

Bec Manser (she/her) is a Fantasy/Horror author who describes herself as half sparkle, half spooky. Her sparkly side is a pink-obsessed animal lover, whose hobbies include gaming, woodland walks, and eating at every vegan restaurant possible. Her spooky side watches too many horror films, loves visiting haunted places, and thinks she would make a great paranormal investigator (if only she could stay up late enough).

A proud member of the LGBTQIA+ community, Bec is passionate about representing queer and diverse characters in children's and YA literature.

You can find her on Instagram, Threads, Twitter and TikTok @thatsparklybec.

BEC MANSER

# Wildheart





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For twelve-year-old me, who dreamt of
becoming an author. We did it!


DRYDA FOREST
Hunter's Snare
Crooked Clearing
Wriggleroot
Chalk Twins' Den
Shiverside


Shadow Stalkers' Camp
Wailing Woods
Camp Root
Centaur's Fort
Twigswick
Gnarlton



# Prologue

Deep in Dryda Forest, in the town of Twigswick, children are taught three things: never stray past the rune posts at the edge of town, run home as fast as you can when you hear the warning bell, and know that Spirits are very real, and very dangerous. These spectres creep between the gnarled trunks of old trees. They slip into the swirling mists surrounding weeping willows. And they lurk in the shade beneath bristly bushes. Hungry for the souls of the living, they prey on anyone who dares enter their woods.

Rangers with wild hearts fight to protect those living in Dryda Forest from its horrors. Unflinching and fearless, they recruit only the bravest to their cause.

Growing up in a world where stepping out of your door could get your soul gobbled up by something monstrous,

children survive by following rules, keeping their boots laced tight – in case they have to run fast – and always watching the shadows. This either makes them as tough as winter bark or as jumpy as mice.



# CHAPTER ONE
# Nettle and Fern

'Don't eat me!' Nettle let out a strangled cry as cold fingers stroked her cheek. Startled awake, she found herself safe in bed, not being chased through the woods by a swarm of sharp-fanged monsters, like she'd been dreaming.

Nettle smothered a scream as her sister's face, half illuminated by candlelight, appeared above her.

'Shh! You'll wake the whole town,' Fern hushed, flashing her chipped tooth – the result of an ankle-snagging root when she was younger. Their mother said her cracked smile made Fern look ugly. Fern, however, didn't listen and kept smiling, especially when she'd been up to mischief.

'Were you having another nightmare?' Fern asked, setting

down the candle she was holding on the small table between their beds. It was winter, and the smell of frost mingled with a sugary scent as Fern shrugged out of her ruffled coat. She was wearing her foxglove-purple nightdress underneath and a pair of heavy boots, which she pulled off quickly, sliding them under her bed before wriggling under the covers.

'I always have nightmares,' Nettle said with a sigh, struggling to remember the last dream she'd had that hadn't involved a monster chasing her. She sat up in bed, scrambling to keep her blankets from slipping down and letting in the cold. Their mother's refusal to keep the fire burning overnight meant every room in the cottage was freezing.

'Did you sneak out to see Poppy again?' Nettle whispered. Twigswick had a strict curfew. All townsfolk had to stay inside their homes from sunset to sunrise. It was for their own safety. Everyone knew the forest's Spirits were more powerful at night. But lately, Fern had become reckless, often ignoring the town's rules.

'Not this time,' answered Fern, her teeth chattering. She tossed an item on to Nettle's lap. 'I wanted to get you something special for your birthday.'

Nettle eyed the small, lumpy object. In the dark, it looked like one of the town cats had had an accident on her blanket.

'It's a berry roll from Briony's Bakery,' said Fern. 'It's after midnight now, so I can say happy birthday, Nets.'

She grinned as she tucked into her own roll. The mushy blackberry chunks made it look like she had several missing teeth instead of just the chipped one. 'I know they're your favourite.'

Nettle's favourite were actually golden syrup buns. The berry rolls were Fern's. Fern had a habit of forgetting things Nettle liked and replacing them with whatever *she* liked instead, but Nettle didn't want to seem ungrateful, so she bit into the gooey present, trying not to let her face scrunch in disgust at the sour filling.

Nettle always felt a mix of excitement and relief on her birthday, as if each year that passed without her soul being snatched by Spirits was another badge of honour. She imagined twelve golden pins decorating her leaf-green nightdress.

'Thanks, but you shouldn't steal things,' Nettle said. As she swallowed the berry roll, she wished she had something to wash the bitter aftertaste from her tongue. 'If you get caught, Elder Warren will banish you to the city and you'll be thrown in jail.'

'There's no one brave or stupid enough to drag me all the way through the forest and out the other side just because I pulled off a bakery heist for my little sister,' Fern replied.

Fern was right. Most people wouldn't poke a toe past the protective rune posts encircling the town – because

*most* people were afraid of the woods. But Fern wasn't like everyone else. She never got scared. Not like Nettle.

Six years ago, fear had sunk its teeth into Nettle like a hungry beast and refused to let go. On that day, their brother, Grimswold, let Nettle's pet chicken out of its coop, and when she couldn't find her pet in town, Nettle had snuck into the forest to find her. She knew it was dangerous. She knew it was against the rules. She told herself she wouldn't stray far, but the forest was treacherous. It was as if the trees twisted shut behind her, and soon Nettle was lost. Hours passed as she tore through bracken and shadow until eventually, cold and terrified of being attacked by Spirits, she curled up outside an abandoned fox den. It was at that moment, when she'd given up all hope, that warm hands had grabbed her wrists. Nettle had screamed, but it wasn't a monster. It was Fern.

The sisters returned home with Nettle shaken but unharmed. But their father hadn't been so lucky. He'd charged into the woods to find his missing daughter and never returned. All that was ever found was his torn-up hat. Nettle blamed herself for her father's death. As did her mother and brother. But Fern never held Nettle at fault. Nettle loved Fern fiercely for that, and for saving her from the forest. She knew she would forgive her sister anything – including a tendency to be a little selfish. Their bond was unbreakable.

Ever since that day in the forest, it felt as if a seed of terror had been planted inside Nettle. As the years passed, the seed grew, its branches spreading through every inch of her body. Nettle called it her fear tree because whenever she was afraid, she felt its tendrils twitch beneath her skin, shaking her limbs and locking her legs.

Nettle had sworn never to break another rule again. Rules were there to protect you – and the people you loved. Terrible things happened if you ignored them. She knew that now. That was why Fern's recklessness scared her so much.

Fern shuffled to the end of her bed. 'Hold out your hand.'

Nettle did so reluctantly. Not just because she didn't want to surrender an arm to the cold, but because this game usually ended with her sister dropping a spider into her palm in a misguided attempt to 'toughen Nettle up'.

Fortunately, there was no arachnid this time. Instead, Fern tied a bracelet woven from dyed grass around Nettle's wrist. Nettle noticed a purple tinge to her sister's fingernails. The air wasn't that cold, was it? Or were the stains from the berry roll?

'I made one for myself, too,' Fern said, showing Nettle an identical bracelet fastened around her own wrist. The plaited bands of both were coloured pale green and violet. 'This way, we'll never be apart.'

Nettle felt an anxious flutter in her stomach. Beneath her skin, the leaves of her fear tree rustled. 'What do you mean? Are you going somewhere?'

In the dim candlelight, Fern's eyes glistened with excitement. 'It's New Year's Eve. The Wildheart Rangers will come to Twigswick tomorrow to make their annual selection. Poppy and I are going to volunteer.'

A chill swept over Nettle. The day she had been dreading had arrived. For as long as she could remember, her sister had wanted to join the Wildheart Rangers – the masked guardians of Dryda Forest. Now Fern was fourteen, she was old enough, but Nettle didn't want her to leave. Apart from sneaking out after curfew, the sisters did everything together. From chores like dusting the town hall's pews – although Nettle did most of the cleaning – to attending Elder Warren's classes – which Fern often dozed through, then copied Nettle's notes – to playing hide-and-seek in the spooky grove-yard, even though it gave Nettle the creeps.

'Mother won't let you,' Nettle blurted, panic making her voice louder than she intended.

'Shh.' Fern's blonde ringlets poked out from her blanket cocoon as she glanced nervously towards the bedroom door. 'I don't need her permission. Rangers are bound by oath to let anyone who asks join them. So long as they're old enough.'

'It's too dangerous!' Nettle squeaked.

It was the Rangers' job to protect the people living in Dryda Forest from the evils prowling the woods. There were monstrous ghouls with red eyes and sharp claws, rogue bandits known as Shadow Stalkers and, most deadly of all, the ghostly Hollow Spirits.

'I survived the woods before,' Fern boasted. 'We both did.'

'That was different.' Nettle shuddered. 'We only went in once. Rangers are in the forest all the time.' She nodded towards the window. 'You'll be out there, and I'll be stuck here with . . .' She didn't finish. She wasn't sure what was worse – the unpleasant aftertaste left by the berry roll, or the thought of Fern leaving her alone with their mother and brother. 'You can't go,' Nettle pleaded.

'No one is going to tell me what I can't do any more,' said Fern, defiance dripping from every word. Her hazel eyes narrowed. There was an anger simmering behind them that Nettle hadn't seen before. 'I'm not going to stay in Twigswick and let every decision be made for me. I don't want to work in Mother's hat shop, or wear stupid frilly dresses, or marry Will Weedslip when I'm older – like I know Mother is trying to arrange. I want to be free to make my own choices and just . . . be me.'

Tears trickled down Nettle's cheeks. Her sister had clearly made up her mind, and there was nothing she could do or say to change it. What a miserable birthday.

Fern moved to sit beside Nettle. 'It's like there are vines holding me in place, Nets – so tight they're suffocating me. I need to cut myself loose.' She looked at a small painting mounted on the wall. It was of their family, before their father died. 'And I want to fight the Spirits, so that they can't hurt anyone else.'

Nettle wiped the tears from her cheeks with the edge of her blanket. While their father's death had turned Nettle into a frightened mess, it had emboldened Fern to act.

'What will happen to me?' Nettle asked.

'I'll come get you,' Fern said. 'In two years you'll be old enough to join the Wildheart Rangers, too. You remember the Ranger's Rhyme, don't you?

'On New Year's Day I joined the Rangers,' Fern began, and Nettle joined in.

*And swore an oath to protect others from danger.*
*Brown boots, green cloak and a quiver of arrows,*
*I stood face-to-face with monsters and shadows.*
*But Rangers never stand alone,*
*Together we fight to rid the Gloom from our home.*
*So come and join us, if you're bold and brave,*
*We've got secrets to tell you, and a forest to save.*

As she finished the rhyme, Nettle shook her head. 'I could never be a Wildheart Ranger. I'm not brave enough.'

'The rhyme says Rangers never stand alone. I'll be there to protect you,' said Fern, wrapping her arm around Nettle's shoulders. Nettle felt the anxiety crawling beneath her skin shrink back. Being around her sister was the only thing that kept Nettle's fear tree quiet.

'If you join the Rangers, we can be together,' said Fern.

Nettle felt like she'd swallowed a rock, not a berry roll. Her sister watched her expectantly, waiting for an answer. Perhaps, if Fern was there to protect her, Nettle would find the courage to be a Ranger? The habit of letting Fern get her way took over and Nettle gave a single, nervous nod.

Fern grinned and raised her wrist. 'In the meantime, these bracelets will connect us. If you're ever afraid, just touch it and you'll feel me with you.'

A floorboard creaked outside. In one light-footed bound, Fern blew out the candle and leapt back into her own bed. Nettle lay down and shut her eyes, waiting for the sharp click of the door handle and for their mother to appear. But the door remained closed. Slippers shuffled across the kitchen floor, followed by another door clunking open and shut. It was just their brother going to use the outhouse toilet.

'Psst.' Fern's whisper carried through the dark. 'If you have another nightmare, just imagine I'm there in my Ranger uniform, fighting off whatever's scaring you.' There was a rustle of covers. 'Goodnight, Nets. Happy birthday.'

Nettle pretended she'd already fallen asleep. As her fingers traced the twists in the woven band Fern had given her, a heaviness pressed on her chest, as if a stone had been laid on top of her. The feeling wasn't loneliness, or heartache. It was more foreboding, like the unease you feel just before something is about to go wrong.