

Flames licked up all four sides of the small, thatched roof cottage, consuming everything in their path. Some thirty feet away, Mary Alice crouched behind a withering rose bush; every one of her muscles locked in place. Shivering from the cold and fear racing through her body, she gazed at the violent, swirling flames as they engulfed her home.

"No," she whispered, the word sounding loud to her over sensitized ears. Her home was nothing more than burning timber, her parents nothing more than black ashes mixed with the remnants of their lives. Shaking quietly with her eyes glued to the macabre scene unfolding in front of her, Mary Alice sobbed and coughed, the sounds ripped from her sore throat.

Smoke snaked through her nostrils tainted with the smell of burning wood, fabric, and bodies. It clouded her eyes, making them water painfully as she tried to search for any sign of life in her home. Fingers clutched tightly in her dirt-stained, white lace nightgown, she prayed that her canine companion would come running out of the burning structure. Her parents—Mary Alice tightened her fingers around the fabric of her nightgown until she felt her nails pressing forcefully into her palms through the fabric—she knew were not going to leave the house.

Bits and pieces of her fragmented memory returned to her as her eyes raked over the scene a few feet from her. A glimpse of her mother's chocolate brown curls tousled wildly against a moonlit background. Lips pressed in a tight line, grey eyes shifting through the shadowed room, her mother had grabbed Mary Alice and forced her out of bed and through her open bedroom window. No words had been exchanged between the women. The girl knew better than to question her mother.

Blood, Mary Alice remembered the smell of blood and the sting from her knees as she'd fallen to the rough ground beneath her bedroom window. Behind her she could hear her mother whispering for her to run, but she'd paused, uncertainty keeping her firmly planted on the ground. The shout that

had come from her father's deep baritone made her jump, and the following blood curdling scream from her mother had made her body pitch forward.

Crawling, she'd been crawling, trying to escape from what she did not know. And that was when she'd smelled it, pungent, a smell that had made her gag; blood and burning flesh. Crying and crawling on her skinned knees while dirt found its way under her fingertips and into the stitching on her nightgown, Mary Alice tried to not to look back at the house, look back for her parents. She knew her parents were not coming out of the house.

Wiping her tears away with the back of her hand, Mary Alice trained her eyes to the open doorway of her home, flames hallowing the archway. Then, like the Devil coming out from Hell's fire, the silhouette of a man stood in her doorway, flames all around him. Yet the Devil seemed unperturbed, relaxed in the chaos with an ax held in his right hand and her canine held by his scruff in the other. "Wolf," the whisper escaped her lips before she could bite it back. The Siberian husky lay passively in the Devil's grip whimpering in dismay. A violent shake from the Devil silenced her furry companion instantly.

The Devil stepped from the crumbling structure, turned and became man. Mary Alice watched the Devil-man like a mouse watched a cat. Like a snake rearing for an attack, the Devil-man whipped his head and hissed at the rose bush she was hiding behind. Biting her bottom lip until she tasted blood, Mary Alice remained completely still, knowing who the man was instantly and what he would do if he found her. He stared at the rose bush a moment longer with seething hatred etched into his features, but the sound of villagers footsteps forced him to turn away. Before she blinked next, the Devil-man was gone, merging with the shadows.

Voice hoarse, eyes wide and stinging, Mary Alice looked at the blood on her skinned knees,

the dirt on her white nightgown and gave the Devil a man, made him alive, breathing, and human.

“Hunter Bradshaw.”

Mary Alice ran, laboring for breath with tears streaming down her small face, throat burning from her exertions. Still she ran, kicking up dirt and debris in her mad dash to the only safe haven she still had. Stumbling, Mary Alice tripped on a root, fell hard, and scraped one entire side of her leg from ankle to thigh and both of her palms. Pain arched through her body, momentarily blinding her. But the smell of smoke was still in her nose, still sitting heavily on her tongue. She could not give up, could not wait for the Devil to find her. Pushing aside the pain, she forced her body back up and ignored the pain throbbing in her body and mind. A few stumbling, painful steps later she was running again, her thoughts a chaotic jumble of wants and needs.

I need help. Mary Alice cried into the darkness of her mind, as the forest wind whipped her torn and dirty nightgown around, and the creatures hidden in the shadows watched her with hungry eyes. *I need safety. I need my family.*

Sadly, Mary Alice knew beyond a shadow of a doubt that her parents were dead. When the villagers had arrived and worked quickly to put out the fire, through the two charred half walls remaining of her home, she had seen two twisted charcoal bodies on the piece of floor that had once been the living room. There hadn't been a guess to who the bodies had belonged to, every villager had known it, and Mary Alice had accepted it.

She saw it then over the small rise she stood on, strong and sure, a cottage that could weather even the most traumatic of events. Mary Alice wiped her dirty face with the side of her uncut arm, a watery smile flitting across her lips. Surrounded by edelweiss flowers, with a little white candle on both

of the window sills on either side of the front door stood her sanctuary, her second home; grandmother's cottage.

Cynthia handed the frazzled girl the cup of hot edelweiss tea, and looked down at the child. She looked over the small figure huddled in her arms, and gently rocked her back and forth. Mary Alice had told her grandmother as much as she could between the uncontrollable shudders and broken sobs that wracked her small frame. A brightly burning fire in the hearth heated the cottage, and made it feel cozy and homey, though it did nothing for Mary Alice as she continued to shiver in fear.

“R-run! We h-have to r-run!” Mary Alice whispered fearfully, the words coming out choppy from her chattering teeth. “H-he will come. T-the Devil-Hunter will k-kill us. I don’t want to die!” She hugged her grandmother closer, feeling the smooth, beige cotton against her dirty cheek, and smelling the calling edelweiss fragrance that clung to the woman like a second skin.

Cynthia stroked her back with gentle hands, soothing the girl. “Calm down, and drink your tea, Mary Alice. It will make you feel better.”

Placing the steaming cup on the wooden floor, Mary clutched at her grandmother’s dress sleeves, willing the woman to her understand her fear and panic. “W-we must r-run. He w-will kill us.”

Cynthia picked up the tea from the floor and gently ushered Mary Alice to a set of wooden rocking chairs and sat her down in one of them. Sighing deeply she handed it back to the girl. Curling the girl’s hands around the mug, Cynthia lifted it to her small lips; “Drink your tea, Sweet. You are overwrought, and it will sooth you.”

Mary Alice looked at her grandmother over the rim of the cup. *Something is wrong.* *Something is not right.* Mary Alice thought frantically for an explanation to the sudden warning bells in

her ears, when she heard the howl of a wolf. The two women stilled, eyes going to the windows across the room at the front of the house.

Mary Alice knew that howl, it was Wolf's howl. She turned back to her grandmother, relief breaking over her face, to know her canine companion was not dead. Her grandmother was staring into the darkness of the forest, a frown tugging at her lips.

She stared at her grandmother a moment longer, until the woman turned to her, grey eyes seeking hers. Mary Alice's grandmother did not have grey eyes. *My grandmother's eyes are green.*

Cynthia touched her face worriedly; looking down at the cup still held up to the girl's lips, Cynthia said tersely, "Drink your tea, Mary Alice."

Mary Alice's eyes widened to the size of saucers. Her lower lip quivered, and she stared at the woman in front of her, more stranger than family. "Grandmother?"

Cynthia rose from her seat and wrapped a mass of Mary Alice's thick, brown hair around her hand then yanked the girl's head back, forcing the cup to her lips. "Drink the tea!"

Shaking her head wildly and pushing at the woman in front of her, Mary Alice yelped as the tea cup fell into her lap and soaked into her gown to her thighs. She scratched at the hands in her hair, trying to pry them free and kicked at the imposter's legs with all her might. "Let go of me!"

The woman, who shared no resemblance to her beloved grandmother other than her silver veined black hair and stolen black frock, stumbled back from Mary Alice. The woman stood clutching her battered hands, grey eyes as wide as saucers, with her mouth opening and closing like a fish dying out of water.

In the span of a heartbeat, the air shifted, charged, and the imposter's face twisted in crazed, blind rage. Before Mary Alice could anticipate it, the woman launched herself at her, screaming a

banshee's song with naked nails curved like claws. "I'll kill you!"

A second before the woman would have claimed her, Mary Alice jumped out of the way, fleeing to the other side of the cottage and bumping up against the low wooden dresser positioned against the wall. While her mind tried to wrap itself around the sudden turn of events the quick and steady tread of paws echoed in her ears. As Mary Alice turned her head to the front door, it burst open, banging against the wall with a sound like a thunder clap. The girl yelped in fear and ducked, crumpling to her dirty, skinned knees on the cold wooden floor.

Growls issued from the creature's throat, but Mary Alice knew the sound—she'd heard it all her life. Lifting her head to the door, wonder and hope flashed across the girl's consciousness as she looked at Wolf, teeth bared, fur standing on end, in the doorway.

Mary Alice reached out a hand to her canine companion, but the animal ignored her efforts and turned to the imposter in the room. He leaped toward the woman, a deep growl emanating from his chest as he dragged the imposter down, front paws on her shoulders, large jaws around the delicate column of her neck. The woman screamed, scratched, and kicked at the canine, desperate to get away.

Another growl emanated from deep within Wolf and the canine pressed down harder on the woman's neck until skin broke and blood flowed onto his muzzle. Cynthia only became more crazed, her struggles more desperate as she clawed at the animal's fur and tried to kick its hind legs. But, all at once, a deadly snap was heard throughout the small cottage and the woman stopped struggling, stopped moving.

Mary Alice looked at the scene, and knew the woman was dead. She was shocked, her body shaking violently, teeth chattering painfully as her eyes followed the trail of blood that ran down the woman's neck, soaking into her dress and the brown patterned area rug underneath her.

“Such a waste,” came a sing-song voice from the still open doorway.

Mary Alice would forever remember that moment; it was when she turned to look at the Devil, and saw every nightmare she’d ever had embodied in a single man. He strolled into the cottage with ease, and Mary Alice followed his gaze as he cast a cursory look at the two chairs in front of the fireplace, the pale pink canopy bed positioned against the back wall, and finally at the lifeless body in the middle of the small cottage. He never once turned his head to follow Wolf’s steps as the canine positioned himself in front of Mary Alice or the freighted girl huddled on the floor.

Hunter stepped forward until he reached the body, and then with absolute calm he crouched down and checked for a pulse at her neck. His fingers came away from the woman's revenged neck covered in blood and tissue. He raised the bloody fingers to his mouth and licked them clean, enjoying the taste of the woman's blood. He shook his head, smiling, his voice happy and carefree. “Such a pity. Cynthia never did listen.”

Gaining his feet, he turned to the girl and her canine protector. “It was simple,” he said conversationally to the pair. “Have you drink the tea, then you’d fall asleep. Then it would be easy. I would sell you to slave traders, and claim the money.”

Hunter paused and smiled at her, the expression so genuine it made Mary Alice flinch. “Easy, right? But she never listens, and look, she got herself killed. Ha! By a dog no less.”

He shrugged carelessly, drawing the girl's eyes to the large ax he wielded in his left hand. He turned sharply and kicked the dead woman's body, hard. “Now look what you’re making me do! I’ll have to kill the girl because you don’t listen.”

The Devil turned back to the canine and Mary Alice. Hunter sighed exhaustedly as if the entire endeavor had taken a great toll on him. Finally he turned and faced Mary Alice, his blue eyes combing

over her disheveled appearance and tear stained face.

“Why did you do it?” Mary Alice asked, her voice shaking badly.

Hunter’s dark brown eyes turned to her, and he tilted his head, “Because I was bored.”

Another sigh escaped from his lips as he turned his body and took a step towards the pair.

“Don’t worry, I’ll make this quick.”

But Wolf charged him, pouncing on him and clamping down hard on his ax hand. Hunter yelped in pain and dropped the ax. “Damn dog!” He swore as he used his other hand to beat the dog, punching the growling canine’s head.

Mary Alice watched Wolf hold on with all his might to Hunter’s arm, weathering the brute’s attack. Her eyes darted to the ax he had dropped a couple of feet away, and then back to his face. Drawing herself up, Mary Alice crawled slowly towards the ax, staying low to the ground and keeping her eyes trained on Hunter. The Devil was still trying to pry Wolf off his arm by the time her hand curled around the handle of the ax.

Wolf was whining and growling in pain as Hunter continued to violently shake and beat the canine, his fist covered in blood, fur, and other things Mary Alice did not want to think about. Drawing on the last of her strength, Mary Alice lifted the ax high above her head with both her hands and moved silently to the back of Hunter.

Squeezing her fingers tight around the hilt, the girl bit her lip until she tasted blood and then swung the ax down quickly. At the last minute, Hunter sensed the girl behind him and whipped his body around sharply just as the ax struck his arm, severing the arm that held her canine companion from the bicep down.

Blood gushed and sprayed, while Hunter looked at the place where his arm had been and

screamed in a mixture of pain and terror. Mary Alice clamped her lips tight as she was showered with his blood, but she didn't stop, couldn't stop. Lifting the ax again, arms shaking with the effort, Mary Alice swung down with all her might stumbling as she did so. The Devil-Hunter was too disoriented to move or block her attack, so the ax lodged with deadly precision in his chest, breaking his ribs and penetrating to his lungs.

Mary Alice stared into the Devil's eyes as he went down seeing her reflection in their murky, pain clouded depths. She saw a girl coated in blood, tears, and dirt from her brown curls to her naked toes. She saw surprise on her face, fear in her eyes, and something else.

Whatever it was, Hunter recognized it, a kinship to his soul. Falling to his knees, with an ax embedded in his chest and blood dripped from his wound, Hunter swayed but looked up at Mary Alice and smiled. The Devil smiled like God had just forgiven him, and that was how Hunter Bradshaw died, a smile on his face as he fell into a pool of his own blood.

Mary Alice stared at the body for what felt like an eternity, mesmerizing every pour that oozed sweat and blood and death. Her eyes finally looked down, and were caught by the red stain crusting on her fingers, hands, and further up her arms. Her body lurched forward of its own accord and her stomach heaved as she vomited water and bile.

I killed a man. The thought crippled her, forced her to her knees right beside Hunter's dead body. Tears streamed down her face, mixing with the blood and falling to the ground.

Darkness encroached on her vision, beckoning her to the sweet release of that void. But before Mary Alice could give into the temptation she heard Wolf whimpered. Looking up and towards the canine, she saw tired, half lidded brown eyes stare back at her. As quickly as she could, Mary Alice crawled to her pet, ignoring the slick blood on the floor.

Coming over to the canine, she noticed Hunter's arm still held between Wolf's jaw. Gently, Mary Alice stroked Wolf's fur, ignoring the blood and being careful of the broken bones sticking out of the animal's skin. Slowly, Wolf let go of the arm and whined low, panting out a few short and pained breaths. The canine lifted its head, looked at Mary Alice with unseeing eyes, nuzzled her arm, and promptly died.

Mary Alice held him to her breasts, and rocked her pet back and forth, murmuring soothing nothings to her canine companion. Time uncounted passed, and her knees began to ache. Mary Alice ran her hand through her pet's fur one final time, ignoring the chunks of skin and fur that twined around her fingers.

"Good boy. You're such a good boy," she whispered as she laid him back down on the ground.

Pushing up from the floor, she smoothed her hands down the front of her nightgown and looked around the room. Light was peeking through the closed blinds of the front windows, shafts of light highlighting various gruesome scenes in the small cottage.

Forcing her body to move, Mary Alice glided around her grandmother's home like a ghost, bare feet barely touching the slick floor. The stench of death was heavy in the air, embedded in the hints of smoke, edelweiss, and the forests own unique scent. Mary Alice glided past the three bodies littered around the room and towards her grandmother's closet.

"I have to get dressed or I'll be scolded," Mary Alice muttered as she reached for the brass knob of the closet. Turning the knob, she opened the door wide and took a large step back as her grandmother fell out.

Bending down, Mary Alice felt the back of her grandmother's cool neck for any sign of a pulse.

There was none.

Straightening, the girl stepped over her grandmother's body and moved towards the chest at the end of the bed that housed all her grandmother's most precious possessions. Lifting the wooden lid, Mary Alice pulled out a simple green frock and a red riding hood. She laid the outfit out on the bed, stepped over the bodies to the low dresser, and poured the blue flowered pitcher of water into a matching blue basin.

The water felt cold, freezing as Mary Alice splashed it on her face. She felt the water trail down her forehead to her eyelids, and drops fall of her lashes and into the basin. Again and again she cleaned herself, removing the blood and grime from her face, hair, and hand. Mary Alice had repeated the action so many times in the past that she did not even open her eyes, but instinctively reached for the face towel her grandmother usually kept folded neatly beside the pitcher and basin, and wiped her face.

Then the girl undressed slowly and let her nightgown pool at her feet, dipped the face towel into the rust colored water and began to wipe her body. She slid the cloth up her arms, down her legs, and over her feet. She wiped every inch of the body, ringing out the towel every so often until at last she placed the cloth in the basin and noticed the water looked more like blood.

Stepping back over the dead bodies, Mary Alice made her way towards the bed and grabbed the green frock. She slipped the dress over her head and laced up the ties in the front, tying the leather into a neat bow at her neck. Mary Alice reached for the hooded cape and swung it over her shoulder and then did up the three gold leaf shaped button down the front.

Flipping up the hood over her head and eyes, she glided over the bodies of her grandmother, the Devil, Hunter, the impostor, Cynthia, and her canine companion, Wolf. Reaching for a pair of kid boots her grandmother kept by the door for her, Mary Alice grabbed the shoes and opened the door.

Stepping out into the waiting sun, she turned and closed the door to her grandmother's cottage.

The grass, still wet from morning dew, cleaned her bloodied soles as she walked through the forest, away from her grandmother's house, her home, her village. No longer was she the sweet, young girl known as Mary Alice; she was now the silent and mysterious woman in the red riding hood.