Opening extract from

Fire, Bed & Bone

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Chapter One



The wolves came down to the farm last night. They spoke to me of freedom.

I lay by the last of the fire with my four feet turned towards the embers and the last of the heat warming my belly. I did not listen to the wolf talk. This is no time to think of freedom.

Tomorrow, in the morning, I will choose the place. Out in the byre, where the bedding is deep and the children cannot find me.

My back aches from the pull of my belly. However long I lap from the cold cattle trough I am still thirsty. I think tomorrow is the day.

I rest. The fire ticks. Grindecobbe grunts in her stall. Humble creeps in through the window and curls beside me, soft as smoke.

I can smell mouse on her. She has eaten, and come in to the fire for the warmth.

Rufus snores on his pallet of straw. Comfort, his wife, lies curled around him, dreaming. Down by their feet the children cough and fidget in their sleep, as children do. Only Alice, the baby, is awake. Only she hears, with me and Humble, the wild song of the wolves.

I heave my belly up and hobble on splayed feet to stand beside the cradle. Alice reaches her small, red fist towards my ear and smiles. She does not fear the wolves. Their voices come to her from far outside the house, which is the only world she knows.

Thin, frail, far off and going further, their call wavers back from where the snow lies deep under the pine trees. The grey rock pushes like bone through the cold hide of the earth and the moon hangs over all.

I know the world beyond the house. I know Rufus's byre. I know Joan's house, which stands beside the village field. I know all the village. I know the Great House barn and sheep pens; I know the Great House fields. I know every small place where oats and beans and barley grow.

I know where the rabbits creep out from their burrows. I know where the wicked wildcat leaves her stink on the grass as she

passes. I know where foxes hunt, where deer step out on fragile legs to graze. I know where the wild boar roots and where the great bear nurses. I know where the little grey bear with the striped face digs for bluebell bulbs in springtime, when the woods are full of hatchlings that fall into your mouth, dusted with down, and the rabbits on the bank are slow and sleek and foolish.

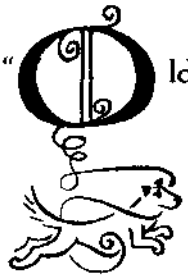
I am a creature of several worlds. I know the house and the village and have my place in both. I know the pasture land beyond the great field. I know the wildwood. I know the wetlands all along the river, where every green leaf that you step on has a different smell. I know the high, dry heath.

Soon now I shall climb into the bracken stack next to the medlars that sit in rows, skins wrinkling while they ripen and decay. I'll make a bed there, like the soft bed Rufus made for Comfort at the time of Alice's birth.

I shall not groan, as Comfort did, nor beg Rufus to rub my back. I shall push and wait and push again, three, four, maybe five times.

Move over, Humble, let me uncoil my aching back.

Chapter Two



"Old bitch looks ready to drop her pups." That's Rufus talking. He bends down and rubs his hard hand down from the base of my skull to the root of my tail. Again. Again.

Comfort looks my way and smiles. "I wonder where she'll hide this time? Why won't she stay beside the fire, Rufus?"

"She knows what's best for her."

Rufus is a good man. When Comfort hollered from the pain of the baby before Alice, he put his weight behind her and his strength and his voice, put everything he could behind her, tried his best to coax that child out.

In the end he ran for help. I stayed with Comfort while he went for Ede. They always go for Ede when they need help of this kind.

The child was out and dead before they got

back. There was a smell of blood. Comfort lay very still. Her twins, Wat and Will, sat by the fire with their fingers in their mouths, not looking. The new one didn't move, not even to draw breath.

Poor Comfort. That was the year two of mine were born blind. Rufus took them. I bit his thumb near to the bone.

Next year came sweet Alice.

"Give the old dog a dish of milk, Rufus."

Rufus shook his head. "Do you think I'm a rich man, Comfort, to feed my dog on milk? Not I. I work for what I get."

Comfort smiled, because he had already lifted the crock that holds the milk down off the windowsill.

"And so do I," she said. "And so does the old dog. That's the best hunting dog we've ever had. Best in the village and you know it. Everybody knows it. She does you credit, Rufus."

Rufus poured my milk.

"Wolves were close round the farm last night, Comfort. I saw their tracks in the snow when I went out this morning. It's good that we mended the Great House sheep pen."

"I will keep the boys close by until the snow lifts."

"Wolves won't take a child. Not while there's lambs to take."

Comfort did not reply. She disagrees with Rufus on the matter of what wolves will and will not take. And so do I. Only a wolf knows what a wolf wants.

I slipped away from the fire while they were talking, and made my way across the yard to the byre. There is more snow to fall. It will overlay my footprints.

It was hard work, to drag my belly up the wooden steps and into the bracken Rufus cuts for bedding. The chickens squawked each time I slipped; the goat watched with those yellow eyes of hers. They winter in the byre with the sheep. Grindecobbe lives indoors with us.

I pushed in under the wooden platform where they store the medlars. The place was perfect. Dark, hidden, high. Not safe. Nothing is safe. But easy to defend.

I could hear the sheep moving down below, and the goat fidgeting. I smelled the bracken. Clean. Dry. I turned around and around, treading my nest. As I lay down, satisfied, the pit of my belly started to tighten.

One of the hens has flown up here to watch me. Her fierce round eye stares at me and her head tilts to one side. A long, slow cluck escapes her throat. Hens know how to hatch eggs and how to keep a clutch of chicks warm under wing and

how to scratch for food, but they are ignorant of anything beyond their own concerns.

Oof!

Hens do very well as hens. They are not stupid. But they are no good at any but hens' business. Sheep are the same. There are two in the stall below me waiting to lamb. I hear them now; they grind their jaws from side to side, working the cud.

Horses, now—

Oof!

Horses are different. Mullein the Great House horse is a good-hearted beast, patient and strong and brave.

Oof!

Welcome, my sweet. Soft yellow gold, like me.

Burdock the ox is strong, but foolish. He can pull the plough and take the cart to market. But I do not like him.

Oof!

Welcome, damp wriggler. Lie still beside your sister.

There'll be no market while the snow blocks the road. There'll be no coming and no going. Burdock will champ in his stall.

Oof!

Welcome. Are you the last and latest, small one, smudged smidgen of a puppy?

I think so.

Yes. Just three.

One golden brown. One black, like Swart, your father. One smudged. Two dogs and a bitch. Lie still and let me clean you. Oh, the sweet, soft smallness of you under my tongue. Suckle, and I'll name you.

Squill, my little black dog, Swart's son. Your nose shines like a wet black leaf. Parsnip, small daughter, yellow like me. Little two-colour fellow, I shall call you Fleabane.

Go, hen. You've seen them now. Go down and tell your sisters that my pups are born. Call out the news. Let Swart hear it too, over the hills.

Squill, your small teeth prick like pine needles. Stop that, Parsnip, and let your brother Fleabane feed beside you.

Night comes again. Snowfall and darkness and the quiet wind. I'll make a circle round my pups, and sleep.