




## THE FIRST TALE

### *The Wolf Child*

 At the edge of a fathomless forest, in a castle grey as cloud, a baby was born at the stroke of midnight. But, alas, all was not well. 'She's dead,' the young mother gasped, her tumbling hair plastered to her brow, her ragged voice as thin as the curls of smoke snaking their way from the fire as she staggered from her chamber.

Outside in the corridor, her husband stumbled back in shock, grief gripping his heart. He turned away from the tiny bundle, too upset to even gaze upon her.

The mother's eyes burned bright as she crept through the castle, the baby clasped in her arms. A cloak of red velvet thrown swiftly over her shoulders, her feet still bare.

Somewhere a window was open, letting in a snow-laced wind. It skittered through the corridors, carrying away the tiniest whimper, as soft as a nightingale's wing.

Three serving girls huddled together. A golden dog barked in the courtyard. The apothecary, who

had helped bring the baby into the world, stood statue still.

The mother hurried on, out into the dancing snowfall. Near the castle's entrance, a trusted huntsman stood alone, keeping watch over the drawbridge. Magnificently tall, shoulders as wide as an ancient oak, his skin the colour of ebony. He was the castle's sworn protector, and he had taken an oath to keep its secrets. All of them.

'She's dead,' repeated the young mother, pushing the little bundle into his arms.

The huntsman took hold of the bundle carefully, taken aback by the pale figure swaying before him in the wind.

A demanding little cry came from within the blankets and a perfect pink foot kicked at the huntsman's elbow.

He gave a smile of relief. 'Look, she's –'

'She will not last the night,' the mother said quickly. 'Take her to the river, bind her to a rock and throw her in. Make sure she sinks to the very bottom. This way is kinder.'

The huntsman peered down and felt his heart still. The babe was as radiant as the winter moon, her hair the silver of stardust, her eyes icy blue. Her right arm, not fully formed, ended in a neat little stump.

She was beautiful, but she had been born with the Mark of the Witch.

The huntsman swallowed his dread and said gravely, 'I will take her away.'

The mother nodded, drew up her scarlet hood and was gone.

Under the watch of the lone pearl moon and a solitary owl, the huntsman rode deep into Silverthorne Forest. Through tangled briars, over shifting rocks and rushing brooks, never pausing. And, as he rode, he sang sweetly to the child, a ballad of sorrow and hope.

For a forest can hold many secrets. Promises murmured beneath a new moon. Pathways so twisted they defy any map. Dark truths hidden in the heart of a wolf. The very air seemed to stir with myth.

The mother's cruel words circled the huntsman's heart. 'She will not last the night.'

*We will see about that.*

He would have taken the babe home to his own wife and child, raised them as sisters if he could. But he knew news would soon spread of his new daughter, one with stardust hair and the Mark of the Witch. Word would get back to the castle and the child would be put to death. All his family would be in grave danger.

*Her only safety lies in the thick of the forest where the Silverthorne wolves reign, and all but a few brave folk fear to tread.*

Finally, after riding far into the woods, the huntsman brought his horse to a halt. Tethered her to an ancient ash tree and dismounted in a glade of trembling aspen, and alder buckthorn, still rich with dark berries.

From round his neck the huntsman pulled the garland of lavender he always wore for safety and

bent it carefully into the shape of a crown, placing it upon the child's fair head.

Within the forest's folds nearby, a wolf with moonshine eyes awoke and stretched out a long, sinewy limb. Her fur was the bleak white of winter, her teeth sharp, her heart wild. She tilted her snout to the moonlit skies and breathed in the scent of a stranger in her forest. Then she set off at a run. Other wolves were drawn to the sound of her howl, and took up the chase, following their leader.

Soon the gleam of yellow eyes flashed through the dense trees surrounding the alder clearing. Snouts raised to the moon, they sang with a swift, feral yearning.

The wind stirred and the snow whirled. The wolf bleak as winter pawed the earth, glaring hard at the huntsman.

He lowered his gaze in respect and moved towards her. Carefully he laid the child on a bed of leaves at the white wolf's paws.

The huntsman crept back as the wolf put her nose down, taking in the lavender crown's familiar scent.

The baby raised her arms to the wolf, her single hand clasped in a fist. The wolf opened her jaws and tenderly licked the child's cheek, then, slowly, she lay down by the babe in the snow, guarding her from the night. The pack at once surrounding them for protection.

As the wolves' howls continued to ring through the glade a barely noticeable doorway opened and a

band of fierce men and women stepped from the dark into the moonlit clearing, drawing their daggers in readiness.

‘I have brought this child to the safety of the forest,’ said the huntsman, bowing to his friends in solidarity. ‘She is already at one with the wolves, and I humbly ask: will you also watch over her?’

The gruffest-looking man pushed his way forward, walking among the wolf pack as if they were family, and peered at the child’s luminous hair.

‘Where did she come from?’ he asked.

‘The castle,’ the huntsman replied.

The group of Forest Folk muttered among themselves, uncertain, sceptical. They wanted nothing to do with the castle, or its king and queen. But the youngest of them, a girl not much more than a child herself, was drawn to the baby. ‘Please,’ she murmured to the gruff man, and he saw just how lovely the baby was, and caught sight of her sweet little arm. Gently he took the babe from the wolf’s clasp and turned to the huntsman.

‘I swear we will protect her,’ he said with great solemnness. And the family of Forest Folk welcomed the babe into their home.

And so the huntsman rode away, back towards the Ebony House at the edge of the forest, back to his own wife and child.

And the Wolf Child?


Some say she did not outlive the winter. Others think the wolves devoured her. But there are some

who swear that, on nights when the moon is high,  
they hear her singing.

A voice bright as bone, wild as a wolf. Singing a  
melody of moonlight and freedom.

## CHAPTER ONE

### *Upon a Dark Horse*

 Deep in the heart of the forest, a wild-hearted girl rode upon a dark horse. Her hair was as pale as moonlight, and her eyes were the ice blue of the mountains in winter.

She had no light as the wind had stolen her lantern's flame. Yet she galloped on fearlessly, for she knew the paths of the forest as well as the lines that criss-crossed her palm. Trees drew back their boughs to let her pass; stars realigned themselves to light her way. The girl tipped her face to the sky and howled, feral and sweet.

She was wilder than snow on a first winter's morn. Wilder than moonlight on a midsummer's eve. Wilder than midnight in a forest of wolves.

Her name was Wild Rose.

A little way in the distance, the River Spell gurgled like a wise witch's laughter and Wild Rose slowed the dark horse to a canter. A wolf with mottled fur of many shades soundlessly flanked her as she weaved past ancient apple trees, through a glade of winter



pinetrees, round a huge dead ash tree, then past a tunnel of hawthorn.

Wild Rose did not even glance at the tunnel, though she caught the bewitching scent of cinnamon and sorrow that drifted from within.

Journeying on, she came to a bend where the river's current calmed to no more than a whisper. The horse and the wolf, named Lullaby for the sweetness of her howl, both halted. Wild Rose leaned into the woodland darkness, sensing a watchful owl high above, a scuffling water rat near the river's edge and somewhere in front a living, wicked solidness.

*The Spindle Wood.*

Impossible, unfathomable, impassable.

A tangled wall of briar, tall as the trees, laced with thorns as sharp as daggers. No one had ever found their way through it. Carriages and carts from the village took the royal road, which led round it. Nobody ever dared or even dreamed of going through.

Wild Rose dismounted in a smooth, light jump and turned to the stallion. First she stroked his silken mane, darker than jet and woven with ribbons. Then she whispered, with as much authority as she could summon: 'Stay here, Luce.'

He stared at her, black and proud and beautiful. She reached out her arms to him, breathing in a scent that felt like safety.

'I'll be fine,' she assured him, her heart already racing.

Turning towards the thorns, Wild Rose moved forward, a shimmer of hope tingling in her bones.

*This will be the night I cross.*

Over the years she had mapped and planned and schemed and dreamed that one day she would cross the Spindle Wood and dance in the castle courtyard beyond. It was a pledge she had made often. A pledge made real in dreams and promises.

First she'd had to wait for a night when the clouds were so thick the moon was all but hidden. The forest so dark that no one would notice a lone rider. Not her bright-eyed uncles and aunts, nor the Royal Guard.

Next she'd had to steal the sharpest axe, which belonged to her Uncle Tobias, from the cottage.

Then she'd 'borrowed' the dark horse.

And now here she was. Ready to cross the Spindle Wood.

There was just one thing left. Wild Rose dropped to the earth beneath a young copper beech tree and retrieved a small jar. Her protection spell.

Three thorns from a white rose pushed into three hazelnuts soaked in rainwater and left in the starlight for three nights. Wild Rose bound the little jar to her waist with a length of spider-silk twine and murmured the incantation.

*'Thorn of rose, with petal white,  
protect my heart on this deep night.*

*Little nut of hazelwood,  
let my path be true and good.  
Drop of rain and purest star, guide  
me safely near and far.'*

Creeping forward, she held her hand out before her. Almost instantly a thorn pierced the skin of her second finger, drawing a droplet of blood. Wild Rose froze, trying to ignore the shooting pain.

Lullaby gave a low growl of caution, but Wild Rose closed her heart to it.

'I'm fine,' she whispered as Lullaby licked the blood from her finger, then she inched cautiously forward again, feeling for the axe at her belt.

Rising to her full height, Wild Rose held the axe high. She sliced and chopped and carved with all the care of a woodcutter, until a hollow had been created, just big enough for one person.

Stepping boldly forward, Wild Rose felt thorns sharp as daggers snare her ragged clothes and matted hair. For a precious moonstruck moment, the Spindle Wood seemed to surrender. But then the maze of thorns began to close in, as if it were swallowing her. Thick, leafy stems twisted and tangled together afresh, catching in her hair, scraping her with thorns, blotting out the moon as they drew her in.

Wild Rose gasped, almost dropping the axe. Behind her Lullaby howled in protest. Suddenly another wolf, pale and fast as lightning, shot from the trees. It swiftly burrowed into the thorns and closed its powerful jaws round Wild Rose's ankle, dragging her free, a handful of thorns still trapped in her hair.

Wild Rose flopped to the ground with a sigh of exasperation as a wolf white as winter and wise as the moon unclamped her jaws and glared at her.

‘Fine then, not tonight,’ she huffed, glaring at the leader of the wolf pack: Snow.

Snow made no sound, but Lullaby drew back in fear and Wild Rose sprang up and ran over to the dark horse, leaping on to him, her wish for freedom still alive in her heart. The white wolf’s eyes burned gold in warning as Wild Rose blew her a kiss before riding swiftly away.

One day she would know the world beyond the woods. One day she would venture into villages or cross the moat to Silverthorne Castle. But not tonight.

Wild Rose galloped away, through the Wild Wood – a stretch of dense woodland on the edge of the forest – and past the Deep Wood, which was known to the villagers as the forest’s dark heart. Wild Rose knew it as home.

Lullaby ran by her side, streaking through the trees. Wild Rose kept riding until the scent of lavender in rainwater and burnt arrowroot reached her. This was the sign they were close to the apothecary’s house. A place secretly hidden away somewhere between the Wild and the Deep of the forest.

Most homes within Silverthorne had grown weary of arguing and simply become part of the wild. Shrouded in ivy, stained green with moss, or cracked from years of the keening wind. The apothecary’s house was so well hidden that it found you, taking you by complete surprise if you stumbled upon it. And, sure enough, the dark horse came to a staircase cut into the ground at steep, jutting angles. Sensing a

shift, Wild Rose jerked and gripped Luce's mane more tightly as they crept down the woodland stairway. At its base, an ominous brick wall rose out of the earth, covered in nightshade and fungi and lined with shards of broken glass that glittered cruelly in the starlight.

Wild Rose dismounted, tucked the crook of her right elbow under the horse's chin, into his golden bridle, and led him along the wall, feeling through the mushroom-covered brickwork with her hand. Finally her fingers closed round a devil-horned knocker. But she did not use it. Instead she sank to her knees, poking around in the cold mud until she grasped an iron lever.

She turned to Lullaby. 'I love you, but you can't come in here. Away you go.' She kissed the wolf on the end of her snout and gave her the littlest push.

The wolf gave a growl and Wild Rose bowed her head, pressing their foreheads together, sending her thoughts to the wolf, until Lullaby turned and did as Wild Rose had asked, vanishing away to roam the night country.

Then Wild Rose heaved her full weight on to the lever and held still as the brickwork creaked and shifted until a doorway swung open in the wall. The horse and Wild Rose squeezed through and the door clanged shut behind them.

They entered a long, sweeping garden, a lantern-lit path winding its way to the entrance of a majestic house. It was the colour of bats' wings and had been built so cleverly that the tiles gave the appearance of flowing silk, reaching from the topmost tip of the roof down to

the dank earth in one sweep. It was a witch's dream of spires and turrets, and at the centre was a grand tower in which there was a door the shade of pewter.

But Wild Rose never used *this* door, wise as she was to its illusion. Instead she bent down and found a far smaller door tucked almost entirely out of sight. It was at this that she knocked.

There came the gentle patter of soft-shoed feet, a flickering of candlelight and a long, welcoming squeak as the door creaked open and a woman with the elegance of a nightingale stood before her.

The apothecary, Lady Mal, had silky dark hair, rich brown skin, and eyes that seemed to know your thoughts before you even thought them.

'What do you want at this hour, child?'

'To see you, of course.' Wild Rose smiled.

The Lady Mal raised an eyebrow, taking Wild Rose's cold hand and pulling her into the warm. Inside, the ceiling was high, the air dancing with a million dust motes. A fire burned in the hearth with two cauldrons bubbling above it.

The Lady Mal had settled herself in a high-backed chair beside a tall window, eyeing Wild Rose like a cat watching a bird.

'You are too good a thief!' she said musingly. 'I thought we had agreed that you would ask *before* you borrowed my horse.'

Wild Rose shrugged with feigned innocence and the Lady Mal rolled her eyes. 'Well, you're here now. You may as well have tea with me.'

Wild Rose took two fired china cups from a high cupboard, dipping each one carefully into a broth of mint, lemon peel and ginger from one of the cauldrons. It smelled of morning.

‘What’s bubbling in the other pot?’ she asked. It held the aroma of summer wilderness, yet there was an acrid bite to it that stung Wild Rose’s eyes. Peeking inside, she saw a huge root of valerian, the white wing of a moth, handfuls of camomile leaves, stems of dried lavender buds and other ingredients she couldn’t identify ‘Is it a potion?’

The Lady Mal moved to the hearth and gave the pot a stir. ‘It is.’

‘What does it do?’

Ever since the Lady Mal had spied Wild Rose, aged three, hanging from a tree just beyond her garden, she had welcomed the child to her house to learn the ways of the woods, the knowledge of woodland flowers and the secrets of forest herbs.

Her uncles and aunts might have taught Wild Rose how to cook heart-warming soup, mend and sew her clothes, tell folklore or sing a ballad, but the Lady Mal had taught her everything else. How to chant incantations, how to ride fearlessly and how to stay alive in the bleakest of winters.

Now Lady Mal was quiet for a moment, as if considering her answer. ‘It’s a sleep potion. Called the Dreamer’s Draught,’ she said at last.

*The Dreamer’s Draught.*

‘To stop nightmares?’ asked Wild Rose.

‘No, child,’ answered the apothecary. ‘To send you to sleep for over a hundred hours.’ And then, in a much lower voice, she added, ‘It can also wipe your memory. The last thing you did before you sleep is forgotten.’

‘Will you teach me the recipe?’ Wild Rose asked brightly.

The lady held the girl’s face in her hands, in an unexpected gesture of tenderness. ‘One day I will. One day I will tell you everything I know. But you are too young to learn such dark things today. Come sit with me by the window before I head to the castle.’

Wild Rose took her steaming cup and followed the Lady Mal across the grand room. For this was her other most favourite thing – hearing stories about life in the castle, life in the villages, life beyond the forest.

‘Will you take me there one day?’ she said with a sigh.

‘You know the rules about leaving the forest.’ The Lady Mal looked at her pointedly. ‘You know it isn’t safe—’

‘Yes, yes, yes. The villagers think I’m a witch and want to drown me. I’m just sayi—’

Now it was the Lady Mal’s turn to cut her off, this time with a look.

‘Have you forgotten about the little boy you found by Old Eleena’s house?’

Wild Rose fell silent. She had not forgotten. She never would.

