

# House of Wolves

By Robert B. McDiarmid

Chapter One Excerpt

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It was almost as if David appeared out of nowhere. We flashed a smile at one another as I was leaving the clinic; I mean, how sad that is, cruising someone on your way out of a therapy appointment.

He wore a tattered, old, black leather jacket; gray T-shirt; brand new wranglers; and new blue jeans, as if he were trying to contrast his graying hair and middle age with something fresh and vibrant. Strong legs, muscular butt, and he communicated an air of mysterious confidence that drew me to him in a way that has never been duplicated. There I was, suddenly feeling the sparks ignite in my heart, as if I recognized a kindred spirit.

He wore his beard, then, and it was bushy and wild, with the tiniest traces of gray. His hair, tied in back in a ponytail, was frothing about under a red cloth ball cap. The most amazing thing about that first moment, and I will always say this, was the momentary, childlike flash of baby browns that disarmed me from the very beginning.

For days afterward, I found myself constantly daydreaming about him, between correcting math tests and grading book reports on the latest childhood adventure. I needed to be back at school that fall. It was *my* classroom, Mr. Wallace's third-grade class. After my first partner died the previous year, my classroom and my young companions were my purest comfort zone.

I dove into hanging my fall decorations and reminding myself how to make long division exciting for my new group of youthful spirits. The walls were plastered

with eleven-year-olds' interpretations of pilgrims, Native Americans, and neon-colored horn o' plentys.

We were studying the early history of the Northwest, including Indian legends and how rugged North America had been. In the first few months of the new school year, we would talk about loyalty, new team building skills, and learning about each other.

Third-graders are the perfect age where they really want to make a relationship with their teacher. They are starving for knowledge and have not yet learned the attitude of their fourth- and fifth-grade counterparts. It was just fifteen eager minds and me in a canoe on a sixteenth-century river in the middle of my classroom, searching for grizzly bears, bald eagles, and French Canadian trappers.

They would shout out facts during interactive lessons and moan and laugh at my poor jokes. We were learning by doing. That was our motto. Interesting that, in the midst of all this enthusiasm, I kept denying what a nice distraction working with my kids was from having to really deal with what do past the death of Joe. I don't do all that dating, flirting crap very well. I was so used to being part of a partnership that when Joe died, I felt pretty lost outside of work for a long time.

Each of my kids keeps a journal. It's remarkable to watch the progression of these young people as the year progresses. My second day of daydreaming caught the attention of Marcel, my little writing star. In his journal, he wrote, "Mr. Wallace must have met someone, Robbie says he is going soft on us." I laughed out loud reading this observation; even little Marcel started to notice that I was ready for love again in my life.

I had spent lonely nights in bars searching faces and had gone on dates that were clearly not ever going to turn into anything even remotely close to a relationship,

becoming lost in a few quick, lusty affairs that dissipated when we discovered we had nothing in common but liking to fuck. I found myself in a very lonely place, wishing I could be back in the time, a few years earlier, when I had a partner and a life apart from work.

Then, just like that, he was showing up everywhere: David at the grocery, David at the gym, David at the video store, David at the coffee shop. That one moment, on a rainy October Saturday—when he reached out and held my hand to the counter and paid for my tea changed my life completely.

We sat in the booth at the coffeehouse, with the stereotypical, driving Seattle rain as accompaniment, and talked for hours. His name was David Moreau, a painter and woodworker. He was designing signature clocks and cabinets. This beast of a man spoke passionately about how he had found the work that made his spirit complete. It was completely natural to imagine this man surrounded by wood chips and the smell of linseed oil. He talked about artists he loved and how perhaps he could take me museum hopping. We talked about art and paint and laughed about the things we had in common: a passion for eggnog, an undeniable need for dramatic romance, and fresh tulips.

Then his eyes changed tone entirely as he leaned in and said, “So, what is your story, young man?”

David knew when to touch me. From the first, this was like magic. He reached out with his callused working hands, stroked the hair on top of my hands, and kept listening.

I was still grieving the death of my first partner in those days. The survivors’ group and therapist were holding me together. I had kept this Hollywood romantic notion that Joseph would be with me forever. Even when both of us had

tested HIV+ together at the clinic, my dreams of forever were not dashed. Then the night sweats came, and then the slow quiet wasting; my life seemed to fade along with the most important man I had ever met. I missed Joe's beautiful eyes and his infectious laughter.

There are times, these many years later, when my eyes still well up at the thought of those terrible few months after Joseph died. I told David about having to sell the house and how I kept even Joseph's smallest trinkets locked in a storage unit where they could not cause me further pain.

The last few months had been painfully lonely. I told David that I thought I was just now reaching the point where I yearned for something new. The struggle was that I was not sure what something new meant.

Sitting there in the booth we learned that both of us lived with HIV and had a passion for alternatives, like herbs and relaxing with tai chi. The more we shared, the more intense our little hand game on the table became. While listening, he looked over at me with those glistening, baby brown eyes, stroking my hand and forearm with real intent, pulling on the little hairs, manipulating them with his fingers.

There have been times in my life when being touched in public seemed flagrant or inappropriate. When David touched me, however, it was like there was not a single care in the rest of the world. He touched me, and if the entire world saw it, it simply did not matter. That was David's first lesson for me—that touch can heal.

He asked to walk me home, so we headed down Broadway in the pouring rain, holding hands beneath my umbrella. He had me laughing out loud, telling

stories of abysmal dating catastrophes and his inability to conquer the country-western two-step.

“Some people have two left feet,” he giggled, “but I have four.”

Usually, the driving rain of early winter made me maudlin; but there I was, hand in hand, walking down the street with David as if it were a perfect summer day. He walked me to the doorstep of my 12th-Street bungalow.

Shadowed in oaks filled with crimson gold leaves, this had been my fortress of solitude. I had intentionally chosen a small home; only one person could live there. No out-of-luck friends could suddenly become roommates; no transitory lovers would move in. The bungalow was my escape. And here, on these steps, this bear of a man leaned forward and kissed me.

It was an urgent, wet kiss, with purposeful intent. He slowly explored my lips for what felt like endless seconds, pulling me to him and just staying there. Then he gently ran his coarse mustache across my lips and nuzzled in against my neck. That was the first time I remember the scent of pipe tobacco, his unique mix of vanilla & burley. It was definitely more of a scent than a perfume.

We stood there for a long while, my arms wrapped over his shoulders as his short, stocky frame pressed me against my front door as if a cosmic jigsaw puzzle had finally found the missing piece. He licked my neck and then whispered, “I need to let you go, my sweet little man, but I will find you again.”

He then curiously took a deep breath from my neck and sniffed his way up to my ear, setting off goose bumps across my body.

“Believe that,” he finished, as he withdrew and tapped my chin, a gentle smile

on his face.

I watched him walk away, down the cobblestone alley. It's still one of my dearest memories of David. He walked away, his black boots clomping in his strong stride, his shoulders slowly bounding as he bounded off into the rain; at the end of the block, he paused, turned, smiled, waved, and then disappeared around the corner, into the neighborhood.

I sat there at my doorstep for a moment, simply stunned by the encounter. Smiling, I put the key in my lock, entered the house, leaned against the door, and let out a large sigh.

"I could love this man," I thought to myself.

The rain continued well into the evening. I found myself totally distracted from any of my schoolwork. Trying to get back into my routine, I tried watching some TV but just fidgeted, completely distracted. Finally, I retreated to bed and sat reading when the phone rang. It was David.

"Sorry, I just couldn't wait to find you again. So I looked you up in the book. So, my dear Mr. Wallace—as if he were one of my students, he loved calling me that from the very beginning—why don't I pick you up in the morning, and we'll go up into the islands together? The sun is supposed to shine tomorrow, and I am going out for an early morning 'get out of here'; I really want it to be with you," David quietly spoke to me on the phone.

"Sounds good to me, David. What time shall I be ready?"

David responded, "Six AM, and dress warm. I don't need you getting a cold on me now, do I?"



It felt warm and gentle for this man to care so much about my welfare. “Guess not. Thank you for today, David,” I said, smiling into the telephone.

“That’s a good little man. I’ll be in a gray truck and, well, at 6:00 AM, probably the only man coming down your alleyway,” he said, laughing. “See you then?”

“Yes. Thank you!”

“You are very welcome, Mr. Wallace; see you tomorrow.”

Click.

I hung up the phone, closed my book. David had me simply entranced.

This man had, in the simple act of buying me a cup of coffee and coveting time with me, started me dreaming again. I honestly do not remember dreaming properly from the day Joseph died until that night in the loft. This time it was all about dreams of David’s vanilla & burley scent. Vivid dreams of waking with my face in the center of his chest and of wondering what mysteries hid behind his baby brown eyes.

I woke suddenly the next morning, bathed in the sunrise. It was just as David had promised. The dawn streamed in through the skylight above the bed. With all the crystal sunrise light dancing off the walls, I let out a large, contented sigh. Stretching in my loft, I heard the coffee pot sputter and spit, filling the house with rich aroma.

I stumbled down the ladder to the bathroom, and the steam from the shower

clouded the windows. The stereo played a local jazz station; Norah Jones crooned as I simply let the water run over me. My short brown beard dripped with water as I stood there. I'd never grown a beard before, and it had been the first thing David had complimented me on. I smiled to myself.

I've always loved the solitary power of a hot morning shower. Leaning up against the shower wall daydreaming, tracing my body with the soap, it made me smile; I made a singular dance out of making sure every inch of me was clean for my morning with David. All toweled off and headed for the kitchen.

I poured myself a strong cup of coffee and sat and read more of my novel as I waited for 6:00 AM to approach. The sound of the doorbell came right on time. I opened the door and there was David, hair down around his shoulders. In his mouth was a small pipe—a very simple, black pipe. His eyes lit up when he saw me, like a child at a circus.

“Good morning, Mr. Wallace,” he said, walking inside. “Ready to go?”

“Yes, my stuff is right here,” I said. I grabbed my jeans jacket and baseball cap out of the closet and threw my pack over my shoulder.

I went to walk past him, and he pulled me to him roughly, removed the pipe from his mouth, and kissed me. Unlike the romantic kiss of the day before, this kiss was hungry and urgent. The fresh pipe smoke in his moustache and the taste of the tobacco rushed into my senses as his tongue found its way into my mouth for the first time. Grunting, I reacted by running my arms into his leather jacket and around him and kissing back hard and deep, my pack falling to the floor. He pushed me up against the kitchen counter, and we rubbed chests and bodies as we kissed. It was playful, frantic, and wild. Coming up for air, the Cheshire grin came to his face as he said, “I missed your green eyes, Mr. Wallace ...”

I licked at his nose and said, “Good morning, David!”

I returned a warm, excited smile. With that momentary celebration, we headed out into the morning. The city streets on mornings like this are clean and fresh, and the morning air greets your lungs like a champagne toast. “It’s not pretty, but it’ll get us where we are headed,” David giggled as he proudly presented his beat-up Volkswagen pickup.

The vehicle looked as if it had survived a war. Spots of mismatched paint, with a Native American dream catcher hanging off the mirror. No radio, gauges broken on the dash.

“I was hoping that you had most of the day,” he said. “I’d like to take you up to the islands, but we can make a quickie out of it if you’d like.”

I leaned in and licked his ear as he began to drive down the road. “You can have me all day and night if you’d like.”

“That, Mr. Wallace, is the correct answer,” he said with a chuckle.

We drove along enjoying the morning sun as he puffed away, careful to keep the window open. I snuggled in next to him, my hand on his thigh. We sat in a comfortable silence as he wound his way down the hills of Seattle, to the freeway and then north. When we finally started to break out of the city to the countryside, the fall foliage of the northwest was displaying a brilliant cascade of color.

“I thought I’d take you to Deception Pass and Whidbey Island. I grew up near there; my pop would take me and my brother and drop us off in the woods for the day. It was a great place for hide-’n’-seek when I a child—but it has also been a great getaway for me as an adult. It’s so beautiful there,” he said, his voice trailing off as he puffed on his pipe and the truck bolted down the freeway.

A few minutes down the road we pulled off, and he said, "I didn't get my cup of coffee this morning, so let's get me some. Before I get grumbly. What do you think, Mr. Wallace?"

"Sounds good to me. I can always use a good cup of tea."

He smiled.

"How very old world," he said, laughing, "A cup o' tea, you say (faking an English accent). Not any of that strong American coffee for me, I say!"

For such a brute of a man, out of him came a childlike giggle. He had this sidesplitting snort rather than an adult laugh. There wasn't a thing about him that I wasn't completely falling in love with.

We wandered into the small-town coffee shop and ordered. He sipped his latte. When the froth got all over his mustache, David leaned forward purposely smearing it in my face and kissing me.

"Can't let my mustache get all sticky, can we, now?"

He walked away, leaving me stunned in front of a group of rural folks, giggling his way out to the truck. I soon followed, chuckling to myself at this grown imp I found myself traveling with.

We turned off the freeway and were suddenly deep in the woods of the San Juan Islands. David explained that he'd always had a spiritual connection with them. The green forests of the islands, with their beds of ferns and plants, were

like therapy for David. He called them his “ferny forests.” He’d grown up surrounded by nature and the musk of the forest. As I sat listening to him, we entered the park.

The trees, unhampered by logging and the world, grew thicker and taller. The farther we drove, the deeper the mist and fog became. He told me about the days when the fog would come in quick and quiet. You’d suddenly find yourself in so deep it was like the world had been swallowed and isolated away from everything else.

He pulled the truck off and down a winding, steep, single-lane road, heading toward the water. It was like descending into nothing as we headed down the hill. Through the shifting mists was revealed a small bay, lined with trees and rocks, and a small boating dock. The evergreens bent in the wind, showing that they’d long since given up fighting the ocean breezes. The air was thick with salt, and the fog moved through the inlet like a snake in the grass.

“This is our first stop.”

With the engine noise no longer invading the peace, we got out of the truck and started walking toward the water. He stopped for a moment and put his arms around me, peering over my shoulder. We sat there in the silence, simply taking it all in. This scene was very alive. The fog danced with the shoreline while we listened to the ocean lap at the stone-covered beach.

“This is Bowman Bay, one of my favorite places. The last time I was here was with ... well ...” David’s voice trailed off, as if he were hesitant to complete the thought.

He nuzzled my neck with his thick bushy beard. David wrapped his strong arms around me, shoving his hands into my coat pockets. We stood there for a while just gazing out over the choppy waters of the bay. I felt great affection in David's warm embrace.

After a while, David released me. "C' mon." He led me along a path bordering the water, grabbing a belt loop on my jeans and pulling me closer to him as we followed the path deeper into the thick green forest.

After a few minutes, curiosity got the better of me. "Tell me about him?"

"Richard was my lover for three years. We met after a woodworking show."

David's eyes grew radiant with memory.

"I was at a home show with some of my work. He walked up." David laughed.

"It was springtime. Here was Richard in his trademark long coat and rainbow scarf, in May, hardly scarf weather. He loved my Saanich Indian work. He said he'd had childhood connections with them. They settled this area, you know."

David paused and moved his hand toward the scene around us. He told me about the Saanich, the tribe that had settled the very land we now slowly walked through, and of their artistic and spiritual traditions."

"I use a lot of their images in my own work. It ... gives me strength." I sensed the tremendous pride David had for his work and the respect he had for the traditions of the Saanich.

He said that one day he'd take me to the Saanich reservation and go "listening."

"You can only find true inspiration in art that believes in its integrity. So few

artists understand that; they treat First Nations art like it's something to be copied and exploited. When I first encountered it all, I decided I had to take the art to the next step. I had to honor its tradition and actually learn from the actual Indian artists and find their stories behind their art. It's made my work more satisfying since I worked harder to make sure my work and my art was authentic to their practices, not some cheap dime-store imitation.

Returning to the story about Richard, he added,

“After meeting me, Richard commissioned a large Saanich carving and installation.

“Richard was building a house and wanted the door to hold the sign of the wolf in Saanich tradition. He commissioned a beautiful original design of wolves with interconnecting tails. I really do try not to mix work and pleasure, but talking with Richard was unlike anything I'd ever experienced.

“He talked of ways to live authentically and was unapologetically masculine and sexual. So when he asked me to come stay with him at the new house the weekend we were installing the door, well, I jumped at it. I met Richard's housemates, and the house and Richard quickly became part of my life.”

The tone he used when describing his home, “the house,” was almost like he was describing a living being. On this comment David stopped, packed his pipe, and lit it, staring at me for a moment contemplatively.

The sun started to peak through the fog as he continued his story.

“Honestly, there had been no dating as far as I was concerned; I was in love with Richard from that very first encounter.”

Each time he talked of loving Richard, he held me tighter, closer. He deliberately

made sure I was closer and closer to him.

David talked about Richard's incredibly soft voice, which had contrasted his lumberjack brawn. He described Richard as a man who had been in his late fifties, a longtime fitness buff, and the tai chi instructor at the local YMCA. He described the first few times they were physical with one another, how Richard's beauty had simply shown David a whole new side of his sexuality and his physical body.

His eyes softened from his reminiscing of Richard's life with him. He leaned into me, and I realized he was crying. It was all at once uncomfortable and powerful. Eventually, David stopped, looked at me through tears, and said, "I lead a complicated life, Mr. Wallace, and I so want to show it all to you. The house, the men I live with, all the magic it has brought to my life."

I stopped walking and simply leaned into him, running my forehead along his beard. His hand naturally cupped my neck. My hand ran through his hair flowing onto his shoulders. He looked so rugged and yet so soft with his hair down: simply irresistible as he pulled me to him with his other hand.

"You really are an interesting surprise, Mr. Wallace."

He continued his storytelling, his smoke swirling between us. Richard had been the headmaster of sorts in a cooperative household of six other men. Since it started, they had kept attaining and adding special roommates, and Richard, as patriarch of the household, had decided that David would join them. He explained that "the house" and his brothers were now the center of his life, since Richard had died.

"I talked to all my housemates about our coffee conversation, all the things that we had in common. You know I saw you watching me that day, leaving the

therapist's office at the clinic. I had hoped we'd encounter each other again.

"The men of the house have all been there for me since Richard left and wanted me to find a new path, to move on. God, the last year has been a real struggle for happiness. It's just that getting out and meeting people doesn't come naturally. I don't do bars or parties, and most gay men have the shortest fucking attention span."

David giggled to himself. "I'd come to the conclusion that finding gay men, where pretences and shadows don't exist, seemed impossible. I have become frozen with fear, at the same time, about being near or around my own kind. I feel paralyzed.

"I chose the isolation of the house, the busy chores, and my work to keep me happy; but then, yesterday happened, and, well, perhaps ... perhaps ..."

He looked at me softly and smiled. Tracing my mouth slowly with his hand, his eyes softened even further. I leaned in, removed the pipe from his mouth, and kissed him. Letting out a little groan and starting kissing me back, his tongue fresh with a thick, smoky taste. He started nuzzling his beard and face into my neck and grinding against me.

He took the pipe from my hand and took a deep breath of it in and then fed it to me. I had no idea the head rush and spin it'd give me. The hot smoke filled my mouth and into my throat. He did another breath in and then slowly breathed it over my face.

His eyes taking on a sudden intensity, David took my right hand and held it to his crotch. My cock was so hard it gave away any doubt that he was turning me on, it ached at his touch.

He kissed me again with a mouthful of hot smoke and started grunting and sucking on my face. I pushed him up against a tree, and we slowly lowered ourselves to the ground. He sat back against the tree, and I kneeled between his legs. Staring into my eyes, he worked his fingers in between each gap of the shirt as he unbuttoned it, swirling the hair on my chest purposefully and slowly. Once my shirt was open, he sniffed his way down, while blowing warm smoke across the fur of my chest.

“Just as beautiful as I knew you’d be,” he whispered.

He found my left nipple and the ring waiting there, took the pipe out of his mouth, stared into my eyes, and ran the bowl of the pipe across my nipple ring. I whimpered.

“That’s good, pup. That’s real good to see. I want to make love to you very soon. I plan to spend many nights up inside you and beside you. Believe that. (Oh, the intensity in his eyes, the flash of ferocity.) But first we have today to kiss and explore, and then you’ll meet the others. And the time will come when we’ll have one another. I just know it.”

David’s eyes misted over. Lying on top of me, here was this beautiful man, almost crying, simply at the thought of knowing that one day we could be there for one another. It was a different tear in his eye than earlier, this one of happiness and dreams.

He blew another thick cloud of smoke across my neck and slowly, deliberately, buttoned my shirt. He paused for a moment, then reached down, combing my chest hairs with his hand.

“You are a beautiful man, Mr. Wallace. And you are captivating me.”

He helped me up, and we continued on our hike, his hand installed on my belt loop.

We walked silently as David gave me time to consider all he'd shared that morning. We continued to talk and laugh our way through those woods for the rest of the day, sharing more stories. His love for Richard had been strong, a feeling I knew all so well after losing Joseph. I was captivated by his description of the household and the men he now cared for in Richard's absence. We didn't stop talking the entire day, not through dinner or when he dropped me off in the darkness of night.

I asked David up, but he said no, that he was tired, and that we'd have lots of time to keep learning about one another.

“One day at a time, Mr. Wallace, and you made this one day very special.”

I kissed him and got out of the truck, smiled, and waved as he drove off.

Isn't it interesting how life presents you with unexpected opportunities? David and I both had stopped looking for the right man in our lives. Now we had many things to think about.

He'd invited me to his house for dinner the following weekend, and now it was time to concentrate on a busy week with my kids. Later that evening, I realized his scent was in my mustache. David was part of me now; I was just beginning to understand how much that meant.

I sat there thinking how terribly long it had felt since Joseph had died, remembering how Joseph had always loved telling stories from his faith. He could tell stories until late in the night and make me smile with every word. Oh, how I

missed those late nights up talking. There is one story in particular that I've always remembered.

Joseph woke me early in the morning and said he needed to talk. He was worried I'd never meet another man again or open myself up to true love. I've always thought it amazing that a man who was clearly dying had so much concern for my welfare after his departure. He laughed, coughed roughly, and told me that, of course, he had a story to tell me.

“The rabbis say that God created the universe by shattering vessels containing God's energy. These shards spread throughout the universe, spreading the divine spark, beginning all life. It is said that, when strong, undeniable feelings happen between people it is because you are made from the same original ancient spark of this energy. This unique power recognizes itself within the other person and longs to be united again.”

Strange, that he'd explained to me exactly the way I'd feel two years later, when I met David Moreau.