

## Nina Blazon – Wolf Time

### Chapter 1

#### Red Narcissus

Anne tried to reach for the weapon as quietly as she could. But her grandmother didn't miss the quiet sound of metal scraping on the stone wall of the peasant's hut. "Where do you think you're going again, child?"

Anne gave a start and closed her hand more tightly around the spear. Well, it wasn't a real spear, just a shepherd' crook with a short knife attached to it.

"I'm just checking on the animals, *mémé*."

The old woman let the wooden bobbin she was using to make a lace border sink into her lap.

"Again? What is the matter with you today? You don't think to go out to the field, do you?"

"No, just to the barn."

"Where is your father? Why doesn't he go?" The hoarse voice grew louder. "Jacquot!"

"Ssshhh! Be quiet! You'll just wake the little one." Immediately she regretted the harsh tone of her voice. Naturally, the old woman had forgotten where her son was today. Recently she had forgotten almost everything as soon as it was said or done. It was astonishing she could still remember the complicated lace patterns. And of course she was worried – these days, everyone lived in fear of what lurked outside in the forest.

"Papa is at the village meeting – about the big hunt, you know that," Anna continued in a more friendly voice. "That dragoon captain with his regiment wants to gather all the men from the villages." With one hand she quickly threw her wool shawl around her shoulders and covered her hair.

"You'll stay right here, young lady! I will not allow you ..."

"I'll be right back."

Her grandmother started to scold her, but in her excitement started to cough.

"Watch out!" Anne cried, but it was already too late. The bobbins slipped from the old woman's lap, and with it went the delicate lace band that was just turning into a pattern.

Anne set the spear on the ground and bolted for the hearth. She snatched up one of the rolling bobbins just before it got too close to the embers. *Mémé* was always cold now, so she scooted her chair much to close to the flames of the big fire.

“The good thread almost caught on fire. Why do you have to get upset so quickly all the time?”

“Why?” croaked the old woman. “Don’t think I don’t notice you constantly trying to sneak away. Admit it, you just want to meet up with that boy again, the one who’s not from around here who makes pretty eyes at you.”

Muttering unhappily she bent over and felt along the floor for her bobbins. It had already been twenty years since she had been able to see. But she didn’t need sight for her art. Her gnarled fingers worked little miracles of the finest lace – miracles that supplemented the meager income from the Tanavelle family’s farm.

“Leave it,” Anne murmured. “I’ll pick it up.”

Hastily she gathered the scattered objects. The yarn had gotten tangled, the lace trim had come off the needles in one place, and flakes of ash hung from the crumpled fabric. Anne took great care as she blew them off, but they still left behind dirty traces of gray. Before she straightened out the lace again, she studied the pattern. It was lilies – the flower of the Virgin Mary. For months *mémé* had made no pattern but these flowers in her lace, and prayed without ceasing as she worked, as if she was trying to weave a protective spell for the family.

“And what do you want to do out in the barn again, anyway?” the old woman snapped now.

“Jacquot said the cow isn’t ready to have her calf.”

“And what if Papa is wrong? You can’t look after cows in calf often enough.” It cost her great effort to reply so calmly. Everything in her wanted to jump up and run to the gate to look – for at least the tenth time today – for two men. If she saw two men, she would know that everything would be okay.

“The cow has already escaped from the barn once,” she continued in a conversational tone.

“The last few days she’s been acting like a crazy thing. I bet she would even climb out the window to get outside, if she could.”

“Yes, the animals are just like their keepers.” *Mémé* clicked her tongue disapprovingly.

“Jacquot is just the same. And you’re almost worse than your father. Both of you are foolish and can’t sit still. Always going out! Always heading where the music is playing!” Scornfully

she spit into the fire. “Does anyone spare a thought for my poor, old heart? When you were gone so long yesterday I nearly died of worry. I thought ...”

“Those are just fabrications, *mémé*, stop it!” But her glance fell on the spear. *They don't have a long way to go and they're not in danger. Not two strong men carrying spears and clubs.* Still, she shivered and quickly turned away. She didn't want to think about it, not today, not after yesterday evening. The only thing she wanted to see was Adrien's smile. She thought of the whispering that had tickled her ear, and immediately felt that little glow of happiness in her belly that warmed her and took her breath away.

“What should I stop?” the old woman stubbornly insisted. “Being afraid, or praying? You heard yourself what the priest said. God's punishment is upon us, he said, a punishment for the sins of men. So stay here! The monster is hunting the sinners and it will find them and destroy them...”

“But I am not a sinner, and the poor children the beast devoured most certainly weren't. I have to go look after the cow now. You know very well that four hungry mouths are waiting for the milk. Here; before you've untangled the threads I'll be back.” She shoved the pillow to which the half-finished lace border was attached with tiny needles back into the old woman's lap.

But before she could run away, Anne's grandmother grabbed her wrist and pulled her down until Anne had no choice but to kneel before her. The grandmother looked like a dried out root, but when she was as angry as she was at that moment, she could still have held a balky mule by its rope.

“Who do you think you are, you arrogant fool? Children pay for the sins of their fathers! And you don't think you're a sinner, Anne? All human beings are sinners from the moment they're born, mark my words, and you young girls especially. Look at me!”

Dry, powerful hands took hold of her face with enough force to be painful and forced her gaze upward. It was eerie to look into the blind eyes, two dull, granite-gray orbs. “Oh, I know you young people. None of you have any decency anymore and the apple doesn't fall far from the tree. Your mother was pregnant with you before Jacquot knew what was happening to him. So don't imagine I don't know why you're running around the room here like a cat in heat. You want to go to that young man you've been fawning over since summer. Is he waiting for you out there?”

“How dare you!” Anne sputtered. The fire crackled much too close to her and warmed her left shoulder, but it was for an entirely different reason that she was suddenly so hot that she broke into a sweat. *I am not a sinner. Because we’re engaged, it’s not wrong before God.* Still, she was ashamed that here, face to face with her old grandmother, she couldn’t help but think of the hours with Adrien. His warmth on her cool skin, and his lips ...

She had the feeling that those blind eyes could see right inside her.

“All I did yesterday was dance. And what of it?” she added defiantly.

“Dance!” *mémé* scoffed. “If he was a decent fellow, he would have married you a long time ago. When I was your age I already had six children. If a man wants a woman, he doesn’t put it off.”

Anne jerked herself free. The worst thing was that with a word, a sentence or even just a jeering laugh, her grandmother always managed to rouse her doubts. Now she thought about the other girls, and herself surrounded by them, unremarkable with her mouse-brown hair and skin that looked sunburned even in winter. And she actually asked herself why Adrien, who could have any girl he wanted, wanted to marry her, of all people.

“And besides, you hardly know him. Always running around, that boy, and every few weeks he reappears out of nowhere and acts like he’d never been away. How do you know he doesn’t have a girl waiting for him in every village?”

“That’s not true, he ...”

*Mémé* waved her off. “He keeps your hope alive to get you into the hay. And you can believe me when I tell you: not everyone is as respectable afterwards as your father, who took his girl to the priest before everyone could see her big belly. And you’re not particularly pretty, either...”

“And how would you know that?” Anne hissed.

*Mémé*’s hoarse laugh became a cough. “I still have my ears. I can’t remember hearing the young men whistling after you. And I haven’t heard anyone singing in praise of your beauty, either.”

That was enough! Anne jumped up. “Adrien will marry me! He’s going to ask father tonight at the meeting.”

Now it was out in the open – and *mémé*’s satisfied smile proved once again that while her grandmother might be forgetful, she was still as clever as a fox. Now she was not only angry at the old woman, but also at herself.

“Ah, so that’s how it is,” *mémé* confirmed with a sly grin. “Well, even if the lad wasn’t just buttering you up to have his way with you: do you really think your father will give you to a starving vagabond?”

This time Anne was wise enough to pull herself together. “He has work!” she replied in a steady, calm voice. “For the Count de Morangiès, he told me so yesterday.”

“Then why is he only asking you now?”

*Because I was finally clever enough to dance with someone else, Anne thought. Because it finally dawned on him yesterday that I won’t wait forever, and he isn’t the only fish in the sea.*

“Because he wanted to be sure that he has enough money for the wedding and a house. You’ll see; Adrien is a respectable young man. And he’s generous and strong and friendly to all children. He’s honest, he is serious about marrying me, and ...”

“... you’ve lost your heart.” *Mémé* shook her head with a deep sigh. “Ach, ma puce, you think life is all about dancing and kissing, but you’ll soon learn otherwise. But who listens to an old crone like me? That’s what you think, isn’t it, that your old *mémé* isn’t quite right in the head anymore?”

Anne didn’t answer, and for a few moments the silence was heavy and dense; only the crackling of the fire filled the space. Then *mémé* sighed again, and her shoulders sank a little. Lost in thought, she turned her face toward the fire, as if she was observing the flames. *Or recalling memories from a better time, thought Anne, when she was still young and the most beautiful girl in Gévaudan.* Oddly, her rage vanished with this thought. Instead, she was filled with tenderness for the tough little figure next to the fire.

“Oh, you young people just do what you want anyway,” the old woman said after a while.

And to Anne’s surprise, her voice sounded gentle this time. “If it’s really true, what you say, I’ll make you a lace collar for the wedding. But if you shouldn’t be happy with your Adrien – then think back on my words!”

It took Anne a few moments to grasp what her grandmother was trying to say, in her twisted way. If *mémé* wasn’t against the marriage, then her father would surely say yes!

“A lace collar?” she cried and laughed. “Oh yes, please, but one with narcissus instead of lilies, *mémé*! And you’ll see – by next winter you’ll have a great-grandchild already.”

*Mémé* snorted and waved her hand dismissively. “Oh, don’t talk nonsense. By next winter I’ll already be with the Lord in heaven.”

But it didn’t escape Anne that a smile brightened her wrinkled visage.

She took up the spear again and made straight for the door before *mémé* remembered why they were arguing in the first place. Her wooden shoes clattered on the stairs that led from the living area to the stalls in the lower part of the house. Only when the steaming warmth of cowhide and the biting smell of goats rose to her nose did she pause and close her eyes. Her hand moved to her neck and stroked the skin, just as Adrien had done yesterday. *Adrien*. The quiet doubt stirred in her by the fight with *mémé* disappeared, and she smiled at the memory of music and dancing. Images of men's faces came to her: a lad with a nice smile, a soldier who had twirled her around, and a giant man with a costly coat. But their faces faded, leaving only Adrien – his eyes, brown like wild chestnuts, the sickle-shaped scar that held the left corner of his mouth in a constant slight smile, and the curly, dark hair that he tied at the back of his head with a leather band. She rested her cheek on the crook.

“... *que Ricdin-Ricdon je m'appelle*,” she quietly sang the song that had so often made her laugh and that belonged to them alone. She could almost feel the whispering on her ear again, after he had pulled her roughly from the arms of the soldier. She had been shocked by his fury; he had seemed almost like a stranger to her then, and his hand had grasped her arm painfully tight. But she had enjoyed even his anger and jealousy. *Do you want me, Anne? I'll speak with your father. Right away, tomorrow. If only you want me!*

“Adrien Bartand,” she whispered, “and Anne – his wife.”

*But only if your father agrees.*

The clatter of a door brought her back to earth. Her father always looked in on the animals before he came in the house. But the hope that he had returned with Adrien to seal their engagement with a toast was disappointed.

Cold wind whistled through the door standing ajar, acting like a white beacon in the darkness of the barn. And the pregnant cow was gone! Anne gripped the spear tighter and rushed through the barn door into the courtyard.

The warmth of the fire still glowed on her face and made the wind seem doubly icy. It was a bitterly cold January. Snow fell from the sky in great, dry flakes and had already covered any tracks. The crazed animals had pressed open the gate leading from the yard. That was the last thing she needed! Anne ran to the gate. When she had been here earlier to look for the men, she could still recognize the path that led downhill to the village. Now the houses were no longer to be seen; she could just make out the bell tower of the church in the mist. The mountains that were visible in the distance on clear days had disappeared entirely. Anne only

hesitated for a moment before she pushed open the gate. Her heart was pounding as she left the courtyard and crossed the border between safety and wilderness. But then she lifted her chin decisively. She wouldn't be Anne Tanavelle if she left the cow outside in the cold! After just a few steps, she was surrounded by milky white. Fingers of snow seemed to grab at her. Shivering, she hurried uphill and tried not to lose her wooden shoes as she went. Then she saw the animal – light brown hide, two horns with black tips. Her knees trembled for sheer relief. The cow hadn't gone far yet, but instead was trotting toward one of the frayed beech trees on the hill.

“Just you wait!” muttered Anne and started running again. Snow slid into her shoes and the cold bit her fingers. Too bad that she had left her mittens at home! She reached the hill, out of breath, and gave a quiet whistle. The small Aubrac immediately stood still and sluggishly turned to look over at her mistress. The lead dangled around its neck, and one wooly ear twitched. The white fur that circled the eyes and muzzle in combination with the black nose made the beast's face look like a jester's mask. Anne gathered her skirt and trudged onward, using the spear as a cane. Underneath the blanket of snow, the wood struck rocky ground. Her teeth chattering, she caught up to the animal and reached for the rope. But she hadn't counted on her crazy cow's reaction. It turned neatly and trotted heavily a short distance away. Anne had to restrain herself to keep from shouting out.

“Jolie,” she called softly to the cow. “Come here, Jolie, my sweet!” she cajoled the cow. And in fact, the animal did stop and turn its head. With just a few steps Anne caught up to it, grabbed the rope, and gave the cow a light slap on the hindquarters with the spear. “Stupid beast!” she scolded. “What are you doing outside? If the wolves eat up you and your calf, we won't have any milk this winter.”

All at once she realized that she had come a good distance away from the house. The wind rustled louder than before in the treetops and snow crackled as a sudden blast of wind blew over the hilltop. A noise made her spin around, startled. It was only a raven flying off, but Anne found herself leaning into the cow and clinging to its wooly fur with her hands.

*I bet that beast everyone is so afraid of is just a common wolf.* That's what Adrien had said. The thought of him was a safe haven.

“Don't be a coward, Jolie!” she whispered to the cow. “Come on, back in the barn with you!” It was reassuring to see the little farm growing closer with every step downhill. *Mémé* had surely set aside her work and was listening anxiously for her granddaughter's footsteps.

“I’m on my way,” Anne whispered, and tugged impatiently on the rope.

A harsh blow to her shoulder took her breath away and made her lose her footing. At first she thought the cow had stumbled and bumped into her, but at the exact same moment the rope was torn from her closed fist with a painful jerk. She lost her balance, her knee hit the rocks hard, and out of the corner of her eye she saw the cow rushing away. But next to her she still felt breathing, fur and warmth, a presence. With a gasp she whirled around. Her shoe remained stuck in the snow. Out of the corner of her eyes she saw a shadowy figure scurry away. Something was circling her. But only when she heard the growling did she truly understand. Without hesitation she raised the spear. Wood met its target with a dull sound. The smell of wild animal assaulted her nose. Fangs glittered, much too close to her throat – and snapped shut at precisely the moment she raised her arm and threw herself to the side. The fangs buried themselves in her arm, and a piercing pain coursed through her. With all her might, she flailed with her fists and hit her mark. The grip loosened; the monster let go and retreated. And while she desperately clambered onto one knee, she realized with absolute certainty that it was not a wolf – could not be a wolf.

*The wild beast*, she heard *mémé* whispering. *La Bête Féroce!* It was strange that she didn’t feel terror, not even fear, she only knew that she could not die – not today, not here, not without the lace with narcissus and Adrien’s kiss on their wedding day. The cry that came out of her throat now was raw and dark and gave her the strength to lift the stick and jab toward the creature. The knife on its tip met resistance. With all her might she thrust again and actually managed to clamber to her feet – and with horror saw the knife come loose and fall in the snow. The bands that had attached the knife to the wood had come loose.

Her second shoe slipped off her foot. Thinking quickly, she grabbed it, hurled it at the wide skull of the beast, and turned around. She ran onward, barefoot, holding the shepherd’s crook tightly in her hand. Icy cold gusts blew into her eyes and blinded her. Snowflakes melted on her forehead. She felt cold on her shoulder and something wet, warm at first, then cool in the wind. She was injured, badly, but she didn’t feel any pain, only a heaviness that tugged at her legs as if she was trudging through dense marsh. *I have to make it back to the barn!*

Snow swirled as the monster brought her to the ground again, and the stick slipped out of her hand. But she fought and screamed with all her might, kicked with bare feet, hit, scratched and bit. At one point she tasted wiry fur between her teeth, another time fangs glanced across the back of her hand and slid off again. She raised her arms to scratch the beast’s eyes out and

was shocked when she saw her hands. It looked as if she was wearing red gloves of blood. That hesitation cost her a valuable moment of time. Claws scratched her collarbone, and the weight of the predator pressed the air from her lungs. In that moment, she knew she had lost the fight. Blood-red eyes stared at her and the snarling sounded like a word: sins. She squeezed her eyes shut to avoid having to look at those eyes. But even behind her closed eyelids they seemed to glow like two setting suns. *Holy Mother of God, save me!* she pleaded in her thoughts. *I didn't want, I never meant to ...*

She wanted to scream when something hard struck her in the throat, taking away her voice and her breath. Her head fell to the side. Something was warm on her chin, her neck. She felt for it with her hand and found a wound, but oddly she felt no pain. Dazed, she blinked. Snow stirred up by the fight was piled up next to her. She imagined she saw narcissus as if they were made of lace and ice crystals; at the same time the future that would never be flashed before her mind's eye: she and Adrien on a spring morning as they entered the village church in their Sunday clothes. Holding her first child in her arms on a snowy day like this one. *Mémé* blessing her great-grandchild as it lay in the cradle. She saw the second child, and the third. She saw Christmas celebrations and summer harvests, dances around the fire on St. John's Eve and moonlit hours with Adrien behind the curtains closed around their bed. Day after day flowed into the snow, irretrievable, and drained away forever. New narcissus blossomed on this spot like flowers decorating a grave for the stolen years. They were beautiful and unblemished – and as red as the eyes of death.