

CHAPTER 1

Red wondered if the moon was on fire when she caught a glimpse of it in the midnight horizon. It loomed like a blazing crimson titan, high above the towering treetops of the majestic forest. As impossible as it sounded, she believed that lunar spirits were calling out to her. She could hear their distant voices beckoning her further down the dark dirt path she'd been riding on since earlier that afternoon.

“Show me the way!” Red shouted at the moon.

With each mile she traveled further from the city, and the deeper into the woods she ventured, the hope in her heart grew ever stronger. It felt as if she was waking from a mundane dream she'd been dreaming her entire life. There was no clear reason to think the direction she was traveling would lead to her grandmother's house.

In her heart, she knew it would.

The giant trees and overgrown brush caused the path to become dangerously narrow. The ground was paved with jagged rocks, unexpected dips, and slippery puddles. Red had to fight tooth and nail to keep the wheels of her little motorcycle upright. She knew that slowing down would be the smart thing to do. One false move could be disastrous, and there was little chance of rescue so far away from the safety of civilization. Ignoring these sensible

notions, she squeezed harder on the throttle.

“Playing it safe won’t get me to where I’m going tonight,” she said aloud.

The roar of the motor penetrated deep into her chest, making her feel like a fearless predator on the hunt. Hope for a new life filled with love and adventure was her prey. A great warrior was awakening from deep within her and taking control. The darkness was no longer obstructing the path from her sight. It wasn’t that she could see the giant trees surrounding her like a canyon—she could feel them.

Her thoughts drifted away as the aroma of wild roses aroused her senses. The wonderful scent spawned a surge of emotions that warmed her heart and soul. Distant memories of a time long forgotten came rushing back in a flash. In her mind’s eye she saw a collage of amazing places that felt somehow familiar.

There was a mysterious cottage hidden deep within the woods ...

A temple that housed supernatural forces of unimaginable power ...

An ivory palace that sat atop a hill ...

And a metropolis with wonders far beyond her wildest dreams ...

For the first time in her fifteen years, Red was free of the cares and concerns of growing up as an orphan in the big city. Then, in the blink of an eye, the moment of bliss escaped her. A furious roar thundered out from behind. It sounded like the engine of another motorcycle, one far more powerful than Red’s. The deep rumbling gave her such a fright that she nearly lost control and crashed into the trunk of a towering oak. Taking a quick glance back, she saw the blinding glare of a single headlight approaching.

Seconds later, a *mysterious rider* sped up beside her. He cranked his throttle hard, making his engine roar out like an untamed beast. The rumbling vibrations made Red shudder with both fear and excitement. From what she could make out under the dim moonlight, he wore a black leather jacket, gloves cut off at the fingers, ripped jeans, and knee-high riding boots. Something about

him felt oddly familiar to Red, as if she had once met him in a distant dream.

“Do I know you?” Red asked.

She tried to get a look at the rider’s face, but the tinted visor of his black helmet masked it. The only feature she could make out was his long, brown hair rippling over his shoulders. Her curiosity turned to angst when she noticed him glancing down at her hip. Her short green skirt flapped around in the wind. She didn’t need to see his face to know that he was checking her out.

“Peep show’s over!” Red shouted.

Squeezing down on her throttle, Red accelerated ahead of the mysterious rider. For the next few minutes, she tried with relentless intent to ditch him.

She cut under low hanging branches ...

Shot across slippery puddles ...

Sped flat out down a steep hill ...

And even made a daring jump over a pile of fallen logs ...

But it made no difference how hard she tried, the rider stayed right behind her.

If things weren’t complicated enough, Red could smell a hint of danger in the air. She had no doubt that the startling scent was coming from the mysterious rider. It made her blood boil in a way that she’d never known. *I just have to know who he is*, she thought.

Red decided that if she couldn’t ditch the rider, then she would do whatever it took to unmask him, even if it meant having to play dirty. She slowed down enough so he could cut alongside her. Once again she could tell that he was checking her out from behind his dark visor.

“Would you show me your grungy mug already?” Red said. She reached into a wicker basket tied to the back of her motorcycle. When her hand emerged, it held a few wild berries that she had picked earlier that day.

The rider glanced down at her hand, then back up to her face. Unsure of her intent, he gave a shrug.

Red flung the berries at the rider, causing them to splatter all over the front of his helmet. He *grunted* and flipped his visor up so he could again see. Red glanced his way, excited to get a look at his face. Before she got the chance, he accelerated ahead. Adding to

the insult, he cut into a puddle and squeezed his throttle, spraying a shower of mud right into Red's face.

"Watch it, you stinking jerk!" Red shouted.

The rider waved an arm high to let her know he had done it on purpose. Red clenched her teeth and squeezed her throttle to the max, pushing herself beyond all rational limits to keep pace with him. Deep down inside she knew that doing so came with a big risk, but her pride simply refused to let him win the night.

I'm going to catch him, and nothing can stop me, she thought as she pushed the accelerator as far as it would go and the bike's vibrations spread throughout her body.

No sooner had she thought it than Red caught sight of a massive tree a few hundred yards ahead in the road. The trunk was twenty feet around and surrounded by jagged black boulders and thorny brown bushes. The giant branches swayed in a methodical rhythm, like arms dancing in the night breeze.

The fiery explosion Red expected to see when the rider reached the tree never came. Instead, there was a glaring flash of white light. It took every bit of will Red had to keep her eyes open. When the light finally faded away, the mysterious rider had vanished from sight.

The instant Red's hand reached for the brake, a distant voice spoke out in her mind. It was the spirits that inhabited the tree, telling her that they stood as guardians to a world hidden on the other side. If she stopped now, there would never be another chance to find her family, nor would she discover the truth of who she was. It was a fate, Red thought, worse than the ultimate risk of facing the tree head-on.

With only seconds before it would be too late to stop in time, a fear greater than any she had ever known before overcame Red's heart. She knew speeding head-on into a tree was pure madness, but stopping sounded worse than the dreadful disappointment of waking from a dream at the best part.

I can't go back now, Red thought.

Red's life had been exactly the same for as long as she could remember. She was an orphan without a last name or any family to speak of. All she knew of her past was that her father had abandoned her on the steps of a church when she was five years old.

For ten years, she had lived in every orphanage in the city. Most stays were short-lived and rarely pleasant. The endless moving from place to place left her feeling quite unwanted. She quickly learned to avoid getting close to people, as it always led to disappointment and heartbreak.

This all changed when a letter arrived by messenger late on a mid-summer's night. It was from a woman called Grenda Stalk, who claimed to be Red's grandmother. She insisted it was time for Red to return to her hometown of Wayward on a matter of great urgency. The directions given stated that Red would find the way if she had the courage to trust her heart.

After days of agonizing over the letter, Red came to believe it was merely a cruel prank. She couldn't find any public record of a woman called Stalk, nor did Wayward appear on the maps in the city library. Red did her best to forget about the whole thing, but this proved to be impossible as her mind became clouded from dreadful dreams.

It wasn't long before Red couldn't sleep a wink. Whenever she closed her eyes, she saw a burning red moon in the sky and vicious wolves chasing her into the forest. It always ended with a faceless young man who stood engulfed in flames, demanding that she set him free or he would haunt her till the end of her days.

The headmistress of the orphanage would never allow Red to return if she went off in search of her family. Well aware of the risk of ending up homeless, Red snuck out the back window during the night. With no direction in mind, she hopped on her trusty little motorcycle and sped off into the darkness, taking along only a small basket of food and a bag of coins she had been saving to buy a new dress.

For a full day, Red sped around the countryside beyond the borders of the city. She traveled for miles through the scenic hills overlooking the suburbs. By late afternoon, she even risked venturing along the isolated back roads used by merchant drivers and shady travelers who opted to avoid the main highways.

As the warm day faded into a chilling night, Red feared the chances of finding Wayward had escaped her. Just when she was ready to give up the search and return to her life of loneliness, she came upon a desolate wooded path. On it was a sign that appeared