

— TWICE TOLD TALES —

Caged Birds Rising

A Grim Tale of Women,
Wolves and Other Beasts



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Books in the Series

Twice Told Tales

Lesbian Retellings

Caged Bird Rising by Nino Delia

The Secret of Sleepy Hollow by Andi Marquette
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Chapter 1

ONCE UPON A TIME THERE was a maiden, fair and chaste, who lived in a small village bordering the oldest forest in the kingdom. Though she was a girl born in times of hunger, her father, a kindhearted man, had not fulfilled his patriarchal duty toward her. Instead, he let her live and even gave her a name.

“Robyn. You’re late again!” Granny called from the foot of the stairs.

“I’ll be right down.” Robyn grabbed her bodice and ran.

“If a man had raised you, you’d have been up before sunrise to start on your chores,” Granny scolded. “Instead you’re running around like an untrained puppy. What would your father say?”

Granny didn’t mean to be harsh—she was old and grouchy—but Robyn always felt sad when she mentioned her father. He had died when she was very young. All she knew was that a dangerous beast had killed him on the dark forest roads. Robyn was lucky Granny had been there to look after her. The old woman grumbled about everything, but she did love Robyn and had done her best to raise her charge right.

“Fetch me the brush.” Granny was impatient. “We’ll see if I can make that red devil hair of yours respectable for the marketplace.”

Robyn handed over the brush. Granny’s hands were stiff with arthritis and her brushstrokes tugged at the tangles, but Robyn suffered in silence like a good girl.

“I always did my best to serve your poor departed father.” Granny sighed, and her brushstrokes slowed into a rhythm with her memories. “He was a good man. And I do my best by you, too, young lady. Though it would have been so much easier with a man in the house to protect and guide us.”

“Granny, you know how much the villagers respect you for being such an excellent surrogate mother,” Robyn answered by rote. This was a conversation they often had. Robyn knew the right things to say.

Wrinkled fingers patted her shoulder. “They don’t trust me. And they are right not to. A young girl like you needs a strong man to shield you from the evils of the world, not an old crone, like me.” It was her favorite lament. Her grandmother had been trained to be an exceptional wife and mother, and that alone kept the villagers from questioning Robyn’s upbringing. It helped that Granny had snared a fine young husband for her beautiful granddaughter. A good betrothal was only to be expected for a well-reared girl.

“Thank heavens you have finally filled out,” she said. “A girl needs good hips and breasts for nursing her children. Men have an eye for these things.” Granny gave her a playful slap on the backside with the brush. “At least you have some qualities for your future husband to look forward to, eh?”

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Robyn smiled and handed Granny some hairpins. Granny was a wise woman. Robyn was blessed to be raised by her. "I wouldn't know what to look for in a suitable beau," she confessed.

"That's why I took care of it," Granny said, pinning up Robyn's hair. "You'll know what makes a good man now."

By Granny's standards, Robyn knew that a future husband should be a man of authority. He should have a deep, rich voice to make his wife listen to him. He also had to provide well for his family so his wife could concentrate only on serving his household and raising his children.

* * *

Captain Hunter Wolfmounter stepped out of the Red Rider headquarters and headed for the market square. He barely took two steps when Rump Spindlefinger, the richest imp in town, crossed his path.

"Hello, Spindlefinger," Hunter said. "What brings you to market this early in the day?" Spindlefinger's inn never opened before midday. He was usually doing his accountancy in the mornings to make sure not one coin was missing.

"I was helping my wife get the retail wagon into position," Spindlefinger smiled, showing off his rows of gold teeth.

As Captain of the Red Riders, Hunter knew that Spindlefinger had applied for the booth license for this new wagon. Rump Spindlefinger wanted the world to know how well his business was doing. "I hope my new wife will be as hard working as yours."

“Believe me, it wasn’t easy, but schooling Robyn should be a simple task for a man like you, Captain,” Spindlefinger said. “After all, you will be the first man to train her.”

Spindlefinger’s usual over-confidence made it sound like an easy task, but Captain Wolfmounter knew better than to underestimate the challenge an unbroken female presented.

“Yes.” He nodded. “With no father or brother before me, she will be weak and make many mistakes. As her husband, I will have to teach her how to be a good wife and mother.” He was the best man for the job, and he knew it, the same way he had been the best man to lead the Red Riders.

Decades before his birth, wolves began to repopulate the royal forest. Soon the decent people of the kingdom avoided the woods altogether. They were frightened by the wolves and of the thieving scum who lived there, too. Terrified villagers demanded protection, so the King ordered a special patrol be created, the Red Riders, so called because of their red hoods. Every village and town had their own patrol made up of their ablest men. The Red Riders marched through the streets and combed the forest under the King’s orders to exterminate evil wherever they found it. Soon enough the forests and mountain roads became safer because of them.

“You know, the best way with women is to give them children as soon as possible. Lots and lots of children.” Spindlefinger winked at him. “With any luck she’ll be a fertile little thing and pop babies out one right after the other.”

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Wolfmounter laughed and slapped Spindlefinger on the back. "I'll see to it, but first we must celebrate our wedding at your inn, my good fellow."

He bade Spindlefinger farewell and headed for the well in the middle of the market square. His men were already gathered there, waiting for their captain to give them their orders for the day.

"Morning, men."

"Good morning, sir." They saluted in unison, standing to attention before him, a bright row of about twenty red cloaks billowing in the wind.

"This is the last of the winter markets, so chances are there's more than a dozen thieves lurking among our good, honest citizens. I want extra patrols around the booths and on the side streets. The North gate needs no sentry today. Snow has already closed the northern trade route, and no one will be coming that way until the spring thaw."

His men listened to him intently, and he bathed in their respect before sending them off to work. This was exactly what he wanted from his betrothed. Respect and obedience. He was a good catch for any young woman, and was prepared to be father and husband combined for her. He would show her how good life could be for the dutiful and conscientious wife of the captain.

* * *

"Go straight to the market and buy exactly what I told you to," Granny instructed for the umpteenth time.

Robyn held on to the banister while her grandmother pulled her bodice laces tighter. "You've been eating too much pie lately," Granny grumbled, her old fingers

struggling with the ties. Although Robyn was betrothed, there was no reason to let her looks go so soon. On the contrary, Granny told her she had to try even harder to look beautiful. Her cheeks needed to be that little bit rosier, and her hair must shine brighter than ever to keep the attentions of her handsome captain. She had to show the village how happy she was to have caught him. She would be a married woman soon, and everyone expected her to be overjoyed to finally have a purpose in her life.

“Buy the yellow potatoes, the good ones. And taste the apples, girl. The ones you brought back last time were bitter.” Granny pulled Robyn’s green woolen cape over her shoulders. “Remember, you’re cooking dinner tonight for the workmen. I’m happy to supervise, but it’s your chance to show off your skills. So, buy the best ingredients and fill their bellies well, so they talk about it for days. If you don’t, tongues will wag that the Captain’s making a mistake, and you’re not worthy of his name.”

Workmen had fixed the roof on Granny’s cottage before the first snow arrived. Robyn could smell the chill of it on the air, moving down from the north. Granny was rewarding their kindness with a dinner. It would stretch their meager rations, but Granny would not accept charity. The men had mended the roof, and Granny and Robyn would repay them as best they could with a good meal.

Robyn had considered going up on the roof herself if only to assess the damage, but Granny nearly fainted at the thought of such behavior in a young woman. What would the villagers think? God forbid Hunter break off his betrothal to such an unnatural girl. Robyn wished she’d never said a word to Granny. What did she know about

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roofs? As a female, it wasn't her place to repair houses, so she did as she was told and went to politely ask the men for help.

"Yes, Granny, I will only buy the best." She fastened her cape around her neck and kissed her grandmother goodbye. She had to get to market early to get the best bargains. The road to the market square was long and winding, the stones still slippery from the early morning dew. Though her feet hurried, Robyn's thoughts took their time. She worried what would become of her grandmother when she was married and gone to live at Hunter's house. She decided Granny would do exactly what the villagers expected of her. She would take care of the motherless children while their fathers were away working, and she would cook for those same widowers when they came back home. An old woman would always be of use in a village such as this. And when there wasn't a requirement for her services anymore, she would quietly trudge off into the deep woods and disappear, leaving room for a new generation.

Robyn arrived at the market shortly after the booths opened and had the luxury of leisurely browsing the wares on display. Unlike Ebony, who hurried past her already on her way back home. Ebony was the only girl in a large family of boys who all worked at the glass factory, and Ebony had to prepare a huge meal for her seven brothers every night of the week.

Robyn knew she was also luckier than little Ash, who had to bargain with the merchant over the price of lentils, because her father did not take enough care of his wife and family. No, Robyn was glad she would soon be Hunter's wife. He was handsome and strong and had a decent

income. She would never have to worry about feeding and clothing their children.

“Good morning, Goldie.” Robyn went over to visit her friend who was sitting at her spinning wheel.

“Robyn, why are you out this early?” Goldie brushed her hands on her apron then reached under her stall to retrieve a small package. “Here is the linen your grandmother ordered. Give me six shillings and we’re good.”

“Six? Only six?” Robyn raised a brow. Linen cost almost double that when she bought it from Spindlefinger, Goldie’s husband.

Goldie looked away. “It’s an old order that was never collected. It’s perfect, it even has the Spindlefinger monogram embroidered in gold thread. It’s old stock, but there’s no difference in quality.”

Robyn opened the package and stroked the monogram. “Thank you for saving me money.” Robyn handed over her shillings and put the linen into her basket. “I mustn’t let Granny know, though. The leftover money will be useful when I’m married.”

“How so?” Goldie looked at her.

Robyn leaned forward so as not to be overheard. “This means I’ll have a little extra on top of what Hunter gives me for housekeeping. I can go and buy the best meat and the bigger potatoes, and he’ll praise me for handling his money so well.”

Goldie gasped and shook her head. “You cannot lie to him,” she whispered. “What if you run out of money? You will be forced to buy the ordinary things and he will think you stopped caring.”

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Robyn bit her lip; she hadn't thought about that. She must never give her husband a reason to think ill of her; that was Granny's very first lesson. Goldie put a hand on her arm and smiled. "Why don't you buy him a wedding gift with it? Better yet, show him your jar of shillings after the wedding. Think how proud he'll be to see you saving money so responsibly."

Robyn clapped her hands in happiness at that and thanked Goldie for her advice. A proud husband would be a wonderful start into her new life as the wife of Hunter Wolfmounter.

A large hand wrapped around her shoulder and startled her. "My lovely," Hunter said. "What a pleasure to see you." It was as if their talk had conjured him up.

Before Robyn and Goldie could say goodbye, he pulled her away. Her skin itched where his hand rested on her shoulder.

"I hope you had a good morning. Mine has certainly improved since seeing you," he said, leading them into the heart of the market.

Robyn smiled, happy with the compliment. "Granny sent me to buy the ingredients for tonight's dinner. I hope you'll be able to come."

"Of course, I could never miss the chance of spending an evening with you. Unfortunately, I'm on duty later, so I'll have to leave early."

"You will be careful, won't you?" She feared for him when he went on patrol, as was to be expected for one's brave betrothed.

"My dear." He sighed and stroked her cheek. "Don't worry about me. I know how to keep myself safe."

“Of course you do, or else you would never have slain the beast and become captain of the Red Riders.” She tried to sound proud of his accomplishments.

“As soon as we are married, you will be known as the woman who tamed the most handsome wolf in the valley. Our boys will be little wolf cubs running around your skirts.” He bared his teeth and growled playfully. She ducked her head and giggled as he kissed her throat, growling as if he really were a wolf catching his prey. He stroked her hair and kissed her forehead. Then, checking that no one was looking, he gave her his best shiny smile as his hand slid under her cape to pinch her bottom. “Until tonight, lovely.”

He turned and left. Robyn watched him go. What a man. And soon she would be his. A small ache nestled in her stomach, but she ignored it as she always did.

Hunter had kept her back so Robyn had to hurry to finish her shopping. She gathered her basket and wandered over to see Whitney and Rose. The twins were the daughters of Darwin Prospector, a sullen old widower who was the foreman at the glass factory. His wife had landed him with female twins before dying on him. Such was his fear of it happening again, he had never remarried.

“How is your father?” Robyn asked. Darwin’s health was not working to his benefit anymore.

“Cranky as always.” Rose shrugged.

Her sister poked her in the arm. “Don’t say that. Father works long hours to put food onto the table.”

Rose rolled her eyes and gestured around the stall. “We work long hours, too. We grow and sell all our own produce. It takes hard work to grow herbs and vegetables

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this tasty,” Rose said. “And we cook all the damn food he sets on the table anyway.”

Rose was never one for holding back. The village was used to her brazen talk, and that was the reason she was not married. Who wanted a woman who talked back when there were so many other girls willing to be a quiet, obedient little wife? Whitney had it the hardest, though. No man would look twice at her because of her loud, rebellious sister. What if, once married, Whitney became the same? Or worse still, her children turned out as unruly and difficult as their aunt Rose?

“Anyway,” Rose said. “How can we help you?”

Robyn looked over the display on the table. “I need parsley and sage.”

“For the big dinner tonight?” Whitney asked. “I heard it’s for the workmen who repaired your roof.” News traveled fast in the small village.

Robyn went to answer, but Rose was faster. “Of course it is, silly. Father will be there, too, stuffing his fat belly, while we sit by the hearth waiting for him like the good little daughters we are.”

Robyn was shocked; she would never speak out like Rose did. Darwin Prospector was a widower and would always need one of his daughters to take care of him. He sometimes went to other villages, where nobody knew about Rose, and bragged about Whitney, his pretty, good-natured daughter who was available for marriage. If one day Whitney married and moved away he would always have Rose as his caretaker, and Rose knew it. She was trapped, and that made her angry, Robyn supposed.

“We don’t have any sage today,” Rose said, wrapping the parsley in a thin strip of sackcloth.

“No sage!” Granny had given her precise instructions. Sage was an important ingredient for the main course. She had to impress the menfolk with her meal, most of all Hunter. “But I need sage.”

Rose and Whitney had the only booth that sold herbs. It was too late to try the next village. She should have ordered everything days ago like Granny told her to. She had failed at the first and simplest hurdle, buying the basic dinner ingredients!

“It’s too cold to grow sage in our garden, but you might find some growing wild in the woods,” Rose suggested. “Everything holds out a little longer there; the trees shelter the earth, so it stays warmer longer.”

Whitney was aghast. “Don’t tell her to do that!” she said. “The beasts will get her.”

Rose rolled her eyes. “She doesn’t have to go far into the forest to find wild sage.” She turned to Robyn, ignoring her sister’s protests. “I go there when our stock gets low.”

Whitney looked horrified. “Watch what you say.” She hissed. “We’re meant to sell only homegrown herbs, not the wild stuff.”

Robyn didn’t care whether the herbs were wild or homegrown. She needed sage and she didn’t care where it came from. Rose explained exactly where she had to go to find the wild sage bushes growing in the forest.

Robyn paid for the parsley and hurried away. She still had to finish her shopping, but at least she knew where to find her last, elusive herb.

It should take her no time at all.

Chapter 2

IT TOOK MUCH LONGER THAN Robyn thought to finish her shopping. Finally, she made her way homeward to Granny's cottage but she did not go straight there. Instead, at the far end of the village she turned toward the woods.

A cold wind snapped her cloak around her legs, and the shadows grew longer as the weak winter sun began to set, even though the noon hour had barely past. She had to hurry, she dared not stay out after dark, that's when the evil creatures, both man and animal, emerged. Near the edge of the village, outside the walls where the farmers lived, the houses began to thin out. People did not build their homes this close to the forest, and soon she was walking alone along the path. The North gate was unguarded, so she had no trouble slipping through it and walking quickly across the grass.

Soon the edge of the forest was before her. The trade route had been closed only a few weeks and already the narrow path was overgrown. It happened eerily fast, she thought. From the South gate, the path was wide and dry. There, the pumpkin fields opened up on either side of the road, and the sun hung on the horizon allowing the

farmers wives a longer working day. On the north side, the dense treetop canopy stopped sunlight drying out the ground, so everything felt damp and dull. Robyn's breath clouded in the chill air as she left the path and stepped into the forest, hitching up her skirt and pushing on through the undergrowth where the air smelled of wet earth and leaf mold.

She carefully stepped over tree roots and slippery moss-covered rocks. She was frightened. The quiet gloominess was overwhelming. Not even a bird sang. Her breath became shallow and her chest tight, but she kept moving deeper into the trees, focusing on the plants, searching for sage. Rose had said she wouldn't need to go very far to find some, but Robyn couldn't see any. If she arrived home late her grandmother would be angry, but if she came home without the herb it would be even worse. Even though the men might not taste the difference, she would know about her failure.

A twig snapped behind her. She spun around with hammering heart, but there was nothing. Torn between feeling both terrified and foolish she glared hard into the gloom until she was certain she was alone, then she turned back.

"Hello, lovely, what are you doing here?" Hunter stood before her, so close her nose was almost buried in his chest. She stifled a scream and stepped back. How had he crept up so quietly?

He put his hands on her shoulders and shook her more forcefully than was playful.

"The sun has almost set. Soon it will be dangerous for a little girl like you to be out. Why didn't you go straight home from the market?"

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“How did you find me?” she asked.

He let out an exasperated sigh. “One of the Prospector girls was worried you’d gone into the woods looking for herbs. You know how stupid you are, don’t you?” He gave her a look laden with disappointment.

“I’m sorry, I didn’t mean to worry you,” Robyn hurried to say. “I was just looking for some herbs I couldn’t get at the market but needed for tonight’s dinner.”

Hunter brushed a loose strand of hair out of her face. “You could have got lost and then what would have happened to me? I would have lost my betrothed and had to live with the knowledge that I failed to save you.” Though his words were meant to be tender he still frowned down at her.

“But you would always save me.” Robyn tried to erase the stern expression on his face. He must not be mad at her. She hung her head. “I only wanted to cook you a wonderful dinner to prove you had made the right decision in choosing me for a wife.”

“But I always make the right decision,” he said, his voice a tiny bit cooler than the warmth she was used to. “I do not need a woman who—” His head whipped around. His hands dropped away from her shoulders to hover over the bow draped over his shoulder.

Robyn had heard and seen nothing. “What’s wrong?”

“Be quiet, woman!” He hissed.

For several seconds they stood listening to the wind. Robyn could hear nothing else. “Hunter...” she whispered uncertainly. He held his hand up for silence. Her eyes followed his fingers moving to the top of his bootleg for his knife. “Hunter...”

“I told you to—” he began, and then the world turned into a blur and she felt him ripped away from her side.

Robyn fell to the ground, a scream locked in her throat. The pungent smell of the forest filled her senses. Then she heard a growl. It came from directly above her prone body. She tilted her head slightly and stared into the hard blue eyes of a huge white wolf. The scream in her died as fear froze her in place. They stared at each other for a moment, then the wolf growled again, baring its teeth and pawing the ground in front of her. Carefully, she drew her feet back. The wolf eyed her closely, and she immediately stilled, knowing that there was nowhere to run. Robyn had always been told there was nothing inside a wolf but hatred and pleasure in killing, but now she wondered if maybe there was something else, a sentient spark in those glittering blue eyes.

Hunter groaned in pain, breaking the spell. The wolf jumped towards his prone form and bared its fangs. It hunched, ready to attack, huge claws dug into the earth, every fiber in its body shook with pent-up rage. Except it did not leap. Instead, it regarded Hunter as if waiting for him to open his eyes. When he didn't, it roared. Hunter screwed up his eyes tighter and did not move. Robyn realized he was as immobile with fear as she was.

She was taught that a woman must stand by her man, must sacrifice herself to save him. She scrambled unsteadily to her feet and made a lunge. “No!”

Robyn slipped on the wet ground and landed bodily on top of Hunter. She covered him with her smaller body, trying to protect as much of him as possible.

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“Please,” she said. “Please don’t hurt him.” Her head was buried in his chest and Robyn could feel the warm breath of the beast on the nape of her neck. It was smelling her. She lay still. If it had to feed, it would feed on her first.

Nothing happened. It stood over them, unmoving. Beneath her, Hunter breathed in fast, shallow gasps. She could feel him tremble. Still nothing happened. Slowly, Robyn turned to look behind her.

The wolf sat a few meters away, its head slightly tilted to one side. It looked as if it was deep in thought. Then it stood and came toward them.

“Please don’t kill us,” she whispered.

It did not stop, but did not bare its fangs either. Instead, it nuzzled its surprisingly warm nose against her leg where her skirts had rode up. Robyn held her breath and willed herself not to close her eyes. The wolf looked up at her and then gently nipped her calf. She did not feel any pain, though she could see the tiny droplets of blood pooling on her skin. It licked the small wound and stepped back giving her a long, hard look. It seemed to nod at her, as if in some agreement. Then it turned, and jumping delicately disappeared into the thicket.

Robyn realized she was holding her breath. She gave a deep sigh of relief. Beneath her, Hunter stirred and opened his eyes. She knelt beside him watching as he blinked up at her. He tried to sit, and she went to help him but he pushed her hand away. Unaided, he struggled to his feet, grabbing at a branch to steady himself. He was limping.

“Where is it?” he asked in a voice pitched higher than usual.

“It’s gone.”

“I need my bow. I need to hunt it down.”

“It’s gone,” she repeated. “And you can’t follow it in this state.”

He glared at her. “This is your fault.” He gestured at his ankle.

Robyn was startled at his accusation. Had he forgotten how she’d flung herself across his chest to protect him? She was about to say so when he cut her short.

“If you had done your duty and ordered everything you needed from the market beforehand, you wouldn’t have needed to come into the woods. In fact, if you were half as good a woman as I’d imagined, you would have come up with another idea for tonight’s dinner.” He took a deep breath, sweat building on his brow. “You’re reckless and stupid, and you risked my life in trying to save you.”

Robyn was downcast, she felt ashamed and a little bit angry. Had she been disobedient? She did not need to ask his permission to come into the woods. At least, not yet. Nor had she asked him to come in after her. He had followed of his own accord, and he had not saved her. He had fainted!

Robyn gasped and slapped a trembling hand over her mouth. Such silly thoughts were not justified. Hunter Wolfmounter was the Beast Slayer, he was her betrothed, and he had come to save her from danger. Who was she to think ill of him? He had every reason to be angry with her.

“Well then.” Hunter sighed, his lecture over. He reached out a hand for her. “Be a good girl and let me lean on you.” He put his heavy arm around her shoulders. “Let’s get out of here.” They began to limp back to the village. She tried her best to be strong for him, trying to ignore the

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throbbing ache beginning in her own leg where the wolf had bitten her.

Just before they reached the market square, Hunter let go of her and straightened to his full height. The Red Riders were gathered by the well waiting to start their night shift. He smoothed his cape before he marched over to them with all the dignity and grace that was expected of the leader of the Red Riders. He walked with the pride of a local hero. His limp no longer holding him back. Robyn followed a few paces behind.

“Another beast hides in the forest,” he announced and all heads turned to him. “I have barely saved my betrothed from its claws.”

There was uproar as several of his men all talked at once. “My God, Captain! You’re wounded!” Hans Sweets, his second in command ran to help him.

Hunter slapped his hurt leg. “Barely a scratch, but enough to stop me from following it.” He turned to look at Robyn. “Anyway, I couldn’t leave Robyn all alone in the woods to go after the beast.” He was brave and proud now he was among his men.

“Why, you as good as saved her life, my friend.” Hans was full of praise, as always. “Do you need to see to your wounds?”

Hunter hesitated and looked back at Robyn, who stood several feet away.

“We need to organize a hunt, but first I have to see my betrothed safely home. She’ll need escorting to her grandmother’s house.” He thought for a moment, a dark frown on his handsome face. “Hans, accompany me so we can talk about the hunt.” He quickly arranged the village

night patrol before he signaled to Hans and Robyn he was ready to leave.

Robyn walked between the men as they turned toward her home. Over her head they planned the hunt.

“It was a big bastard but I managed to scare it away,” Hunter said. “It ran deeper into the woods. We’ll not go after it tonight.”

“We won’t?” Hans sounded surprised.

“No. We’ll wait until morning, and comb the near side of the forest to make sure it’s not lingering close to the village. When we’re certain that there is no imminent threat to our people, we’ll track it down and kill it!” Hunter’s voice was strong and fearless, and rang clearly in Robyn’s ears.

It was so cold the tips of her fingers became blue and her lips numb. The only heat was a slow burn in her calf muscle, where the wolf had bit her. She felt nauseous, and searched for Hunter’s hand under his cloak. He pulled free of her. With blurring vision she forced herself to move forward, not wanting to embarrass him yet again, but her legs soon gave out. The pulsing in her calf mingled with the hammering in her head, finally the last of the strength that kept her upright dissolved. A sickening darkness enveloped her, the only ragged points of light were the broken blue of the white wolf’s eyes, concentrating on her, cold and unblinking as she swirled into oblivion.

* * *

Waking up was like walking through fire. Every inch of her body burned. Her skin felt so hot she thought it might split open.

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“What happened?” She tried to speak, but her words felt dry and heavy on her tongue. Her lips were painfully swollen.

“It’s all right, you’re home safe and sound.” She knew the voice but couldn’t place it. With great effort she opened her eyes. Rose was sitting at her bedside. She placed a cold cloth on Robyn’s forehead. “Shush, you’re fine.”

“Where’s Hunter?”

Rose rolled her eyes. “He was gone when I arrived. Some boy from the Riders said you’d been attacked by a wolf. Is it true? I’m so sorry, I shouldn’t have told you about the damn sage.”

“It’s not your fault. Hunter was right, I should have thought of something else for dinner. It was stupid of me.”

“It was not!” Rose wrung the cloth over the bowl a little too forcefully, and water splashed everywhere. “You’re not dead, are you? Whitney told him where to find you. The great Wolfmounter should have been able to save you as well as his own sorry ass.”

“Rose,” she said weakly. “As you’ve already pointed out, I’m not dead.”

“Are you telling me he saved you?” Rose asked, her voice slick with suspicion.

Robyn was silent. Had Hunter saved her? The wolf could have easily ripped them both apart, but it had not done. It had—well, what exactly had it done? It had spared both their lives and had not wanted anything in return. Or maybe it had?

Rose rearranged her bedclothes and a cry of pain shook Robyn’s body. She ached all over from the fever.

“Lie still, I’ll try to cool you down.” Rose placed wet cloths over her trembling limbs. Every part of her hurt. Except her calf. That was the only place where she didn’t feel any pain.

Rose helped her drink some water.

“Where’s grandmother?” Robyn asked.

“Downstairs, trying to save the dinner.”

Robyn tried to sit up. “The dinner is still taking place? Though Hunter has been hurt?”

“Yes,” Rose confirmed, her jaw tight. “The dinner is still taking place even though *you* have been hurt. Hunter will not be dining tonight. He’s meeting with the village council to discuss the murderous wolf in the woods.”

“But it didn’t kill us. It didn’t want to.” The words were out before she could stop them.

Rose fixed her with an eager stare. Robyn tried her best to meet her gaze, keeping her eyes wide and innocent though the storm of doubt inside her would not ease up.

“What did it do?” Rose crouched beside the bed and placed her hand on Robyn. “What did the wolf do to you?”

Robyn stuttered, “N...nothing.”

“Nothing?” Rose was cynical.

Robyn tried to not look away from the accusing stare. “I’m...I’m not sure.”

There were many things she was not sure of lately, but she was sure of Rose. She instinctively knew she could trust Rose, the only woman who had an opinion on everything and openly expressed it. Rose was brave, but she could also be foolhardy. She had not always been like that. Robyn remembered when, as little girls, the twins had barely differed. But at some point on becoming young women,

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Rose had become difficult while Whitney had remained the lovely, submissive girl everybody expected her to be.

"I think the wolf bit me," Robyn stated quietly.

Rose pressed her lips together but said nothing.

"Hunter was unconscious and I flung myself over him to stop it from killing him." Rose snorted. Robyn ignored her and continued, "It did stop, but it bit me instead. On the back of my leg. Then it went away." It was still a mystery to her. Why hadn't the wolf killed them both?

Rose sighed and looked away. "You must not tell anyone," she said, turning her worried gaze back to Robyn. "I'll say you're exhausted and in shock, and you need to rest for a while. So, no visitors, okay?" Rose's grip on her hand became painful. "You'll tell nobody about the bite. Do you understand?"

"Why? What's wrong?" Robyn asked, fearfully.

Rose saw her fear and softened. She loosened her grip on Robyn's hand and softly stroked her cheek. "Nothing. But you can't tell anyone that Hunter Wolfmounter, the great Beast Slayer, swooned away when the wolf came calling." She spat out the words.

"He didn't swoon. He passed out." Robyn still felt compelled to protect him.

"Sure. Whatever you want to believe."

Through her fog of pain Robyn could not grasp what was really behind Rose's words, though she knew some strong emotion lingered there. With a shake of her head, Rose once again became the jolly caregiver. She arose from her seat and moved to the door. "I'll get you some broth," she said, as if nothing had happened. "You need to rest now."

Robyn awoke sweating and unsettled several hours later. Cold, blue eyes had haunted her fitful sleep. If she squeezed her eyes shut the image of a huge wolf outside her window appeared in her mind. She moved her head; it was not hurting anymore. The fever had broken. Rose was asleep in a chair beside her bed. Robyn wriggled her hand under her covers and tried to reach the bite on the back of her leg. Her fingers traced six raised bumps where her skin had been penetrated. They were surprisingly small given the size of the beast's teeth.

She lay back and closed her eyes, but sleep didn't come. Instead, she remembered the events in the forest. Hunter had certainly not saved her, he had pretended to be unconscious while she cried out for help. Appalled by the sudden thought, she looked over to Rose, certain the other woman would be shaken awake by the sheer wickedness of her thoughts. Rose was fast asleep and Robyn breathed a sigh of relief. Hunter was a brave, upright man and she mustn't think otherwise of him. Still, Robyn couldn't see the necessity to kill the wolf just because it had defended its territory.

Of course, it had been different seven years ago when the Black Wolf had devastated their village, frightening the men and attacking the women. Hunter had been a hero then, chasing the terrifying creature into the woods and cutting its head off. The huge wolf head still hung from the rafters in Spindelfinger's inn. It reminded them all why Hunter Wolfmounter lead the Red Riders. And now he was to repeat his valiant action in search of another

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trophy. But what if Robyn's senses hadn't betrayed her and Hunter had pretended to be unconscious rather than fight? Of course, as a woman she was not allowed to think of her betrothed as a liar. He must have had his reasons and she was just too dull to understand. Maybe Rose would help her figure that out in the morning. Although, there was no love lost between Rose and Hunter and whatever Robyn told her that might discredit Hunter, Rose would no doubt eventually use against him. What would that make Robyn? Certainly not a good wife.

Chapter 3

ROBYN SAT NEAR THE WINDOW and used the remaining sunlight to mend the tear in her skirt. It had been a week since the attack and she felt remarkably better. The fever had gone, and Rose came by every day to bring her herbs for the wound on her leg. She did not stay to help her dress it; there was nothing to clean. The bite had healed completely leaving six little hard lumps that were only visible if you knew where to look.

“Be a good girl and chop these for me.” Granny placed a knife and onions on the table in front of her.

“What are you cooking?” Robyn started stripping off the onion skins.

“Peter, the new Rider in training, is coming by to collect some stew for Captain Wolfmounter and his men. It’s a cold day, and they are doing dangerous work. It’s the most we can do to provide them with warm bellies when they come back from the hunt.”

“We could go and search with them.” The words were out before she could stop them.

Granny pointed her wooden spoon at her accusingly. “And do a man’s work! Did you hit your head out there,

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girl?" She crossed her arms, grim-faced. "If you hadn't been so reckless and gone to the woods in the first place the Riders would not need to go in search of that monster!" Her grandmother rarely spoke to her loudly. And she hadn't lectured Robyn as yet about straying into the woods, mostly because she was still unwell. It seemed her rest was over.

"I'm sorry for scaring you."

"You did not scare me, you disappointed my trust in you, and you put the Captain in danger." Granny clarified her position.

"But isn't Hunter supposed to save me?" The snide remark embarrassed even her.

For a moment, her grandmother stared at her openmouthed. "My dear girl, I can only assume your wits have been frightened out of you, for I will not allow you to speak like that about your future husband! What would you do without him? He asked for your hand, even though you are a poor match with no parents and no dowry. Captain Hunter Wolfmounter is a great man, and he will be able to train you in all those things I could not. You should be grateful to have the chance to marry above your station, but instead you speak ill of your betrothed!"

"Granny, I...I..." Robyn stammered. She didn't understand where her evil thoughts had come from. Why was she speaking in such a disrespectful way about Hunter? "I didn't mean to question his bravery. It's just the wolf didn't do anything, it just..."

"Didn't do anything? It didn't do anything? It threatened your life, silly girl! If Hunter hadn't had the presence of mind to follow you into the woods, why, you

could be dead now. What would people think of me as your guardian if that happened? You didn't listen to my orders, and now poor Hunter is the one to pay."

Robyn laid the knife down and tried to reason with her. "All I wanted was to say that—"

"No!" her grandmother said. "You will say nothing more. Those brave men are out there taking care of us. We should be grateful that they are willing to do so. We couldn't survive without their help."

"Do you really think we are useless without men?"

Her grandmother did not dignify her with an answer; she turned away and stirred the stewpot. Her silence did not last long.

"Go upstairs and gather the laundry. And if you dare to speak like that again, I will never forgive you. How could you shame me in front of your future husband? Letting him see how I failed him in providing a good girl for his wife." Granny was near to tears. Robyn could not respond. "Go now, and do as you're told for once."

Robyn went upstairs. The onions rolled across the table untouched.

* * *

"The snows will come before we find it," Hans said, exasperated.

Hunter slammed his tankard down on the table. "I know, but it has to be near, we have to find it."

Here in the Red Rider's headquarters they were pouring over a map of the forest and the surrounding villages. All possible hiding places for the beast were marked out.

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Candles illuminated the men's stern faces. It had been a long fruitless search.

A soft knock came to the door. The man nearest answered. "It's your sister, sir," he told Hans.

"She's brought food for the hunt." Hans signaled to let her in.

Greta carefully entered the room. She was some years younger than Hans but already her rare beauty was spoken of far and wide. As her brother was the right-hand man of the captain of the Red Riders, her prospects of a good marriage were high. Some of the Riders had already approached Hans to ask for her hand and discuss a marriage settlement. Hunter knew he hadn't decided on anyone yet. Greta was still young and there was no hurry. He supposed it was a disappointment to Hans that she had not caught Hunter's own eye, but what Hans didn't know was that he found the girl too insolent. He disliked the direct way she looked him in the eye. It was not suitable behavior for a girl. She was far too sure of herself and what she wanted for Hunter's taste.

While Greta handed over her food packages, Hunter turned back to the map and its markers.

"We can't reach half of these places if the weather turns against us," he said. "Especially if snow covers up the wolf's tracks. If we catch it at all, it has to be now before the snows fall."

"Why don't you wait until spring?" Greta's light, feminine voice filled the room. "I mean, what if the beast has already settled in for the winter? It might not even be in the area anymore. It might be in the caves up in the hills."

Silence fell, and all eyes turned to Greta. Hunter gave Hans a hard look. Immediately, Hans took Greta by her arm and escorted her to the door. The grip wasn't as forceful as Hunter would have liked, and though his words were muted, they at least seemed to have the desired effect. Greta shrank back and nodded before hurriedly leaving.

"I'm sorry..." Hans began.

"No need." Hunter held his hand up. "It happened once and never will again. She is young. You still have time for discipline." He pointed at the map, bringing the focus back to the business at hand. "All right, we'll go north tonight," Hunter ordered, and started dividing his men into hunting parties.

* * *

Robyn listened to the wind rattling around the house. A night bird sang a sad little song in the tree outside her window. She sat in the middle of the floor amid piles of dirty laundry. Compelled to see the bird, Robyn moved onto her knees to take a look. It sat on a lower branch, its tiny chest swollen as it proudly sang.

It occurred to her that it was strange she could see it so well in the muted evening light. Her vision had become sharper. There was also a strange odor that—the singing died...along with the bird. All that was left was a single downy feather dangling from the white wolf's jaws. Robyn gasped.

The wolf cast a glance at her window as if it knew she was there. Then it turned away, and its huge, ghostly body vanished into the darkness. Robyn stared after it, her nose pressed against the glass, her fingernails digging into the

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wood of the windowsill. If anybody saw it now, right here in the village, the Riders would kill it.

Before she thought anymore about it, she grabbed her cape and opened the window. The gnarled tree limbs were within easy reach, and, feeling strangely unafraid she climbed out onto the nearest branch. Within minutes she had scrambled to the ground and was running after the wolf, uncaring that it could kill her as easily as it had the poor bird. Instead, she ran faster and prayed she would catch up with it before the Riders did.

* * *

The men were gathered outside, some tending to the horses, some inspecting their weapons for the last time. Hunter was leaving the Red Rider's headquarters when Peter came running up.

"What is it?" he asked, as the lad skidded to a halt before him.

"Your betrothed, sir," he said. "Granny has just discovered that she's sneaked out the upstairs window."

Hunter's spine stiffened. He hadn't seen Robyn since the incident at the woods. She should have come by to check on his wound and make sure he was okay, but instead she had stayed home pleading a fever as an excuse to neglect him. He had vowed to be patient and kind, at least until they were married. He wanted to be a fine husband who took the time to accustom his wife to her new home and duties. He had waited for her, and how had she thanked him? By discrediting him in front of his men and running away again.

“Thank you, Peter.” He patted the boy’s shoulder “Find Hans for me and then go and join your unit.”

Hunter began to frantically think of where Robyn might have gone. Who were her friends in the village? Who would know?

“Sir?” Hans appeared at his side.

Hunter put an arm awkwardly around his shoulder, for he was at least one head smaller than Hunter, and led him away from the men. The faintest scent of chocolate reached his nostrils. “I have a minor problem and my hands are full at the moment.”

“Of course, sir, what will you have me do?”

“It’s a private matter.”

Hans looked up at him with furrowed brows. “What is it, Hunter?”

“Apparently Robyn has sneaked out of the house. Her grandmother has just sent word to me.”

Hans blinked stupidly for a moment; then a knowing smile spread across his face. “I think she might be looking for your attention, Captain. After all, you’ve been very busy with the wolf hunt.”

“Why can’t she be a good girl and wait at home until I find the time to call,” Hunter said, with a sigh. “But no. She waits until now to deliberately make me angry. I need to concentrate on the beast, but she plays hide and seek with me.”

Hans said, “Don’t let this little lover’s game distract you. Every girl runs away sooner or later, and then it’s her betrothed’s task to chase her.”

“I thought she would be sensible enough to not require so much wooing. She grew up without a father, she should

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be thankful I am willing to take care of her.” Anger showed through his words.

“Captain, a little struggle is to be expected. You just said that Robyn has never experienced the strong hand of a father. You will have to be both husband and father to her. She needs taming, and the Wolfmounter is just the man to do it. You need to show her how it will be once she’s your wife.”

“You’re a great man, Hans,” Hunter said. “As the only protector of your sister you have become wise beyond your years when it comes to women.”

Hans nodded in agreement. “I will look for her discreetly while you track down the beast.”

Hunter looked at his Second-in-Command, his chest filling with pride and relief at having such a good and pliable friend by his side.

* * *

The fever may have weakened her body but Robyn wasn’t too out of breath. The forest lay dark and foreboding before her and the wolf had disappeared into that darkness. If she wanted to find it, she had to follow. She needed to find it. The Riders would track and kill the poor creature if Robyn couldn’t warn it off. Taking a deep breath to calm her racing heart, she lifted her skirts and stepped forward. Why couldn’t women wear trousers? It would be much more useful. She bit her lip. Where had that thought come from? She liked her long skirts, she had never thought about wearing men’s clothing before, so why now?

The faraway hoot of an owl shook her out of her thoughts. Carefully, she moved deeper into the forest. The

earth was soft under her feet, though her steps sounded loud to her own ears. Above her, the trees slowly swayed in the wind. Under the branches it was warmer than out in the open. The huge trees shut out the cold but left oppressive darkness. Small animals leaped from branch to branch overhead, their rustling raised the hairs on her neck.

A twig snapped nearby. She froze. Her breathing slowed as she strained to listen. No other noise came.

“Are you here?” she whispered. “I swear I will not harm you.” Nothing but silence. The entire forest had grown still. “Please, you do not have to show yourself, just listen. The men are on their way here. They will kill you if you don’t leave.”

There was nothing there, but she could smell a new odor, and knew the wolf wasn’t far away. With a sigh she grabbed at her skirt, readying to head back home again.

“If you hear me,” she left one last piece of advice. “Please go north as far as you can. The snows will come soon and they will not be able to track you.”

Was she mad standing in the forest talking to a phantom on a freezing night? Advising a fearsome beast to run before her betrothed slayed it? She started to walk away when something warm and furry brushed against her hand. She jumped.

The wolf sat in front of her watching her intently, its head cocked slightly. Its piercing blue eyes looked her up and down and she had the feeling it would pounce at any unexpected move.

“Can you understand what I’m saying?” she asked, her heart hammering. It bent its head and kept staring.

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“So you heard me?” Again a soft nod. “They are coming to kill you.”

The wolf stood up and moved towards her, very slowly, its head down. Strangely, she did not feel any fear. She stood still and let it come close. It put its massive head under her cold hand and waited. Robyn held her breath. What was she doing? If Hunter was ever to find out he would break the engagement instantly and make her unwelcome to the whole village. She had not only disobeyed village law, but the orders of her grandmother and her betrothed. Why was she doing this? Was it the fever from the bite? Was that why she had started thinking, started questioning herself and everything she knew?

The beast didn't look so monstrous, not now she was stroking its head. Still, it was a huge wolf. Its shoulders reached as high as her ribs, and its head could easily rest on her shoulder. She stroked down the soft neck, the fur running like silk between her fingers. It was so white and clean it could glow in the moonlight if only there were some. It was dark in the woods but still she could see the wolf's fur as if it were in daylight. Her hand stilled, and the wolf looked up at her.

“Should I be afraid of you?” she asked.

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