

The Lone Wolfe

By Kate Hewitt

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Reputation in tatters, Jacob licks his wounds alone in the shadows. Mollie knows his ferocious bark is worse than his bite and as she takes her tentative steps across the threshold, she brings with her the light missing from his darkened soul. The lone Wolfe will never be tamed—but she knows that once he loves, he loves for life.

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Editorial Review

About the Author
Kate Hewitt has worked a variety of different jobs, from drama teacher to editorial assistant to church youth worker, but writing romance is the best one yet. She also writes short stories and serials for women's magazines, and all her stories celebrate the healing and redemptive power of love. Kate lives in a tiny village with her husband, four children, and an overly affectionate Golden Retriever.

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Wolfe Manor was no more than a darkened hulk in the distance when Mollie Parker's cab pulled up to its gates.

'Where to now, luv?' the driver called over his shoulder. 'The gates are locked.'

'They are?' Mollie struggled to a straighter position. She'd been slumped against her bags, the fatigue from her flight catching up with her, making her content to doze gently in the warm fug of the taxi. 'Strange, they haven't been locked in ages.' She shrugged, too tired to consider the conundrum now. Perhaps some local youths had been wreaking havoc up at the old manor house yet again, throwing stones at the remaining windows or breaking in for a lark or a dare. The police might have needed to take matters a step further than they usually did. 'Never mind,' Mollie told the cabbie. She reached into her handbag for a couple of notes. 'You can just drop me here. I'll walk the rest of the way.'

The cabbie looked sceptical; not a single light twinkled in the distance. Still, he shrugged and accepted the money Mollie handed him before helping her take her two battered cases out of the cab.

'You sure, luv?' he asked, and Mollie smiled.

'Yes, my cottage is over there.' She pointed to the forbiddingly tall hedge that ran alongside the gates. 'Don't worry. I could find the way with my eyes closed.' She'd walked the route between the gardener's cottage and the manor many times, when Annabelle had been living there. Her friend had rarely left the estate, and Mollie, the gardener's tearaway daughter, had been one of her only friends.

But now Annabelle was long gone, along with her many brothers; Jacob, the oldest, had started the exodus when he'd turned his back on his family at only eighteen years old. He'd left the manor house to slowly moulder and ruin without a single thought of who might age along with it.

Mollie shrugged these thoughts away. She was only thinking this way because she was tired; the flight from Rome had been delayed several hours. Yet as the cab drove off and she was left alone in the dark without even the moon to cheer her or light her way, she realised it was more than mere fatigue that was making her rake up old memories, old feelings.

After six months travelling through Europe, six months she'd put aside, selfishly, just for herself and her own pleasure, coming home was hard. Coming home was lonely. There was nobody—had been nobody for so long—living at Wolfe Manor except her.

And she wouldn't be here very long, Mollie told herself firmly. She'd pack up the last of her father's things and find a place in the village or perhaps even the nearby market town, somewhere small and clean and bright, without memories or regrets. She thought of the notebook in her case with all of her new landscaping

ideas, a lifetime of energy and thought just waiting to be given wings. Roots. And she would make it happen. Soon.

She straightened the smart, tailored jacket she'd bought at a market in Rome, and tugged a bit self-consciously on the skinny jeans she wasn't used to wearing. Her knee-length boots of soft Italian leather still felt new and strange; she generally wore wellies. The clothes, along with the notebook of ideas, were all part of her new life. Her new self. Mollie Parker was looking forward.

Smiling with newfound determination, dragging her cases behind her, Mollie made her way along the high stone wall that separated the manor from the rest of the world. The high hedge met the wall at a right angle, and although it was dense and prickly Mollie knew every inch of it; she knew every acre of the Wolfe estate, even if none of it belonged to her. She'd only been in the house a handful of times—it had always been an unhappy place, and Annabelle had preferred the cluttered warmth of the cottage—but the land she knew like her hand, or her heart.

The land felt like it was hers.

Halfway down the hedge Mollie found the opening that had always been her secret. No one, not even the boys from the village who snuck up here on dares, knew about this hidden little entrance. She slipped through the gap in the hedge, and headed towards home.

The gardener's cottage was hidden behind yet another high hedge, so that it was completely separate from the manor house. The small garden surrounding it was cloaked in darkness, yet Mollie wondered just how overgrown and weedy it had become. She'd left in midwinter, when everything had been barren and stark, rimed in frozen mud, but from the heady fragrance of roses perfuming the air she knew the garden—her father's garden—had sprung to life once more.

A lump, unbidden, rose to her throat. Even in the velvety darkness she could picture her father bent over his beloved roses, trowel in hand, gazing blankly around him. The world had shifted and changed and moved on and Henry Parker had stayed in the crumbling confines of his own mind until the very end…seven months ago.

Mollie swallowed past that treacherous lump and reached for her key. Starting over, she reminded herself. New plans, new life.

Inside, the cottage smelled musty and unused; it was the smell of loneliness. She should have asked a friend from the village to open the windows, Mollie thought with a sigh, but communication with anyone had been difficult. Now she reached for the light switch and flipped it on. Nothing happened.

Mollie blinked in the darkness, wondering if the bulb had gone out. Had she left the lights on six months ago by accident? Yet as she gazed through the gloom she realised there was not one sign of electric life in the cottage. The clock on the stove was ominously blank, the refrigerator wasn't humming in its familiar, laboured way; everything was still, silent, dark.

The electricity had been turned off.

Mollie groaned aloud. Had she forgotten to pay a bill? She must have, even though she'd paid in advance in preparation for her trip. Perhaps there had been a mixup. Something must have happened, some annoying piece of bureaucratic red tape that left her fumbling in the darkness when all she wanted to do was have a cup of tea and go to bed.

Sighing, Mollie kicked her suitcases away from the door and reached for the torch she kept in the old pine dresser. She found it easily, and flicking the switch, gave a grateful sigh of relief as the narrow beam of light cut a swath through the darkness.

Yet her sigh ended on something sadder as she shone the torch around her home. Everything was as it should be: the table tucked into the corner, the sagging sofa, the old range and ancient refrigerator. Her father's boots were still caked in mud, lined up by the door. The sight was so familiar, so dear, so *right*, that she couldn't imagine them not being there, and yet.

All around her the house was silent. Empty. At that moment Mollie was conscious of how alone she was, alone on the Wolfe estate, with the huge manor house vacant and violated a few hundred metres away, the cottage empty save her. Alone in the world, as the only child of parents who had both died.

Alone.

Jacob Wolfe couldn't sleep. Again. He was used to this, welcomed insomnia because at least it was better than dreaming. Dreams were one of the few things he couldn't control. They came unbidden, seeped into his sleeping mind and poisoned it with memories. At least his active, conscious brain was under his own authority.

He left his bedroom, left the manor house, not wanting to dwell in the rooms that held so much pain and regret. No, he corrected himself, refusing to shy away from the truth even in the privacy of his own mind. Not wanting—not *able.* Living at Wolfe Manor for the past six months as he oversaw its renovation and sale had been the most harrowing test of his own endurance.

And now, as sleep eluded him and memories threatened to claim him once more, he feared he was failing.

He stalked past his siblings' bedrooms, empty and abandoned, forcing himself to walk down the curving staircase that was one of Wolfe Manor's showpieces, past the study where nineteen years ago he'd made the decision to leave the manor, leave his family, leave himself.

Except you couldn't run away from your very self. You could only control it. outside the air was fresher, soft with night, and he took a few deep cleansing breaths as he reached for the torch in the pocket of his jeans. The memories of the manor still echoed in his mind: *Here is where my brother cried himself to sleep. Here is where I nearly hit my sister. Here is where I killed my father.*

'Stop.' Jacob said the single word aloud, cold and final. It was a warning to himself. In the nineteen years since he'd left Wolfe Manor, he'd learned control over both his body and brain. The body had been far easier—a test of physical strength and endurance, laughably simple compared to the mind. Control over the sly mind with its seductive whispers and cruel taunts was difficult, torturous, and no more so than here, where his old demons—his old self—rose up and howled at him to escape once again.

The dreams were the worst, for he was vulnerable in sleep. for years he'd kept the old nightmare at bay and it had ceased—almost—to hurt him. Yet since he'd returned to Wolfe Manor the nightmare had returned in full force, and even worse than that. Even in its aftershocks he could feel his clenched fist, hear the echo of trembling, wild laughter.

He took another breath and stilled his body, stilled his mind. The thoughts retreated and the memories crouched, silent and waiting, in the corners of his heart. Jacob flicked on the torch and began to walk.

He knew most of the gardens now, for he'd taken to walking through them at night. He doubted he'd ever

cover every corner of the vast Wolfe estate, but the neat paths, admittedly now overgrown, soothed him; the simple order of flowers, shrubs and trees calmed him. He walked.

The air cooled his heated skin, and his mind blanked, at least for a little whi...

Users Review

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