

a WOLF AFFAIR

[Book One of a Wolf Affair Trilogy]

by

Eileen Sheehan

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Note: Portions of this novel may prove too graphic, sexually explicit, or violent for the sensitive reader. It is intended for mature readers.

Notice** This book contains a sneak peek of another great book by Eileen Sheehan at the end of this story.

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One

I was approaching my sixteenth birthday when my father, Walter Cramby, walked out on my mother, Maryanne Cramby, and our lives were forever changed. My brother, Josh, was at the end of his thirteenth year.

To add to my mother's woes, she was laid off not long after that from her job as a fifth-grade school teacher in the suburbs of Detroit. "Cutbacks," they said.

Fortunately, my mother was in possession of a recent, sizable inheritance from her grandmother who managed to survive her husband. My grandparents were killed in a car accident when mom was in her teens. My great grandmother finished raising her. She was a spry old woman who we thought would never die. In fact, we wondered if she might outlive us all. Because of that inheritance, we weren't destitute while she searched for work.

Unfortunately, it took mom a while to get her act together to even look for employment. She spent months sitting around feeling sorry for herself with a bottle of Jim Beam as her companion. I was seventeen before mom pulled her head out of the bottle and things started to look like they might normalize.

Whether it was because she needed a change in scenery or that she'd made a scary dent into the inheritance money that we'd been living on, I'm not sure, but she decided to move us to the small city in upstate New York where the little farm my grandparents had left her was located.

She managed to secure a job in a nearby small-town teaching middle grade English and drama. Since our house was nestled in the hills outside of this ridiculously tiny city, the commute to it or the even smaller town was fairly close in drive time and miles. I remember her smiling as she told me this little tidbit of information while declaring that we had the best of both worlds this way.

I did my best to cooperate with her and not fuss overly much about the move, but it was difficult to leave my lifelong friends. To this day, I question if mom ever considered the impact dad's leaving had on Josh and me.

I don't think she did.

Because she was employed there, Josh would be allowed to attend school in that small town rather than the small city. My mother's shocking excitement about this fact actually blinded her to the reaction she got from both Josh and me. We weren't inner city kids, but we weren't small town either. In fact, the nearby community that they deemed a mountain city wasn't as large and the suburb community we'd come from.

I'd already graduated, but Josh still had three years to go. He just couldn't believe he'd have to spend it in a school with a total enrollment for grades seven through twelve of two-hundred and fifty-one students after attending a school that had nearly seventeen hundred students in grades nine through twelve.

I couldn't blame him for being unhappy.

Josh took our moving to the country better than I did, which surprised me since he'd always been the one to rebel and complain since birth.

Since I was only seventeen when I graduated, I promised my mother I'd stay home with her for a year before I went off to college; if that's what I decided to do. I'd had my fill of school and was still debating about it. Because of that promise, I had no choice but to make the move with them. If the truth be known, I didn't feel equipped to go out on my own quite yet, anyway. I just wished she could have waited to make this move for one more year.

We moved into grandmother's old estate house just one day after school let out for the summer. We'd tripped over boxes being packed for a few months while mom decided what to pack up and move, what to sell, and what to give away to charity.

We ended up living out of suitcases for the last two weeks of school and slept on air mattresses since our household belongings headed east before us. Mom wanted everything waiting for us when we arrived. It was, but it wasn't unpacked. That took another week.

I was surprised at how much didn't make it to the old farmhouse until I got to see inside of it and realized that it was already completely furnished with my grandmother's belongings. Needless to say, mom did more sorting, storing, selling, and donating for the better part of the summer until we eventually fit the house – or should I say the house eventually fit us?

I hated the fact that we'd moved from the hustle, bustle, and convenience of urban living to a mountain top set between a tiny city and a tiny town, but I loved the house and the grounds. It was huge and had an air of grandeur.

I'd expected an old farmhouse; which is what mom called it. Instead, I set my eyes on an enormous white brick, two story estate house that was surrounded by bright red outbuildings and a red and white stable with neat wooden fenced pastures strategically placed on one-hundred-twenty-five acres of land that was surrounded by forest belonging to the state. Even with the lack of grooming that occurred while the house sat empty, it looked majestic.

My bedroom was actually a suite that offered a sitting room along with an ensuite bathroom. Large French doors opened onto my own private balcony. The balcony was small, but it was all mine with the only access to it being through those French doors. It was a far cry from the nine by fourteen-foot bedroom I occupied in a three-bedroom, one bath ranch on the one-hundred-fifty by one-hundred-foot lot we'd left behind.

There was even a swimming pool, although sorely neglected. Mom didn't think she'd be able to resurrect it that summer, but she promised to have it up and running for the following year. Since it was cooler in the mountains of

New York than in the suburbs of Chicago, I didn't mind. I wasn't much for cold and wet.

Once I'd unpacked my things and done what I could to help mom, I found myself searching for something to do to occupy my time. It was decided that we'd all relax and acclimate to our new surroundings over the summer. Mom was insistent that I didn't need to look for work during the year we'd agreed that I take off. We had plenty of money and she'd also be adding to it with her job. She expressed her appreciation for the way I stepped up to the challenge and cared for things while she drank herself silly and insisted I take the year to rest and enjoy life for a bit before I worried about what I'd do from there.

The television cable company didn't run that far out into the country and we'd yet to get a satellite installed. This meant that the only television we had to watch was what we were able to pull in with an antenna and there was absolutely no internet to connect our computers to. Mom purchased a mobile hotspot to hold us over, but she monitored the minutes like a hawk watching its prey. Her only response to our complaints was to tell us that it was good for us to go without for a while. We lived in a beautiful countryside and we should be out enjoying nature instead of being on snapchat or Instagram.

We'd been there for two weeks when three horses were delivered. For the first time since I'd learned of the move, I was genuinely happy. I'd been taking weekly riding lessons since I was ten and they were one of the things I missed the most. Of course, taking a lesson once a week and having the horse on your property to care for on a daily basis were entirely different experiences, but I was undeterred by the responsibility that was given to me. In fact, I was excited.

I took a few days to settle the horses in. It turned out that they belonged to the estate, but were being boarded while the estate was empty.

They'd basically come home. Therefore, it took minimal effort for them to settle back in. By day number three I was exploring the hills on horseback.

I felt happy and free.

Two

It turned out that the forest bordering our land was an animal reserve. Therefore, hunting wasn't allowed, which made me feel mighty safe on horseback. They did, however, allow fishing in the large river that was located on the south end of the eighteen-hundred acres.

I discovered hiking trails that were suitable for my horse and me to explore. There were even occasional markings to indicate what part of the reserve we were in. It was because of these markings, and my fear of getting lost being eliminated by those markings, that I ventured to the opposite side of the forest.

There was a large farm in a high valley on the northeast edge of the state land. It looked to be in good repair, but, whenever I rode that way, I saw no signs of life. Of course, I didn't go onto the property. I stayed on the edge of the tree line and looked down at it.

The house was a typical two-story farmhouse. I'm not an expert on architecture, but I did take enough classes in school to deduce that the house was probably built around the turn of the century. It was what I'd expected our house to be like.

There were several weathered outbuildings and a weathered barn that looked like it housed cows at one time. Although not in as pristine a condition as our place was, it still looked well kept. Just not lived in.

With summer in full swing, the days were getting longer and longer. This meant that I was out riding later and later. It wasn't until the walls of my stomach were rubbing together with such force that I stopped to check the time and realized that I'd been out all day. I'd missed lunch and supper. I was on the edge of the tree line looking down at the empty farm when I had the

presence of mind to check the position of the sun. If I wasn't careful, I'd be stuck in the forest when the sun went down.

My gelding's name was Roger. It wasn't a name that I would have given him, but it was the name that he came with and that he responded to, so I didn't change it. Roger was jet black with a white star on his forehead. He stood sixteen and a half hands high with powerful, well-defined flanks. Had he been human, he would have easily been taken for a body builder.

I rode Roger as much as I could, but, since horses weren't Josh's thing and mom was too busy settling us in and preparing for her new job, I was expected to exercise the other two horses as well. Daisy was a sweet tempered, fifteen hand dapple grey, and Peter was a smooth gaited chestnut gelding who matched Daisy perfectly in height and build.

Only Roger stood out; not just because of his size and coloring, but because of his badass attitude. Almost anyone could ride Daisy or Peter. Only the brave and experienced dared climb on Roger's back. Since life had slowed down to less than boring, the little bit of challenge Roger offered just made him all the more appealing to me.

Since I was starving and had lost track of time, I decided to take a more direct route back home. It would mean that we'd have to go off the trails. This was something we'd never done before. I wasn't sure about the terrain or if there were markers off the trails, but I knew it would cut our journey home in half.

Not knowing what to expect by cutting through the forest, Roger wasn't the ideal horse to be on, but there was nothing I could do. I'd rather ride a skittish horse over unfamiliar terrain than be stuck riding him through the woods after dark. Trail or no trail, that was a recipe for disaster.

We'd been picking our way through the maze of trees for about ten minutes when I caught sight of something dark moving in sync with us to our

left. Almost simultaneously, Roger danced around while tossing his head as if to escape the bit. Grateful that I was riding western and not English, I clung to the saddle horn to keep from losing my balance as I looked down at the compost floor that consisted of soggy, dead leaves and fallen branches.

It took focus and determination to bring Roger around to a calmer, steadier state of mind. When I felt confident that he was finally under control, I looked around to see just what it was that was stalking us, but it was gone.

I felt nervous and vulnerable. I wanted to get out of there in case it came back or something new showed up, so I urged Roger forward at a slightly quicker pace than we'd been keeping.

The sun set over the mountain ridge about five minutes before we reached my home. I made sure that Roger was brushed down and the tack was properly put away before I headed into the house to tend to my own body's needs.

I found my mother pacing the hedge enclosed patio. She'd called the Mastersons, a newlywed couple who lived about one-half mile down the road in a small cottage, to ask if they'd seen me. Hearing how distraught she was, they decided to keep her company while she worried and waited for me to come home.

I couldn't remember when I'd heard so much fear in my mother's voice. "Mary Jane Cramby... You've been gone all day! On Roger, no less. He's too unpredictable to be on for that long. I was getting ready to tack up a horse and come looking for you. Where's your cell phone?"

Since the calls and texts from my so-called friends back home had dwindled to the point of almost never and our plan had limited wi-fi, which made it difficult to connect via social media, I'd stopped bothering with the telephone and left it on my nightstand most of the time.

I explained this to her with as much courtesy as I could muster, considering I felt like I'd been ambushed as soon as I'd put one foot on the patio's flagstone. There was also the fact that she'd used my full name. She knew better than anyone how much I hated my name. I introduced myself to the world as Missy; the nick name given to me by Josh when he was only three years old. It was a silly name, but it beat Mary Jane, hands down.

As tempers died down and moods lightened. I was excused to go to the kitchen and dive into the baked chicken and mashed potato meal she'd kept warm for me. It was the perfect meal to finish the day I'd had. It was filling to satisfy my hunger and comforting to ease my nerves after the stressful ride home and the greeting that followed.

I was tired from a day on horseback and I still had to go to the barn to do the night feeding, but I couldn't resist the light laughter that floated in through the open windows, so I went back out to join mom and the Mastersons for a little while.

"You know, Missy" Lila Masterson's eyes sparkled knowingly as she addressed me correctly and said in a soft tone, "it was more than just the fact that you were riding an unpredictable horse. I've seen you ride and have no doubt that you can handle anything you put a saddle on. It's just that there are predators in the forest."

"Like what?" I asked as I remembered the dark figure that was stalking me.

"Like wolves for one," Lila said.

"And bears," her husband, Bruce, added.

"Seriously?" I said with knitted brow. "I haven't seen anything but deer, rabbits, and a few ducks."

That wasn't exactly a lie since I'd only seen the dark figure in my peripheral vision and hadn't gotten a good enough look at it to see what it was.

For all I knew, my eyes could have been playing tricks on me and it was nothing more than a young tree.

“Count yourself lucky,” Bruce said.

“I love to ride the trails,” I mused with disappointment.

“No one’s telling you not to, dear,” mom said gently. “We’re just asking you to pay attention to the time and be out of there before dusk.”

“That’s when the mood of the place changes,” Lila said with a shudder.

I had to admit that she was right about that. I could feel a type of eeriness permeating the woods, the later it got. I was grateful that, by the time the sun set, I could see the open field and our barn. Saying that I had the creeps was an understatement. Rather than admit this to them, I nodded and agreed to be more careful; as well as to remember to carry my cell phone with me.

As I headed to the barn to bed the horses down for the night, I took a moment to enjoy the brightness of the evening sky. The moon was almost full. In a few more days, it would be. I stopped and stared at it while I remembered my younger years when my father and I would sit in the back lawn and admire the moon as it mingled with the stars. He took a sketch pad outside with him at one point and drew the face he saw in the moon. We framed it and I still had it hanging in my room.

The sound of Daisy neighing brought me back to the matter at hand and I scurried off. The sooner the horses were tended to, the sooner I could soak in a hot tub.