

Benji Zeb is good at keeping secrets. No one knows how badly he's drowning in his studies, not only for school but also his upcoming bar mitzvah. He's nervous about Mr. Rutherford, the aggressive local rancher who wants to shut down Benji's family kibbutz and wolf sanctuary—but no one is allowing Benji to help. And he hasn't figured out what to do about Caleb Gao, Mr. Rutherford's stepson, who turned into a jerk over the summer despite Benji being pretty sure they were both crushing on each other the entire previous year.

But the biggest secret of all? Benji and his family are werewolves, using the wolf sanctuary as a cover for their true identities.

Life gets even harder for Benji when a new werewolf shows up at the kibbutz one night . . . and it's none other than Caleb! He's unable to control his shifting and refuses to go home. He needs Benji's help . . . but with everything piling up, can anxious Benji juggle all of these things along with his growing feelings toward Caleb?



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**BENJI
ZEB
IS A
RAVENOUS
WEREWOLF**

DEKE MOULTON



For Carmela and Sammy, for whom I hope my words create a better world.

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1.

Despite what you've heard about werewolves, my least favorite day of the month isn't when the moon is full—it's Rosh Chodesh. The first of the month. The appearance of the new moon.

Okay, I know what you're thinking. You've heard all the myths and they're very clear about werewolves turning into out-of-control monsters during the full moon. The myths get a lot of stuff wrong.

The *real* worst part about being able to shift from a human kid into a wolf? When your mom decides you haven't studied enough for your bar mitzvah and puts a ban on shifting forms until you nail your parsha.

It's awful, because there are a lot of chores to get done and being a wolf would make all of them easier. Dragging the full hamper from our cabin all the way to the laundry room? Wolf jaws are so super strong that they would make it a cinch. Helping my dad wash dishes while he cooks dinner? I could lick the pots and pans clean before putting them in the dishwasher! Even taking care of my younger

cousins would be so much easier as a wolf. Wrestling in your wolf form is a lot more fun than in a kid form . . . trust me on that one.

But nope.

Ima thinks I've been shifting as an excuse to not study. Not like I'd ever tell her the *real* reason I'd be perfectly happy spending the rest of my life in my wolf form (except for going to the bathroom maybe—indoor bathrooms are seriously not celebrated enough).

Making it worse is that Ima grounded me from shifting on the *same night* as the new moon. She's very serious about not working on Rosh Chodesh, which means all the chores (and responsibility for remembering to do all the chores) fall on me.

"We're already late, Benji!" Ima reminds me.

"I can only go so fast on two feet." I gesture wildly to my two very human legs.

"It's always kvetching from you." Ima hums, ruffling my short, wavy, red-blond hair to show she doesn't take my complaining too seriously. She hands me a giant ceramic bowl covered in aluminum foil. "You spend more time with paws on the ground than you do with a book in your hands, and your bar mitzvah is at the end of the month. It's very important!"

"I know, Ima, I know," I say. "But I *was* assigned the werewolf parsha, so, like, how can I do it right if I don't spend time as a werewolf?"

"Alright, wise guy," Ima says. "You want to complain so much? Kvell. Give me something you're happy about."

Wafts of brisket-y deliciousness reach my nose and I swear I start to drool. Maybe I *do* need to hurry.

“Meat dinner tonight,” I murmur happily. I place the bowl down on the little wooden table next to the front door of our cabin so I can put on my coat.

“That’s your savta’s recipe.” Ima sighs. “If only she could’ve been here to see you become a bar mitzvah. She’d be so proud. Just like we are all going to be.”

I grimace at that. *Going to be*. Because she expects something great. Everyone’s expecting something great. Some great mysterious *something* from *someone* who everyone’s waiting for. And on top of that list of *someones* is me.

Ima sees my face and quickly snaps back into mom-mode. “Yes, right. Meat dinner. And if we don’t hurry, it’s going to be a cold meat dinner.”

“If only I was in my wolf form,” I sigh in a dramatically bummed tone, “I wouldn’t need to waste time putting on a coat.”

“Benji!”

We step outside. It has long stopped drizzling, but our feet slosh in puddles left from earlier in the day. I take a deep breath and brace myself. My nose fills with the heavy scent of pine and worms. The moon set hours ago, but it still heralds the arrival of the new month: Tevet.

The month I’ve been dreading for years.

Ima and I hurry along the periwinkle-lined sidewalk that weaves between eight cabin-sized houses—one for each of the families, including mine, that live on the kibbutz.

You probably don't know what a kibbutz is. That's understandable. In Israel, there are hundreds of them and no one needs to explain it, but it's not exactly a thing here in the United States. A kibbutz is where everyone lives and works together, and we pool all of our money and share everything—including dinner. Usually, kibbutzim are involved with farming, but because we are werewolves, our kibbutz is a live-in wolf sanctuary.

I check up and down the row of cabins again, but they're all dark. I grind my teeth together. *Perfect*. Everyone must already be at the chadar ochel—the dining hall. Lateness can only lead to one thing: being the center of attention as Ima opens the door for us to enter.

“Finally!” It's the absolute worst thing to hear a chorus of your family members say when you step into a room. Believe me.

Have you ever had eighteen pairs of eyes turn to stare at you? It's torture, isn't it? Knowing that behind all of those glares is someone who wants something from you in the form of perfectly articulated words . . . and never knowing what that actually is? There is always *one* right way to answer and a billion different ways you can do it wrong.

“He forgot to put the brisket in our oven when I told him it needed to be put in,” Ima says offhandedly when I do nothing but tilt my head in the direction of the mezuzah on the doorframe. But of course *she* isn't in the spotlight.

“How could you forget?” Dodah Devorah asks.

I know what I should say. *Sorry, I was studying.*

Except the words won't leave my mouth, even if I can think them. Even if I can visualize myself saying it. The ghosts of words pull at my lips, but I don't say anything.

Four words. Easy. *Just say that.* It's the right answer. It's the truth. I got so completely consumed in studying for my bar mitzvah (to be honest, flipping back and forth through all the highlighted-and-noted photocopies of my Torah portion, unable to think of something incredibly wise to say for my d'var Torah, my bar mitzvah speech; that, really, all I was doing was stressing out over how un-proud of me my family will be, which led to me imagining quite clearly what it would feel like to be standing on the bimah and failing in front of everyone) that I lost all track of time.

"St-studying," I manage to get out.

"I guess he doesn't take after you, Rivka." Dodah Devorah sighs, turning to Ima. "My kids have never forgotten to do a chore."

See? One right answer and a billion other ways to do it wrong. And my knack for saying the wrong thing? Unparalleled.

"Benji! What gives? How could you delay the most important part?!" my seventeen-year-old cousin Roni says. Even though he's not in his wolf form, his nose twitches. Clearly not immune to the savory wafts of delicious brisket.

"I . . ." My voice trails off and I try shrugging. Shrugging is great. I rely a lot on shrugging. It includes absolutely zero words and yet everyone understands what you're trying to say.

“Rude,” Roni grumbles.

“Hurry, get it on the table,” Ima says to me.

There are twenty-two people who live on this kibbutz, which might not seem like a lot, but when there’s a holiday, like tonight, the seventh night of Hanukkah, it’s way too many people in too small a space for me. All four of the younger-than-me kids are chasing each other around, their footfalls like a thud I can feel in my chest. My ears tingle at the constant drumming of a dozen conversations between the grown-ups (even if there are only eight of them here). A sound system in the back is playing music, and the party is showing no signs of slowing even though the candles on the menorah have long since melted down.

My heart clenches in my chest, but I clench my jaw just as hard to fight back. It doesn’t matter that I grew up here, that this is my constant. I should be used to the crowds, the sounds, the chaos—*I know everyone here!*—but I’m not.

A prickly itch in my skin is my first warning.

I’m about to lose control.

Talk about the downfall of having your getting-away-from-everything-that-makes-you-anxious fallback plan be the same thing your mom grounds you from doing. I’m so used to shifting into a wolf anytime I get overwhelmed that it’s like my body is about to do it for me.

I rush to put our contribution for dinner on a table overloaded with food: steaming dishes of round, spiced Cochini couscous; roasted root veggies with crispy, caramelized edges; golden chicken broth keeping the matzo balls in the soup buoyant. Even though I’m ready to wolf

down a plate (no pun intended), I head to the kitchen to wash my hands. Not like my hands are dirty, but dousing them in ice-cold water works in a pinch to keep me grounded. Bonus points for it always being less hectic behind the scenes.

Dad's in the kitchen when I step in. I got my red hair and freckles from him, but that's about it. His barrel chest is straining as hard against his flannel shirt as he's straining to loosen some mechanical piece of the oven he's working on. It's a body type that's a dead giveaway for a werewolf, if you know what you're looking for. One day, I'll grow into my body. Or maybe I'm just the runt of the litter.

"Benji, hey!" Dad looks up and greets me warmly. "The brisket's here?"

"Shalom, D-dad," I stammer back. Greetings are always easy, and now that I'm just facing one person, my throat doesn't feel so tight. It's so much easier to talk. The itching is gone. Maybe I can manage to do this without shifting. "Yeah, it's here." *And thanks for not judging the lateness of the brisket arrival.*

I stand in front of the deep metallic sink and the smell of dirt rises out of it, reminding me that no one else on the kibbutz is grounded from running around on all fours outside. It's not just that everyone stops to wash the mud from their hands—it's ritual. I try not to be jealous as I fill the dual-handled plastic jug and pour ice-cold water on my hands. The shock of the frigid water is sharp, but the comfort of having my arms not itch anymore is worth it.

I glance at the kitchen floor, which is covered in tiny screws and gears and all the mechanical bits of machinery I can't identify. The oven being in pieces is the reason I had to remember to put the brisket in the oven in our own cabin. Why we were late. "Oven still kaput?"

Dad looks over his shoulder and glowers at the oven, as though it breaking down had been a breakup between them. "Yeah, and we can't afford a new one." He shakes his head and steps away from the sink. "How's your d'var Torah coming along?"

"Good," I say awkwardly. I reach up to make sure my kippah is still on, which it always is, but it gives me something to do with my hands. I'm horrible at lying. "It's going good."

I look out the window from the kitchen into the dining hall. "Where's Tamar?" Usually my nineteen-year-old cousin is front and center, making sure everyone has something to eat and that dirty dishes are promptly brought to the kitchen. Standing like a steady rock against the crashing waves of chaos.

"Guard duty," Dad says, and before I can ask what we need guard duty for, he goes on. "Roni hasn't relieved her yet." He nods his head toward Tamar's younger brother. "He's been waiting on dinner."

Dad doesn't say it in a you-should-feel-guilty way, but I still feel a pang of awkwardness as I glance through the serving hatch. There's my cousin standing in line, his eyes locked on the brisket. So he wasn't really angry with me, but maybe just upset because he was making his sister wait.

“Rosh Chodesh just started, too,” I say. Tamar doesn’t like that the old rabbis decided thousands of years ago that the first day of the month in the Hebrew calendar would be a “girl’s day off.” Even if it benefits her, she always says it goes against the ideals of egalitarianism that our kibbutz was founded on.

My skin starts getting itchy again. We would have been here earlier if I’d put the brisket in the oven on time at home. It’s my fault Roni’s eating late. My fault Tamar is still standing guard after the sun’s gone down.

Add all of those faults up, and I couldn’t find a more perfect excuse to escape.

“I’ll go tell her Roni’s going to be late!”

“She’s in the forest. You’d have to—”

Before Dad can even finish, I’m heading out the back door.

Ima might have grounded me from shifting for not studying enough, but it’s more complicated than that. You know all the myths about what happens to werewolves when they don’t have control, right?

Yeah. Exactly.

Something just a little bit more serious than getting in trouble with their mom.