

The Wolves of Kirkney  
Renard De Fleureaux

Chapter 2

The summers around Kirkney Hall were brief, but they were glorious. The rolling hills and heath, the rich, ancient forest skirting the estate, all the beautiful land had come alive under a clear blue sky, warm breezes blowing across the landscape. Kirkney's ancient stone walls were now filled to bursting, as the Earl of Lochmaddy had called for a great hunt to celebrate the first wedding anniversary of his son and heir, Duncan and his beautiful wife, Charlotte. To the outside eye, it was a hunt that could be found at any other great house in the land, with several nobles dressed in tweed, surrounded by baying hounds, horses, and servants plying the noble guests with drinks.

Charlotte, however, knew better. She had been given a thorough education in the past year, gently holding the month old infant close to her breast; motherhood agreed with her, she had decided, now that the job of creating him was done. Her son had been baptized in the Church of Scotland by the local vicar and given the name of James, a name shared by both Duncan's grandfather and her father. He was a dear, sweet-tempered child, and while her marriage to Duncan was not without its difficulties, they were both in agreement concerning James.

Duncan entered the room, and Charlotte stiffened- she was still growing accustomed to smelling people before she saw them, and Duncan's unmistakable musk was strong, reminiscent of oak and honey. He smiled warmly to both Charlotte and his son, and moved to hold the little baby. Charlotte flinched, clutching James tightly for a brief moment before relenting. Duncan gave her a questioning look, but then looked down at his son, cooing softly.

"Oh, he's already a strong little chap, isn't he?" James' little fist had wrapped tightly around his father's finger before he drifted back to sleep, rocked in Duncan's arms. "Are you ready?"

Charlotte took in a bracing breath. Some part of her still wanted to run or pull her son out of Duncan's arms, knowing what he was. But then, she was about to present her son to dozens of strangers that were just like Duncan- her son was just like Duncan. And, with tonight's hunt, she would be just like Duncan.

"Let us go through the process one more time, if you would."

Duncan nodded, smiling patiently. "We'll start by showing James to the five great clans-"

"Charteris, Curzon, Ponsonby, Abergavenny- and our own, Galbraith, of course,"

Charlotte recited, beginning to pace as she went over the day's itinerary in her head.

"Yes, good," Duncan replied. He looked up, smelling Charlotte's lady maid. A few seconds later, she appeared with a silver tray and a teapot, which made Charlotte shudder.

"Your tea, ma'am," the maid said demurely, curtsying to Charlotte and Duncan. "Lord Duncan."

"Oh!" Charlotte ran a hand over her head, collapsing on to an ottoman cushion. "That ghastly brew."

The maid looked awkwardly between Duncan and Charlotte. "If you would prefer, ma'am, I could bring some sugar or cream..."

"No," Duncan said firmly, holding up his hand. "Lady Charlotte is happy with it as is, Wolsey, thank you."

The maid glanced over to Charlotte questioningly, and finally, Charlotte nodded in resignation. Wolsey straightened her uniform and curtsyed again. "M'lord. Ma'am."

As the maid left, Duncan glanced apologetically to Charlotte as he handed James back to her. "Sorry." He prepared the tea for her, stirring the inky black brew in a fine china cup. "You know it has to be taken straight. No dilution. Granny told me once the worse something tastes, the better it is for you- wolfsbane tea being by far the worst tasting, therefore, nothing better for your health. She would drink a cup with us when we were going through our wilding."

"So you'll be indulging in this poison with me, as well?" she asked bitterly as they exchanged tea and infant again. "I've been drinking this since you bit me after the wedding. While you were chasing the handsome porter at our Paris hotel, I was wrapped up in the room, vomiting all day."

Duncan smiled bracingly. "Think of how much stronger it's made you. But I could always ask Granny if she would like to sit with you for tea."

"All of you really are monsters," Charlotte muttered bitterly, her lips already curling downwards as she took her first sip of the deeply bitter draught.

"It's your last cup, it's the easiest. If all goes well, when the sun goes down, you will have your first night as one of us." Duncan grinned encouragingly. "You should savor it. The first night is always so... liberating."

"So you keep saying," Charlotte hissed, trying not to spit up the tea. She rolled her wrist as Duncan bounced James in his arms. "Continue."

"Once James is presented, father will give his welcome speech, and you'll be paraded amongst the great and good of our little kingdom. A government notary will also be in attendance, to make sure Her Majesty is aware of another werewolf on whom she may rely." Duncan explained.

"I imagine the Queen has never had to drink Wolfsbane Tea," Charlotte choked through a grimace, forcing herself to down the last drop.

"Well, you may bring it up with her when next we are presented at Buckingham Palace," Duncan replied. "After that, Matthew Curzon, Marquess of Culvershire will give a speech just before the sun goes down."

"The Curzons being, not royalty, but the first among equals in this merry band," Charlotte replied briskly, glad to leave the empty tea cup behind her as she took James again.

"Exactly. You will swear an oath to defend the land from threats of darkness and chaos, then you will be given a silver pendant."

"Which will prevent me from transforming when it would be socially impolite," she said airily.

"Correct. So do keep track of it- English or Scottish, a Briton would rather take a bullet than endure awkward situations." Duncan concluded. "Then, you need only enjoy the hunt."

There was a sharp knock on the door. "Charlotte, dear, are you almost ready?" Edith's doughty voice called.

"Yes, Mother Galbraith!" Charlotte called before turning back to Duncan. "Shall we take the plunge, then?"

Duncan offered his arm. "It'll be over quickly."

The two left the room arm-in-arm, with Edith quickly flanking Charlotte. "Back straight, dear, eyes forward- remember this is your moment of triumph. You're one of us now, and equal to everyone else assembled here- man, woman, or beast."

Charlotte dared a smile. "Thank you, mother."

Duncan was soon flanked by Angus, Madeleine and Oliver in tow. He only grunted gruffly as a means of greeting to his son, but Oliver did manage to mouth "good luck" to Duncan, while Madeleine offered a friendly smile. The sounds of light music, clinking of glass, and chatter grew louder to Charlotte as the family neared the entry hall, as well as dozens of distinct scents that assaulted her nostrils and nearly overwhelmed her. The eldest member of the family, Lady Olivia, joined them at the front entrance, looking each of them over like a general reviewing the troops. When she was satisfied, she nodded once and took her place at Edith's left. Angus straightened his coat and then signaled for the footman to open the door.

As the Galbraith family made their entrance, they cut a regal figure. Angus, the picture of a grizzled patriarch, wore the Galbraith clan's tartan, broad, bright red stripes over black and white, like blood splattered across a starry sky. Duncan and Oliver, likewise, wore the tartan as kilts, Duncan tall and strong, Oliver shooting up like a weed. The ladies wore brooches with thistles and monkshood flowers, the scent bitter to Charlotte, though it was preferable on her dress than being brewed in a teapot. Olivia the old, stately matriarch, Edith, strong-willed and matronly, Madeleine a spirited beauty, and then Charlotte- whom all eyes fell upon, all belonging to hungry wolves. She wondered, trying to discern if she was one of their own or prey.

"My friends!" Angus called out, holding his hands up. "Welcome, my lords, ladies, and gentlemen, once more to Kirkney Hall. My wife and I are greatly pleased to entreat such honorable folk here today, and we thank you for coming to celebrate the birth and baptism of our first grandchild, James Franklin Galbraith!"

The assembled guests clapped, punctuated with the baying of hunting hounds, though Charlotte thought it may have come from some of the fiercer looking guests.

"On this auspicious day, we also see the end of my daughter-in-law's trial. She will take her place in our clan tonight, to which all of you shall bear witness. But for now, my friends, we wait for the setting sun- until then, the hospitality of Kirkney Hall is yours."

Another polite smattering of applause was given before the music began again, and Charlotte reluctantly handed off a fussing James to his nanny. "To battle, then?" Duncan said wryly. She nodded, her head still reeling from the scents of every werewolf gathered.

Duncan led Charlotte first to Matthew Curzon. The Marquess was a tall and stately looking man, with hair as white as snow. Despite appearing to be the oldest guest present, his bright, icy blue eyes and lively movement, and a strong air that smelled curiously of holly, belied his energy and vigor.

"Marquess," Duncan bowed his head politely. "May I present my wife, Lady Charlotte Galbraith?"

"Ah! Young Duncan," Matthew grinned, grabbing Duncan's hand and clapping him on the shoulder. "The Curzon clan was relieved to hear your marriage has been a success. I always told your father not to worry about your previous indiscretions- it's all a matter of finding the right woman, no?"

Duncan's smile tightened. "As you say, sir."

Matthew then turned his attention to Charlotte, bowing his head. "And you, madam, are most welcome into our ranks. The five families believe strongly in the Spartan ideal- strong children are birthed by strong mothers. Do you look forward to your first hunt?"

Charlotte managed a more sincere and demure smile. "I've never hunted without horse and hounds, Lord Culvershire. It will be a fresh experience for me, I would say."

"I dare say," Matthew chuckled. "You will never want to ride a horse again- especially when we can outrun them. You will be flying with the wind tonight, madam- relish it."

Charlotte was about to respond, when a new, overwhelming scent came to her. This was far from any of the werewolves around her, who all smelled of the earth. This scent was crisp and electric, like the lingering smell of a lightning strike, that made her skin prickle. She had only been warned of such a scent, that of a purely magical creature- a fae.

Matthew read Charlotte's face, chuckling lightly. "You smell him, don't you? You have a very keen nose, madam. Robin! Attend!"

Charlotte faintly gasped as what looked like a man stepped from behind a large tree, seeming to take shape from the shadow itself. He was short and squat, with broad shoulders and ape-like arms. His face was broad and flat, with a bulbous nose and the reddest hair Charlotte had ever seen, as if such a creature could be half man and half orangutan. He looked wholly unfit for the suit he wore. Charlotte needed to stop from lurching forward as his scent became considerably more pungent as the creature manifested; he reeked of dried blood.

"Robin has served the Curzon family for many years. A more loyal servant one could not ask for," the older man said.

"Thank you, Sir," Robin grunted, nodding curtly, his voice like gravel.

Charlotte exchanged a look with Duncan, who subtly shook his head. Questions could come later. "I understand you brought a distinguished guest with you from America, sir," Duncan said smoothly, changing the subject.

"Ah! I have indeed. I think you would benefit from making his acquaintance, young Duncan. I understand you're an admirer of his writings- Richard Hopkins."

Charlotte glanced at Duncan, a light in his eye. His chest puffed up and a smile subtly played at his lips; Charlotte still marveled that this other world, as she called it, had their own papers and periodicals, but she had heard of the inestimable Mr. Hopkins. In these circles, he was a famous American werewolf, veteran of half a dozen wars, and a monster slayer without compare. Duncan had read about every one of his exploits. Robin was entirely forgotten; Charlotte glanced as he receded to the shadows, disappearing in the shade.

"We would be honored to welcome him to our home, Marquess," Duncan said enthusiastically. Matthew nodded, gesturing across the green field. The man who approached did not, at first glance, disappoint; Charlotte had noticed how many werewolves carried themselves with a brawny, even bestial, strength, and Mr. Hopkins' tweed suit was buttoned up tight over a powerful physique. He carried himself like a soldier, heavy steps that were steady and precise, his back ramrod stiff and eyes straight ahead. His dark hair was long and streaked with grey, with a bushy mustache and a trimmed goatee along his heavy jaw. Charlotte sighed inwardly; Mr. Hopkins was *exactly* Duncan's type.

"Mr. Hopkins, allow me to introduce the happy couple at the center of these festivities, Lord Duncan and Lady Charlotte Galbraith," the Marquess said. Charlotte had to stop her nose from wrinkling; Richard Hopkin smelled terribly American, all bacon grease and gunpowder. It made her hungry.

Duncan smiled broadly as the American clasped his hand like an old friend, shaking firmly. "Lord Duncan, is it? A pleasure to make your acquaintance," Richard stated in a big voice with a rough accent. "And of course, congratulations to your Lady wife, ma'am," he tipped his hat to Charlotte. "You married into a family like ours, is that right? You weren't born with our gift?"

Charlotte smiled bracingly. Straightforward- also terribly American. "Yes, Mr. Hopkins."

Richard grinned. "My wife was exactly the same way. Oh, I gave her a fright on our honeymoon, I can tell you that. But she loves the hunt more than I do now, hah!"

"I must admit, Mr. Hopkins, I am a great admirer. I've read about your travels- the foes you've overcome!"

Richard laughed. "Well, truth be told, your lordship, my years fighting the rebels was the worst danger I've ever seen. Sioux Skinwalkers and Cree Wendigo are easy prey after the killing fields at Fredericksburg and Antietam. But that don't make for very good penny dreadful stories, do they?" he sighed, smiling sadly. "Well, you didn't throw this soiree to listen to an old soldier talk about..." Richard's nose suddenly curled, his face losing its jovial look.

All of them, Mr. Hopkins, the Marquess, Duncan, and Charlotte sniffed the air. There was a strong scent on the breeze, one that all werewolves knew: it was a mixture of dry dust and fresh blood, of ice and moldering meat- the scent of a vampire.

"Hells bells!" Hopkins snarled, stomping towards the end of the lawn, where the smell was growing stronger. "I've sent ten of these bloodsucking leeches to their maker, and they still don't let up!"

Duncan exchanged a quick, questioning look with Charlotte and started after Hopkins. Charlotte followed, glancing at the other guests; all of them smelled the vampire's scent, and like hounds, were beginning to track. Hopkins had taken the lead, with Duncan jogging behind him and Charlotte in hot pursuit.

"You have a particular grievance with vampires, Mr. Hopkins?" Charlotte asked hurriedly. "I- I've never had the pleasure, myself."

"Ha!" the American barked. "Pleasure? Only pleasure in dealing with vampires is getting to drive the stakes through their cold, dead hearts. Some of those Johnny Reds fought so hard to keep their slaves the same way a cowboy works his damnedest to keep the herd in line- they don't want to lose a fresh supply of meat, get me?" Richard glowered, a savage look in his eyes. "You want some wisdom from a pack elder, Lady Charlotte, you heed my word- vampires are devilspawn, belched out of hell with no higher purpose than to plague the rest of us."

"Well said," Matthew Curzon murmured, able to keep pace with Richard.

When Richard led the rest of the assembled guests to the stone gate marking the drive up to Kirkney Hall, the various nobles and gentry found two men. One was a grim-faced, sturdily built attendant in a bowler hat, holding an umbrella over a distinguished looking gentleman. He was dressed in a tailored black suit, tall and lean, with sharp, dark eyes and well-coiffed hair, well-proportioned features and a prominent nose. His pale skin radiated with the vampire's scent.

"This is a private event," Richard snarled. "Go crawl back into your grave, leech!"

"Mr. Hopkins, please," Duncan muttered, pushing himself to the front with Charlotte in tow. "This is our home, we will take care of this." The young noble turned to the vampire. "My guest has the right of it, Kirkney is holding a private affair. What business brings you here?"

The vampire blinked curiously, adjusting a pair of pence-nez perched on his nose. "I believe I am expected, sir. I am Samuel Levy-Johnson." He looked around at the assembled guests, many of whom were grimacing with barely concealed rage. "I represent the Home Office. I'm the notary expected for the registration of one Charlotte Galbraith?" Awkwardly, he gestured to his companion. Mechanically, the grim-faced man held out a half dozen papers.

Charlotte took it, sharing the papers with Duncan. They were snatched out of her hands by Angus, who had caught up with the rest of his guests. His eyes were like fire as he bared his teeth to the vampire before looking at the papers. "My God. Such effrontery! These papers are signed by the Home Secretary."

"Your government sent this bloodsucking filth for one of our rites? The insult!" Richard snarled.

Another guest, the thin and shrewish matriarch of Abergavenny sniffed. "This is outrageous. Outrageous! My cousin dines with the Home Secretary, we will get to the bottom of this!"

Charlotte nudged Duncan, giving him a meaningful look. Not now, today already had too many complications. The young werewolf thinned his lips, then held up his hands. "My lords and ladies, friends, please!"

It took a moment for the rabble to die down. "The Home Secretary, I am sure, meant no offense. I certainly choose not to take any on this day, to celebrate my son's baptism, my anniversary, and the end of my wife's wilding. I invoke the right of sacred hospitality- Mr. Levy-Johnson is under my protection, as a scion of the Galbraith Clan."

Angus glowered at his son. "You are *not* the master of this house!"

"A member of Her Majesty's government has presented himself, to register our kind at the end of a wilding, for the protection of the realm. These are the laws we have agreed to abide by, to live in peace with our good Christian brothers and sisters," Duncan replied.

"Father..." Oliver stepped forward, looking between the Earl and his older brother. "It's just one vampire. If he does try anything, he's surrounded by the most powerful werewolves in Britain."

Angus thought on this, locking eyes with Mr. Levy-Johnson and staring him down as if he were a prize stag whose antlers were about to be mounted on his wall. "Very well. I will let my son's invocation stand." He pointed to the vampire. "But you should watch yourself, sir. Do not convince us to add further quarry to our hunt."

The other guests slowly began to relax their stance, returning to the party. The government's vampire audibly cleared his throat, trying to swallow his nerves. His companion remained as stone-faced as ever.

Angus turned to Duncan, jabbing his finger against his son's chest. "He is *your* responsibility. If he makes a move, I expect you to snap his neck before he sinks his fangs into some poor unfortunate!"

Angus stalked off, Matthew Curzon glancing doubtfully to Duncan. Duncan, for his part, looked to Samuel, his brow furrowed, then began trailing after his father and brother. Richard stopped in front of Charlotte, bowing his head.

"Ma'am, I've dealt with vampires far too long to feel comfortable with this bat lurking around. I want you to know I will have my eyes keenly focused on this leech- we know how to take care of his kind, back in the States," Richard Hopkins growled.

"Thank you for that... reassurance, Mr. Hopkins," Charlotte said distantly. She glanced back at the notary, still standing at the threshold of the gate. It was strange; besides insisting on an umbrella on such a fine day, a year ago, she may have thought nothing about this man. But now, the scent of decay and blood almost colored him, her eyes perceiving a faint mist of red the more she concentrated on him- but it was a trick of the mind, her newly sharpened senses being overwhelmed.

"Ahem. Madam? Sir?" Mr. Levy-Johnson called after Duncan and Charlotte. Duncan stopped halfway back, and returned to Charlotte's side. Samuel grinned apologetically. "I have not been given explicit permission to enter." He paused, nervously running his fingers along the rim of his hat. "It's one of our rules, you see- we must be invited."

Duncan sighed. "Yes, of course. You are welcome for the duration of the Hunt, Mr. Levy-Johnson."

The vampire sighed in relief. "Thank you, Lord Duncan," he crossed the threshold, and began walking briskly up the drive.

"Will your man need accommodation?" Charlotte asked after Samuel's umbrella-wielding servant.

"Oh, I shouldn't think so!" Samuel replied briskly. "Dear Charles has been dead for three years. He'll make do with a dark and quiet corner."

Charlotte's eyes went wide, clutching Duncan's arm. "Well..." she breathed as the vampire walked by them. "What are the odds this doesn't come to blows?"

Duncan thinned his lips. "Slimmer than my father's patience. Come- the sooner our guests have some meat in them, the more likely Mr. Levy-Johnson is to survive the night."