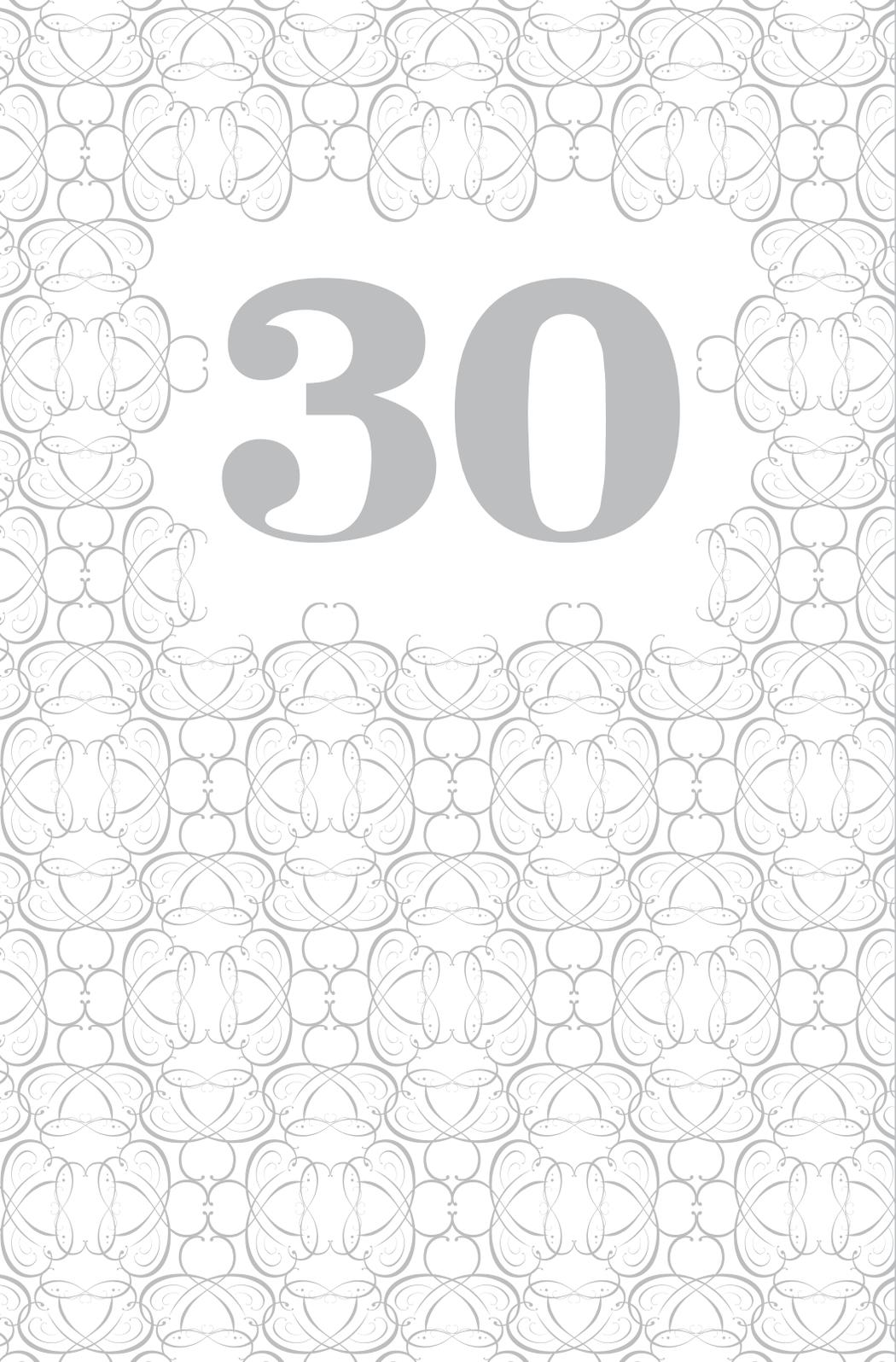


RED  
RIDING  
HOOD



Bonus  
Chapter





# 30



**P**eter?”  
Valerie took a step back from him. She saw that his face was bruised, a purple bloom, and that he had a candy-red cut over one eye. He reached for Valerie, but she stiffened, her eyes intent on something. His hand...both hands. He was wearing gloves. Soldiers’ gloves.

Valerie’s thoughts turned back to the Wolf, its paw sined from crossing onto holy ground at the church.

“Thank God you’re all right,” she said, reminding herself it didn’t matter.

He scuffed at the ground with his boot, then looked at her. She saw the falling snow glimmering white in the blacks of his eyes, lighting them up.

"Where were you?" she ventured. It was only then that Peter could see the fear flash across her face like the flicker of a struggling flame.

"They had me locked inside that thing of theirs, that stupid metal elephant," Peter protested, growing indignant.

Valerie looked from his dark brown eyes, the eyes she knew so well now, to the bruises that darkened his skin.

"You don't believe me?" Peter said, stepping forward, willing her to change her mind.

"Don't come near me," she said, the strength of her own voice surprising her. She didn't feel strong; she felt weaker than ever before. Her fear was overpowering her heart.

When Peter reached to touch her face, Valerie bent down and slid her hand into her boot. Trying to be brave but feeling very small, she brandished her knife in front of her as she stepped back.

"Please don't," she implored.

But he did.

And so she saw herself do something, saw the knife in front of her, a bright line of red across his skin. He doubled over in pain. She turned and tried to get far away before he had a chance to look up.

The gnarled tangle of trees became a blur as Valerie ran, at once feeling every emotion and none at all. She hadn't even realized she was crying until, out of breath, she could run no farther. She stopped, her heartbeat throbbing at her temples. She watched her tears break the even surface of the snow, plunging through to the ground beneath.

Slowly, she turned.

Was Peter gone, or was the snowfall just too thick for her to see him?

*It doesn't matter*, she decided. She would continue running; she would train herself to take whatever came. She turned toward Grandmother's house, toward the dark woods.



"Grandmother?"

Valerie pounded her fists against the door. "Let me in!"

"Pull the latch, dear," she heard from deep in the tree house.

Valerie did just that. She rushed inside, slammed the door shut, and chained the bolt all in one motion. She set down her basket and heaved herself into a spindly rocking chair to survey the room she knew so well.

It had always been an enchanted place for her, an indoor forest where everything grew to its fullest, luscious and beautiful, where nature was allowed to run its course. A pot of stew was simmering on the fire. The cottage was quiet, like a painting. How strange it was that nothing had changed in Grandmother's home, as if Valerie had entered a perfectly contained miniature world. The room was bathed in the firelight glow. She didn't see her grandmother.

"Are you all right?" she called in the direction of the bedroom.

Grandmother didn't respond, so Valerie felt she needed to explain herself.

"I had a nightmare." Valerie felt silly saying it aloud, but her embarrassment quickly became terror. Valerie blinked as a dark shape darted by, headed for the bedchamber.

She followed and then stepped closer to Grandmother's bed. Another step, and then another, until she was close enough to peer through the gauzy silk curtains. She angled herself and, gripped by fear, saw what she'd known, in her heart of hearts, she would find all along.

Its sharp eyes gleamed golden in the dark, a shock to behold. *The Wolf*.

Then a match flared and a candle was lit—illuminating Grandmother's blurry face. It was not the Wolf—it had never been the Wolf. It was only Grandmother.

"I'll be out in a minute," she said.

Valerie could just barely see Grandmother through the curtains, rubbing her eyes, smoothing her nightgown.

Valerie steadied herself against the bedside table, trying to rein her emotions. She reached up to feel her head where it had been wounded.

"I"—Valerie shivered and reminded herself to keep it together—"I think the Wolf is out there."

Grandmother did not seem concerned. "It's all right, darling," she said in a voice that was as placid as a lake at dawn. "We're safe in here. There's some stew cooking. Remember: All sorrows are—"

"—less with bread," Valerie whispered. She halfheart-

edly ladled out a bowl of stew and stoked the fire.

Grandmother laughed. Her face looked strange through the curtains, and her voice sounded different, her laugh new. But she was the same, Valerie told herself. She had to be.

But Grandmother's voice was muffled and deep, almost masculine. "That's right. Eat up, my dear."

Valerie wasn't hungry, but she didn't want to be rude. She felt strange. She was usually able to be her natural self with Grandmother. Just as Valerie raised a spoonful of soup to her reluctant lips, something nudged her leg.

Her heart caught.

It was just Grandmother's black cat. Valerie reached down and scratched its thin velvet ears with one hand. But it wasn't affection that the cat wanted. It licked its lips, eyeing the steaming bowl of stew in her lap.

Valerie's eyes went wide as she felt the room begin to spin.

"I'm feeling dizzy..." she said, trailing off. Then she looked down at the single bay leaf floating on the surface of the soup, obscuring the tough meat beneath. "What is this?"

Raising her bleary eyes from the bowl, Valerie saw Grandmother stand deliberately behind the silk curtains. She was outlined, her body shapeless beneath her nightgown, features obscured. Valerie turned away when she saw that Grandmother was undressing, but she looked up again when the curtains parted and the shape began to walk toward her.

The movement, though, was not that of an aged woman; there was too much determination in the stride. Valerie's eyes recognized the shadowy face as someone other than her grandmother, but her mind wouldn't accept what her eyes were telling her—that the figure standing before her was her father.

It was her father, and yet it wasn't the father she knew. It was like something masquerading as her father, a butterfly trying to pass for the caterpillar it had once been. He was awe-inspiring, powerful and domineering as he had never been before. His face was Cesaire's, but his eyes were those of the Wolf she had faced before.

She was speechless. And yet, she had so many questions.

"Father...?"

Cesaire's face fell.

"I'm so sorry," he said, his voice sounding all of a sudden just like his own. "She's... dead."

*Dead?* What was it in Cesaire's voice that sounded like something other than grief? It was almost like remorse, regret... guilt. With a hint of triumph.

*What happened?*

"I had no choice—she finally realized what I am."

*Wake up. It's a dream. Wake up!*

"What? This can't be. Papa, no." Valerie laughed awkwardly. She would not believe him; she could not. "You're joking..."

"I wish I was..."

Valerie saw clearly what seared behind his eyes. The

shame. And then she noticed his hand, burned. Like the Wolf's paw that had crossed through the gate.

She wanted to believe that this man was not her papa—that her papa was a good man. And yet, she could not deny it any longer. She was trapped with the Wolf, surrounded by his evil.

"Father. No..." Valerie sputtered in what she knew was a vain protest. She had no say. She'd never had a say. "How... could you? How could you do this?"

Cesaire looked at the floor, then resumed the air of a much more powerful man than the one she had known. "Valerie, I love you so much. I wanted you to have a normal childhood—so I lived a double life. Hiding in plain sight. Living modestly." He began to pace the room, the words tumbling out of him. "I tried to keep it up, but I've been so disrespected. Even by my own wife. I couldn't do it anymore. I've settled for far less than I deserved, and I just couldn't do it anymore. I decided it was time to leave for the city... For richer hunting grounds." Cesaire was snarling now, a scary, powerful force. Valerie felt herself being drawn to it...

She took a deep, steadying breath. It was not just fear that she felt. What she felt was so much more complex than that, something she couldn't understand. "Then why didn't you just go?"

"Because I loved you girls, and I wanted you to come with me. To share the wealth."

"But you had to wait until the blood moon." She shook

as she pieced together the awful truth. She wanted nothing more to do with this man, but she had to work through it, try to look past her rage and understand.

“Yes,” he said, pleased with her effort. “By birthright, the gift went first to my elder daughter. I knew that Lucie loved Henry, so I forged a letter and went to her as the Wolf. I told her that Henry had already asked for your hand, but that I could give her something better. Her true power.”

Valerie felt like she was floating, her body gone from her.

“But when I spoke to her in Wolf form,” Cesaire went on, “she didn’t understand me. Any offspring of mine with *my Wolf blood* would have the power to understand me. Suddenly it all made sense. Lucie couldn’t be my daughter. Your mother lied to me. But you already know that, Valerie.”

Her legs almost gave out beneath her. She had suspected the truth, but she had been too afraid to say it out loud. It didn’t matter anyway, no matter who her father was—Lucie was still *her* sister. And she had been murdered.

“She was so beautiful that night, in her finest dress. After all those years of being so careful, so clever, I lost control.”

Valerie nodded slowly, finally understanding her father’s true nature. What she’d always thought was weakness was really hidden strength.

“You took revenge on Mother.”

“And her lover,” he said with a demonic pride as he passed her to cross the room.

Valerie smelled her father’s scent. It was woodsy, musky,

like onion roots and nutmeg.

“My father was a Wolf, too. Our scent, the scent of a werewolf, is still on his clothes.” Cesaire ripped open the lid of the hope chest, grabbed one of his father’s shirts to his face, and inhaled deeply. “My mother never knew what it meant until the moment before she died.” His teeth ground against one another as he clenched his jaw. Valerie saw that he was fighting back tears.

“I loved my wife and my daughter both. And she was my daughter. I never wanted to hurt them.” He dropped the shirt back into the chest.

It wasn’t true. He had meant to hurt them, and he *had* hurt them. Valerie took a step toward her basket.

“Come with me.” He turned toward her. “One bite and you’ll be like me.”

“Why don’t you just force me?” she spat out.

“I need you as an ally, not a slave,” he said, as if he were being gentlemanly about the whole thing.

“I won’t do what you do. I can’t.”

“Yes, you can, Valerie. My blood already courses through your veins.” He loomed over her, forcing the truth upon her with a smile that was grim and toothy.

“It’s a *gift*. A gift my father gave me—that I can now give you. I’m stronger than he was. And you’ll be even stronger than me.”

Valerie felt how easy it would be to give in.

“The world will lie at our feet. We’ll be invincible,” he said in a dark, alluring voice.

Valerie tried to resist. But now, after all the hardship, all the betrayal, the only thing she wanted was to be taken care of. *It would be so easy.*

Her thoughts turned to those who *had* cared for her: her mother, her sister, Grandmother. To all the good there was, to the good that had been shown to her the night before in the church courtyard. To the strength of love. The Wolf was not in her nature—that much she knew.

“There must be a God”—she braced herself—“because you’re the Devil.”

“And you’re the Devil’s daughter,” he sneered.

Before Valerie could reply, she saw that Cesaire had tilted his head to listen, like a dog... like a wolf. Her eyes flicked to the door as an axe blade tore through the wood, snapping open the latch. The door swung open, revealing Peter.

In one glance, Cesaire assessed the situation, seeing foreground, midground, background; Valerie knew by the way his eyes scanned.

“You’re not so terrifying when the sun is up,” Peter whispered with a burning intensity.

He charged at Cesaire with his axe. Valerie breathed in relief; this would be the end of it. But Cesaire reached up, moving faster than fast, and stopped the blade an inch from his forehead.

“How would you know?” he growled, face clenched in anger.

Valerie had backed against the wall, her hands pressed

hard against the rough wood. What could she do? She felt woozy still from the wound on her head and from the aroma of the stew.

Across the room, Valerie saw that Peter was locked in combat with Cesaire, forcing himself forward, his sinewy neck thrusting out of his collar. The two men grappled in silence, but it was a taut silence, tense with the desire to kill. Cesaire punched Peter hard. Storms of dust brushed up from the floorboards as they shuffled. Peter lunged for Cesaire, swung back, and connected with Cesaire’s jaw. Valerie did not wince; her whole being had been given over to a mechanical impulse to kill. Cesaire was no longer a father, a man, or a Wolf; he was only a mass of evil that needed to be destroyed.

Peter raised his weapon with two hands to slam it into Cesaire’s head, but at the last moment Cesaire ducked under Peter to whip him around and fling him across the room, sending him smashing into the shelves next to the loom. Glass jars shattered across the floor as Peter slumped to the ground. Cesaire advanced, kicking Peter viciously, again and again and again.

“Father?”

Cesaire stopped and slowly turned to face her.

His daughter looked like an icon, a girl from a fairy tale. Just as he had seemed to her the ideal father, she was now exactly the daughter he’d always wanted her to be. Her red riding hood was loose over her head, and she held the basket out in front of her.

“I have something for you,” she said, her voice like silk.

“What is it?” He stared, transfixed, panting, but was hesitant to approach her.

“I’ll show you,” she said, speaking gently.

He looked to Peter, who was lying on the ground, then back to Valerie proudly.

“Let me see it.” He wiped his mouth with a rag.

Valerie held out the basket, opening the top just slightly. As Cesaire peered inside, Valerie glanced at Peter, then cast her eyes to the axe just a few feet away, giving him an order. Cesaire, leaning forward to make out what was in the basket, did not see Peter’s impossibly quick movements.

Peter reeled back and used the momentum in the air to land the axe square in Cesaire’s back, cleaving his shoulder blade so that it stuck out like a crooked angel wing.

Cesaire reared in anger and reached behind him with both hands to pull out the axe. A growl sounded roughly from within him, from a place deeper than the back of the throat, vocal cords gesticulating like plucked rubber bands. It was the beast within him fighting to split through the human surface, but Valerie was quick.

“I brought you *this*.”

Valerie lifted the handkerchief, revealing what was in the basket. Solomon’s hand, the fingers curled around the air in rigor mortis, clutching at nothing. She looked up and met her father’s panic-filled eyes.

*How much simpler it would have been to become a beast than to live through this*, Valerie thought.

Before Cesaire could react, she made a move she could not take back. She grabbed the cold hand and jabbed the sharp silver fingernails into his gut. She forced herself to hold it there, steady, as the silver raced through his body.

For a glimpse, she caught his eyes, like a glint in a mirror. She could hear his breathing, labored, like a child’s. Then he fell, forever dead, for always.

Valerie stood with tears in her eyes, her world in tatters. Peter stepped toward her and wrapped his arms around her slender frame, holding her close until her rage began to pass. Valerie stared not at the body of the beast that had killed so many she had loved, but at the body of her father. She felt destroyed; there was nothing left.

“Get me out of here. Please.”

Peter took Valerie’s hand, but winced when she took his arm. He pulled away.

“What?” She looked at him, questioning, as he pulled back his torn sleeve.

“He bit me,” Peter spat out, barely able to say it.

His arm bore a bite mark, deep and infected, his blood curdling already with the evil infection. They looked at each other, understanding.

“Peter . . .” Valerie stood, stunned.

He shook his head, not wanting to believe. “When the blood moon rises, I’ll be like him. A beast.” Peter charged out the door, half climbing, half stumbling down the tree, horrified at the corruption growing inside him.

She followed him as he stumbled through the snow in

agony. It was one of those magical days, the moon still visible in the bright blue, sunlit sky. The storm was over.

The snow tugged at their boots, trying to hold them back. He fell to his knees, and she fell before him. They reached desperately for each other, tears streaming down Valerie's face as their lips found each other's. Spreading out her cloak, he laid her atop it, a stain of red on the white snow.

The snow crunched as they tumbled through it, the cold hugging their feverish bodies. The horror of what they'd done, the hormonal surges of shame and triumph were what moved them. Peter had done everything for her, and she had doubted him. Now there was only one thing left to do. And that was to love him. His heavy hand moved over her body and found her. She followed, his hand guiding hers. Tangled up in each other's bodies, they gave each other warmth in a cold world.



Valerie and Peter made their way slowly to the half-frozen river, Peter pulling the body under a cloth in a wheelbarrow and Valerie stooping to collect the most beautiful, smoothest stones.

"They can never find his body. You'd be deemed a witch." Peter reached to touch Valerie's face. She nodded solemnly. On a dock, Valerie looked away as Peter laid the body

into a rowboat and then cut a deep slice into Cesaire's belly. She handed him the stones, one by one, keeping her eyes averted. In the cold air, the rocks chinked against one another, small sounds that screamed in Valerie's ears. But then they were inside Cesaire's body, and the noise they made was warm and muted.

When she reached the last stone, she brought it to her lips. It felt cool and made her lips tingle. She handed it to Peter and then fed dark thread into a needle and passed that to him as well.

When Peter finished his task, they climbed into the boat and floated to the middle of the river. Cesaire's shirt fluttered in the wind, revealing the jagged line of thread, his belly misshapen, packed tight with rocks. Peter moved for the body, but Valerie stayed his hand.

She thought of the father she had known, the odd, gentle man who had poured hot water into her bath, who had taught her how to bandage a wound, who had laughed, running, when they'd set loose a nest of hornets.

*Papa, Papa, where have you gone?*

As the boat rocked, the stones shifted like heartbeats.

Valerie finally nodded to Peter, who gently lifted her father's body and let it slide into the river. It went slowly, his hand trailing last of all, a final salute to the daughter he had so adored.

Peter rowed the boat back to the dock, and Valerie stepped out. She turned, but Peter was already rowing away.

“Peter?”

He couldn't look at her. Instead, he stared down at his poisoned arm.

“I could do terrible things to you,” he cautioned her sadly. “I have to leave you. You won't be safe with me until I learn to control myself.”

“I'll wait for you.”

Finally, when he felt the strength of his conviction, of her conviction, he turned to her, allowing her in for just a moment.

“I thought you'd say that.”

But then Peter could not look anymore and turned toward the flat gray of river and sky, the empty future. Valerie watched him disappear, until she could not tell if his boat was a swell or a swell his boat.

And then she headed home to wait... for her love... for a Wolf.

