

The Wolves of Kirkney
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Chapter 1

A light, misty rain clung to the long drive leading up to Kirkney Hall, while inside the great house, a fire was tended in the library to push back against the last stubborn vestige of winter rolling over the Scottish moors. The scullery maid feeding the flames leapt as the door opened, and the young master of the house entered. Tall, broad-shouldered, and as imposing as the rest of his family, Duncan Galbraith's bright amber eyes fell upon the girl. She gasped and looked down, bowing her head.

"Begging your pardon, m'lord, I were only tending the hearth."

Duncan held up a hand, his voice deep with the hint of a growl, but his tone soft. "It's alright. I've come in early. Might I have the room? I need some privacy."

The maid looked up, spotting the gentleman behind Duncan. "O-of course, m'lord. P-please, don't tell Mrs. MacCready I were in here when you came in, it won't happen again, I promise."

Duncan sighed softly. "It's alright- Rose, isn't it? You don't need to be shivering like a hare around me. Just gather your things, and we need say no more about it."

"Thank you, m'lord, thank you," Rose curtsied as best she could, hurriedly gathering her cleaning supplies.

As she left, Duncan led the other gentleman into the room. They were a study in contrasts; where Duncan towered over most men and had a brilliant mane of red hair, along with a full beard to give him a leonine appearance, Franklin was short and lean, with a clean-shaven face and slicked back dark hair. To suggest he was not as hearty as Duncan, however, was folly. Franklin was well built in his own fashion, with supple and wiry muscle hardened by his time at Dartmouth.

Franklin glanced after the maid, shaking his head. "She looked as if you were about to eat her. I've never seen servants so fearful and superstitious than here at Kirkney."

Duncan gave a token smile. "Serving the Earls of Lothmaddy is not an easy job, especially one such as my father. He does not believe in sparing the rod."

"Hence the happy occasion here today."

Duncan turned from Franklin, looking out at the rain. "Your coach is already pulling up the drive."

Franklin frowned, glancing at the window. "How can you tell? I can't see past the hedge with this blasted mist."

"The smell of horse carries." Duncan turned back to Franklin, handing him a parcel of papers. "These are your official papers. You are to be billeted as the Second Officer of the HMS

Persephone. I tried for First Mate, but I could only pull so many strings." Duncan tried for a brave smile. "Still. Think of it- this time next week you shall be in the golden sunshine of Gibraltar."

"Would that you could be there with me," Franklin said softly, reaching for Duncan's hand. Instinctively, the larger man pulled his hand back, but then grabbed for Franklin's, holding it tight.

"I'm sorry," Duncan said with a catch in his voice. "You must promise me that you will write, whenever possible. Tell me of all the wonders of the world."

"Of course," Franklin replied. "I wish all the best for you, Duncan. You know that, yes?"

The young nobleman couldn't help himself. He pulled Franklin close to him in a tight embrace, inhaling his scent so he might never forget it; his favored cologne, oaky and dense, but with the smell of sea water and surf always just there under the surface. He leaned down, planting a kiss on Franklin's cheek.

"Duncan..." Franklin whispered, returning the embrace, but balking at the kiss. "What if your father sees?"

"I don't give a *damn* what my father thinks," Duncan growled through clenched teeth and eyes screwed shut. No sooner had he said that than he recognized an all too familiar scent of clover and musk.

"Is that so, boy?" another voice growled.

Duncan and Franklin broke apart instantly, turning to face the figure filling the doorway. Lord Angus Galbraith, Earl of Lothmaddy, was a great bear of a man. Though Duncan stood taller, his father was more thickly built, with a wide, craggy face like weathered stone and a great beard slowly turning grey. He glared with the same bright eyes his son possessed, as if he could burn holes through both of them.

"I was saying goodbye to Franklin," Duncan said numbly.

"You've said it." The Earl turned to Franklin, his mouth twisting in disgust. "Get out of my home, Mr. Bradley. I never wish to see you here again- and if I do, I'll not hesitate to have you torn apart by my dogs."

"Father-!"

Franklin put a hand to Duncan's chest, never breaking eye contact with Angus. He bowed in the courtly fashion. "That won't be necessary, my lord. My term in the Royal Navy will last four years."

"For your own sake, I would suggest at least a decade," Angus said coldly.

Franklin did not respond, but only turned to leave. He was halfway to the front door when Duncan called.

"Wait." The red-haired man crossed the space between them, and left Franklin with one last kiss, grabbing him firmly. "For luck," he said, as his father glowered behind them both.

Franklin nodded, their eyes lingering for one last moment before he left without another word. Duncan's face soured as he looked back to his father, and he began to stalk out of the room.

"You have not been dismissed, Duncan."

Duncan turned slowly, glaring defiantly at Angus. The Earl returned with his own baleful gaze as he lumbered closer, his voice a ferocious growl. "You can engage in as many acts of vulgarity to make me uncomfortable as you see fit, *boy*, but if you ever expect to become Earl and head of our clan yourself-

"I do."

"Then you had better start acting like a leader. You have the day to forget about this- this *ignominy*, and then I expect you to be ready for dinner to receive Charlotte Annesley." Duncan turned his look away dismissively, only for Angus to snarl. He grabbed Duncan by the collar, and with a growl, hoisted his son off his feet in a display of the Earl's strength. "*Do you understand?*"

Duncan replied with bearing his teeth, prying his father's fingers off of him, his feet dropping to the floor. "Yes," he said in a clipped voice.

There was a tense pause as the two glared at each other. Finally, Angus spoke. "Ever since this... unfortunate affair, I will admit a dread curiosity. You were smart enough not to tell Mr. Bradley about our family's peculiar nature, weren't you?"

"Of course." Duncan snapped.

Angus nodded. "Good. Then Mr. Bradley may yet serve Her Majesty without incident."

The younger man gasped. "You wouldn't."

The Earl turned on his son, prodding him in the chest. "To protect this family? There's nothing I would not do."

Duncan was left in stunned silence, staring at his father.

"We understand each other, then." Angus turned on his heel, heading back towards the library. "I don't care what you do with your time, boy. Just be ready for dinner."

The dining room of Kirkney Hall was the oldest part of the Galbraiths' ancestral home. It was adorned with oak wood paneling dating back to the days of Queen Mary of Scots that bolstered tall, gothic arches, with the crests of every Earl of Lothmaddy lining the northern wall, and the crests of every Countess lining the southern. It was a room of intimidating size and scale, where the weight of history hung heavy on the shoulders of those who lived there. Angus sat at the head of the table before a massive stone fireplace, where the Galbraith coat of arms, three wolf heads over a chevron, was carved. His wife, the Countess of Lothmaddy, Lady Edith Galbraith, sat at his left, while the ancient matriarch of the Galbraith family, the Dowager Countess Olivia, sat at his right. Following their mother, Duncan and his two younger siblings, Madeleine and Oliver, were seated to the left, while on the right, under the Dowager's discerning eye, was Charlotte Annesley.

Duncan glanced at her on occasion. He wasn't blind; she was a great beauty, to be certain. She had lovely golden hair done up in elaborate curls, bright, piercing blue eyes, and soft, elegant features. She was further adorned with pearls and sapphires, to compliment her eyes, and a dress of midnight blue that further accentuated her athletic build. He also made note of her

scent, a subtle blend of natural flowers; roses, he thought, and lavender. Her fine qualities, however, could not overcome the basic conflict of incompatibility.

Charlotte, for her part, had seen Duncan at the odd event before. He was tall, strong, and handsome; an excellent match at first glance. Her mother and Lady Edith were cousins, and the discussions of a match had been long. She had heard of the Galbraith family and the rumors swirling about them, and her mother had, at first, been trepidacious about such a marriage. But Charlotte had learned more specifically the type of man Duncan was, and pushed for the match herself. Spending the day in the company of the younger sister, Madeleine, had only strengthened her resolve- Madeleine was a wilful and free spirit, which spoke well of the family in her mind.

"I hope the food does not disappoint," Edith said. Though decidedly plump, the current Countess carried herself with a dignified and matronly fashion, her strong features still making her look, if not a radiant beauty, handsome and well-built as a clipper ship under full sail. "I understand dear cousin Dorothy insists Clearview House has the finest food in England, ever since your father nabbed that funny little French chef."

Charlotte smiled demurely. "Mother is a great francophile, it is true. But father ensured I grew up with a healthy appetite for good, plain British food. Like this venison, which is most excellent."

Angus grinned. "I killed it myself. I hope you also have a healthy appetite for hunting- we do it more so than any family in Scotland."

"I am an experienced rider, Lord Angus, and I love to be out in nature," Charlotte replied. "Though admittedly at Clearview, we mainly have waterfowl. I understand the Galbraiths have long been big-game hunters?"

"That we are, lass," Angus' smile grew, showing a flash of his teeth.

Then, Olivia spoke. Though approaching her eighties, her eyes had lost no spark, and she still stood taller than Charlotte. "The Annesleys have been tied to the Galbraiths through marriage before, so I was pleased to hear that your parents were willing to allow you to come to Kirkney unchaperoned. They remembered it is... necessary, to marry into this family. They have shown great patience for our peculiar habits; I do hope you will thank them for us."

"Of course, Lady Olivia," Charlotte said, with a small bow of her head. "It is often said that the Galbraiths hold unique responsibilities which occasionally lead to a fair bit of eccentricity- but then, that is a privilege of the nobility, no? We may indulge in strange customs and habits and have ourselves called eccentric." She turned her gaze to Duncan. "In other circumstances, people may not be as understanding. But I do assure you, I am ready to accept the unique nature of this family."

Duncan shifted silently under his intended's gaze, but Angus slammed the palm of his hand on the table. "Hear, hear!" He raised his glass in a toast to Charlotte. "I hope that open mindedness continues to serve you well, Lady Annesley. Duncan will explain our family's peculiarities once dinner has concluded."

"I look forward to it, Lord Duncan," Charlotte responded with a small smile.

Duncan smiled briefly, but then turned his head down to finish his meal.

After dinner was completed, the family rose from the table, and Duncan led Charlotte to the library to speak in private. He had rehearsed how to explain the terms of their marriage a hundred times in his head; he could only hope Charlotte was as understanding as she said she was.

"Right," Duncan grunted, closing the library door behind him. "Lady Charlotte, I am glad to have this moment alone with you. There are many things you need to understand about marrying into the Galbraiths." He began unbuttoning his waistcoat and shrugging off his dinner jacket.

Charlotte, seated on a divan with her hands clasped, raised her brow quizzically. "Why are you taking off your coat, Lord Duncan? I don't think I need a... demonstration. I already know."

Duncan froze, turning to face her. "You do?" he asked in a leaden voice.

She smiled crookedly, raising to her feet. "People talk, Lord Duncan, I listen. I know about you, and the barrister's son, Mr. Bradley."

The large man stared blankly at her. "W-what? But... how?"

"It's alright, Duncan, it's alright- if I may call you Duncan?" Charlotte rested her hands on his arm. "It's something of a relief, really."

"It is?"

She nodded. "I am of a similar inclination." She grinned weakly. "I say this to you, because I hope you of all people would understand... I do not swoon over handsome gentlemen like you do. In the exact same way you do not pine for the touch of a woman. Indeed, I imagine we would both be happier exchanging said scenarios."

Duncan furrowed his brow. "Lady Charlotte, that... is not what I was going to tell you."

She shook her head, chuckling softly. "It's alright, Duncan. Your secret is safe with me. I think we could be very smartly matched, actually. We will have to consummate the marriage, naturally, but I would prefer us to be friends. Ones who would watch out for the other, to keep each other's secret safe."

"No, no," Duncan sighed, rubbing his forehead. "That's not what I meant. I mean to say, that is a great relief, but there is something else you must understand, about our... peculiar nature." He began undoing his collar and ascot tie. "Which will require a demonstration." He paused, turning back to her. "I ask you not to scream. I won't lay a hand on you, whatever happens."

Charlotte slowly frowned, taking a step back. "Duncan...?"

"I apologize for the suspense, I merely like this suit and wish to not see it ruined," Duncan explained as he continued to undress down to his shirt. "The Galbraiths' eccentric nature, as you so call it, is something of a tradition, going back before the Conqueror. We, and a select few highborn families across Britain, are tasked with keeping peace with... well, I suppose there

is no easy way to explain it. We keep the peace against very old forces- monsters. Ghosts, phantoms, everything you ever heard might snatch you away from your bed at night."

The young lady scoffed. "I don't think I appreciate your sense of humor. I came to you with a sincere offer to make our married life as comfortable for us both as possible, and you mock me with... fairy stories?"

Duncan smiled bleakly. "I think you'll have to start believing in some of those fairy stories." He glanced over to the tall windows lining the library walls, letting moonlight pour in, and slowly making his way around the room, extinguishing candles and dimming the light in the room, leaving only the fireplace. "As I said- I will ask you do not scream. You're in no danger, here." He reached into his shirt, removing a small silver pendant, and then breathing in deeply. Already, he could feel something stirring inside him.

Charlotte, now fully wary, slowly rose, backing away from Duncan as he continued to talk. Down to his shirt, the hints of his powerful physique were many, and she could see hard muscle beginning to shift- and grow. "Lord Duncan, you're beginning to frighten me, and I don't care for it. If you are a gentleman, I beg you to end this... this performance at once."

Duncan snarled, baring his teeth. As he spoke, his voice grew deeper. "The Galbraiths and a dozen other families across the British Isles have long held to very old traditions. Before the Reformation, before the Plantagenets, before the Romans, a curse- or blessing, depending on who you speak to- runs through our blood. I'm afraid, Lady Charlotte, you are about to be married into a family of werewolves."

Duncan threw back his head, letting out a howl that shook the room. Charlotte stumbled over backwards, eyes wide and unable to turn away from the sight before her. Duncan was growing taller and wider, his mane of red hair and beard spreading across his face and body. His body grew larger and stronger, his arms and legs wound with thick cords of muscle, his chest wide and deep. His face shifted as well, as a series of cracks made Charlotte wince as his skull reconfigured into a canine snout and his ears grew pointed, shaggy, rust-red fur covering his body. Dagger-like fangs poked out of his lips, and he flexed cruelly curved claws. The only thing that remained of the young lord she had only just spoken to were those luminescent amber eyes, glowing in the dim light.

Charlotte wasted no time. She rushed for the door, desperately throwing herself against it to force it open. Her heart pounded as the hulking werewolf closed the distance between them with a single stride. He slammed his fist against the door, splintering the wood and making her jump.

"S'locked," he slurred, the beast only barely able to form words with his large muzzle.

Charlotte shuddered, ducking under Duncan's arm. Her hands trembled as she hiked up her skirts, and pulled out a slender dagger, the blade glinting in the firelight. She held it up, and she saw the werewolf's eyes go wide, his nostrils flaring. Faster than such a huge beast should move, Duncan rushed Charlotte, pulling her away as effortlessly as if she were made of air, locking her arm in a vice grip.

"Drop." He snarled, gesturing to the dagger.

Charlotte stared up at him, eyes wide in terror. "Let me go, first!"

The werewolf stared down at her, a growl emanating deep from his chest. After a tense moment, he let her go, and she slowly lowered the dagger.

"I- I don't understand!" Charlotte gasped, her heart pounding. "This- this shouldn't be possible. How did this happen?"

"Born's way," Duncan grunted. He held out his paw-like hand; it now dwarfed Charlotte's. "N-no... no d-duh-nger."

The young woman was petrified, shaking like a leaf cut in the wind. Duncan stood there, still offering his hand. "No... no danger? You're not going to... do anything? You're still Duncan?"

The werewolf nodded reassuringly. Charlotte haltingly reached out, flinching at the slightest movement, until her hand rested in his. With surprising gentleness, the werewolf led her back to the couch. He simply fell on the floor, causing the furniture around him to clatter and Charlotte to wince.

"W-wa'er?" He gestured to the glass set on the table.

Charlotte shook her head. "No. No, I think I need something with a little more fortification." She snatched at a crystal decanter of brandy, popping off the stopper and taking one long drink straight from the bottle. She shuddered, and then turned to Duncan. "This explains far too much. My mother..." She held up the dagger, a slender stiletto. "She said it might come in handy... in case I came across any wild animals. She insisted it be tipped with silver. I didn't understand her concern until now."

Duncan nodded. "S-silver hur' us."

"It hurts you? I see..." Charlotte withdrew the stiletto blade, and gently placed it on the table. "Why show me? I mean to say, why show me *now*, before the wedding? You could have shown me after our vows were made and I couldn't get out of it."

Duncan shook his great, shaggy head. "N-not righ'."

"Not right. Ah, I see. Not gentlemanly. How courteous of you," she said distantly. "And... the rest of your family, the Earl, your mother...?"

Duncan nodded again.

The realization hit Charlotte, her heart leaping. "Oh my. Well. I think I'll need another dram of that." She reached for the decanter again, taking another swig.

"Y-you..." Duncan began to speak. "Y-you... n' me," he thumped his fists against his chest. He bared his fangs, and it took Charlotte a moment to realize he was smiling. "You 'idn't s-scream."

"I'm a lady, Lord Duncan, I try not to cause a scene if it can be helped," she quipped with a smile, even as her hands continued to shake, her knuckles white as she clenched them into fists.

Duncan reached out with his hand again; still, she flinched, but she placed her hand again in his palm. "Y-you n' me," he repeated. "W-we marry... you... b'come... us."

Charlotte furrowed her brow quizzically, but soon, realization dawned on her. "You mean...?"

Duncan gently moved her arm, and mimicked biting it. "You... a werewol'."

The young woman froze, looking between her arm and Duncan, eyes wide with shock.

"Y-you ch-choose."

Charlotte cleared her throat, looking deep into Duncan's eyes before giving her answer.