

# Wolf with Wings

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Brayden walked through the yellow brown grass that reached his chest. The stringy bunches at the ends of the tall blades reminded him of how girls braid their hair sometimes. They looked spikey, but when he picked them off and rubbed them in his fingers they were soft and fell apart on to the ground. He asked his dad once if picking the heads off the grass killed it, but his dad said that it needed to be picked, that there are seeds in the head and you help it spread when you drop them at your feet.

A breeze came up softly at his side and Brayden turned into it to see if he could smell any prey. A wolf could smell an elk from more than a mile away. They wander around all day following their nose. The wind brushed the strands of straw colored hair that poked out from under his knitted gray hat. He could only pick up the green sweet smell of the pine trees.

The loud grinding sound of a car came up the road to his house. Brayden turned and ran a slow arc around the back to see who was coming and watched his mom's long blue car making its way toward him. Gravel crunched under the tires as she parked in front, the car door made a deep, sharp thump when she closed it behind her.

“Hi sweetheart, do you know where Dad is?”

Brayden turned and pointed squarely at the workshop behind the house. Just as he did, his dad walked out, brushing his hands off on his jeans. His mom walked over towards him, she didn't smile as much as she normally did.

“Hey Hon, how was work?” His dad called out easily. Brayden stayed where he stood, watching as his mom got close to his dad. They talked too quietly for him to hear but he saw the grin on his dad’s face falter as his mom spoke. His dad nodded and stroked his beard. When his mom lowered her head and rubbed her temple, his dad smiled at her and rubbed her shoulders. They turned and walked towards Brayden.

“Sweetie Sandy and her mom are gonna come over in a few minutes so you guys can go out and play, does that sound like fun?”

“Is she gonna bring her ears?”

‘I don’t know sweetie, probably.’”

As they passed him on their way into the house, his dad put his big hands on his head and pushed him around playfully. “When you’re playing with a girl, son, and you want her to like you, make sure to impress her with your skills and resourcefulness. Belch your ABC’s or something like that, works every time.”

“Don’t listen to your father.” His mom smiled at his dad as they walked into the house, leaving him outside.

He liked being outside. He liked the uneven gray of the sky and the crunch of fallen leaves under his red rubber boots. His house wasn’t very big but they didn’t have neighbors and he was free to roam through the woods and throw rocks in the creeks. In the grass behind the house he could build forts out of the old couches and chairs that his dad threw out from the shop. He really liked it when Sandy came to play with him. Sometimes they played Bear and Wolf or

she helped him dig for bones or they just walked around looking for Indian artifacts. They found an arrowhead in the creek last time she came over. Brayden kept it on the windowsill by his bed.

He waded through the tall grass, looking through it to what was on the ground, the long grains swishing against his dark blue sweatpants. Outside of his dad's workshop he found an old wooden chair leg lying in the ground and picked it up.

Brayden cut his way through the grass. His broad swings splintering and breaking the dry stems. The forgotten piece of wood balanced well in his young hands and made a satisfying swish as he swung. He stopped just at the start of a new swing when he heard another car coming up the road. The leg dangled at his side as he watched Sandy's mom's big white car pull into the drive. His mom and dad came out of the front door as Sandy's mom got out of the car. He could see them talking to each other as Sandy's mom opened the backseat and Sandy got out, but couldn't hear what they were saying. He left the chair leg on the ground as he walked over to the car.

Sandy's mom worked at the bank with his mom and Sandy was in third grade with Brayden. As she got out of the car, he saw that Sandy was wearing her brown hat with furry ears on top. Her mom had knitted that one for her and the gray one just like it for Brayden. He liked to wear his hat all the time but his parents made him take it off for dinner, school, and church.

Brayden walked close to the driveway where they were all standing. Just as he could start to hear what they were saying, Sandy's mom bent down and told Sandy to go over to him. She ran over to him and passed him, running into the yard.

"I'm gonna go hibernate! Count to one hundred and don't cheat!"

He turned and watched her as she ran toward the trees. Standing still, he looked back towards his parents and Sandy's mom. All three of them were looking at him.

"Go on and count now Brayden, don't let her get too far ahead." His mom called out to him. Sandy's mom looked down at the ground; she looked upset and rubbed her neck nervously with one of her hands.

Brayden turned and walked towards the back of the house, counting in his head. He wondered what was wrong with Sandy's mom; she usually smiled at him when she saw him, curling her lips back and showing him all of her front teeth. She came over to talk to his parents every once in a while when she was upset like this. His mom said it was because she didn't have a lot of people she could talk to and it made her feel better to talk to someone.

When he was done counting he turned towards the woods behind his house. He couldn't see Sandy anywhere, which meant she had found a cave somewhere and was hibernating, ready for him to try and sniff her out. He breathed in and then howled at the trees as best and as loud as he could. Sometimes when he found her she would say that it didn't count because she hadn't heard him howl and was still looking for somewhere to hibernate.

Sandy liked bears as much as Brayden liked wolves, and whenever she put on her brown hat he had to call her Bear Sandy.

Brayden walked past the first three forts he'd built in the grass before the trees without looking in them. Sandy stopped hiding here a long time ago, and always ran into the trees now.

He looked up to the dark green tops of the nearing trees and wished that he could be that high, wished he could fly over the land like a wolf with wings and look down and see Sandy

running between the trees or crouching behind a boulder. He would glide down to her and teach her how to fly, and then both of them would rise out above the trees. They'd fly over the grass and the forts and the workshop. Look down at the house that would be even smaller from the sky. See his parents and her mom huddled in the driveway and hear what they were saying. And they would come back down only when they had to eat dinner and go to bed.

Brayden was in the trees now and looked up at the formless gray sky through the dark shadows of the pines. He remembered what he was doing and sniffed at the air. The last fort he made was close by; built out of the biggest sticks he had found in the woods that he could carry and leaned neatly in a circle around the base of a large tree trunk. He left an opening on one side that he could crawl through and had enough room to sit against the trunk of the tree.

He didn't think Sandy would hide there since it was pretty close to the edge of the woods but he went to look in it any way.

When he crawled through the opening into the shelter, he found her sitting there cross-legged. She was looking at a small rock in her hand and didn't look up when he crawled in; her hat was on the ground by her feet.

"Found you." Brayden said quietly, careful not to sound like he was bragging.

"I don't want to hibernate anymore." She looked up at him and he knew she was sad. Brayden stayed there without moving for a minute and she looked back down at her rock. He moved inside and sat down next to her without speaking. They sat there for another quiet moment before she spoke again.

"Tommy got in trouble again."

Brayden had never met Sandy's older brother Tommy, but he had seen him get in to fights outside of the school before. Tommy was seventeen and in high school, Sandy didn't usually talk about him.

"Mom said he got in real big trouble and he's in jail now. I heard her say on the phone that they want us to pay to get him out but my mom doesn't have enough money, so he has to stay in there." Brayden could see that she was crying a little bit now, and he looked down at his lap. "She said he didn't do what they say he did, but no one believes him and no one will help him."

Brayden didn't know what to say. He sat in the silence for a while, staring at the ground while Sandy sniffed next to him. He didn't know what to do when other people got sad. He thought about the times when he would see his mom at the kitchen table at night and she looked tired and sad and rubbed her temple. His dad would come in and tell Brayden that they had to make his mom laugh so she would feel better.

"My dad taught me a cool trick yesterday." She sniffed when he spoke and looked at him. Without speaking he took a large breath and began to belch out the letters of the alphabet. At first she looked confused but then she started to grin and by the time he had gotten to J she was laughing.

Brayden stopped and picked her hat up and handed it to her while she continued to giggle. Then he leaned over her and rubbed her shoulders with his hands the way his dad would with his mom.

"I found a cool chair leg outside of my dad's shop; do you want to see it?" She smiled and nodded.

They crawled outside of the fort and walked back towards the house. Sandy wasn't crying anymore but she had stopped laughing. Brayden looked around at the ground and picked up a skinny stick that had fallen from one of the tall pines.

"Look what I can do." Sandy turned to watch as Brayden held the stick in his hands at both ends, right at eye level. He lunged his head forward and broke the stick in half with his forehead. Sandy squealed excitedly and ran off ahead to look for her own stick. Brayden ran after her and they carried off through the trees, all skinny limbs and high pitched laughter with broad grins spread across their red ruddy faces.

They picked up all the sticks they could find and the ones they couldn't break with their bodies they swung against trees until they split and sprayed bits of bark over their arms. Squealing and shrieking happily, they wound their way through the woods and into the wheatgrass. Clambering around Brayden's forts and burrowing through the field, they carried on even as the gray fall sky darkened and the soft breeze rose up cold and biting.