



RED RIDING HOOD REBORN

WOLF AND BEAR

JULIE FUGATE

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A Short Story

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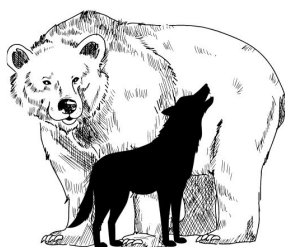
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For everyone who loves a fairytale.

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Chapter One



Silver calls me Red, after Red Riding Hood.

I am not the original girl from the stories, but a modern version. A descendant of an abandoned Norwegian island mining town where the children possess unique powers. Even those in on the secret have questions. Are we the result of magic or someone's mad science?

I may have powers, but life is still normal.

Tonight, I'm hunting a chicken thief.

Smoke curls from the chimney top of my cabin, a dark silhouette against an inky sky with a full moon and stars. Twinkling lights wink in and out through the curtain of fast-moving clouds.

A storm is coming.

My head slightly aches from the drop in barometric pressure, and my dry throat craves the spring water gathered from the mountain behind me in the bottle at my feet. Yet I don't move.

I sit with stiff joints, still like a statue in a rustic treehouse nestled against the edge of the snow-covered forest.

Cattle to the left. Goats to the right. Chicken coop in front of me.

The moon glints off the head of an axe embedded deep in a chopping block. A pile of kindling lies beside it.

Tonight, I chose a small-caliber rifle. The barrel rests on an opening in the boards. My hand lies against the cool, smooth stock, my finger on the trigger guard. Waiting. At fifteen, I'm a crack shot.

The farm animals sleep.

Not me. The insomniac. Waiting.

Nothing to distract me from thoughts of my father who left me behind because of my connection to the wolf. The horror and hatred simmering in his eyes. My little sister's tears as he forced her to leave with him. Until a few wolves yip, followed by a rendition of howls.

I mustn't join them.

A light breeze brings the scent I've waited for.

My head dips forward, a few strands from the mop of rusty red hair loose from my braid tickles my nose. My jaw sets, my eyes squint as I peer through my scope.

White fur. Slinky body. Stubby, perky ears.

There you are, you little thief.

Deep Breath.

The arctic fox sniffs around the coop's door.

It's sighted into my crosshairs.

Small paws scratch the dirt at a low spot at the bottom corner of the enclosure.

Finger is poised to squeeze the trigger.

His body flattens and wiggles, but the extra wire I've buried underneath the cold ground deters him.

The little guy isn't giving up, though my rooster sounds the alarm as if it's already morning.

I stop and sigh, then project a high-pitched bark.

The fox's head raises, ears twitching in my direction, and the next moment... he makes a beeline for me.

His claws click on the wood posts under my feet, and then he's in the small space with me, his eyes glinting in the moonlight.

I can't help the wry twist of my mouth. One more for the pack.

He winds around my leg, scaling up into my arms, his rough tongue licking my face.

I'm chuckling as I stand up to stretch, slinging my gun over my shoulder. "Let's go home," I whisper.

This is my magic. The ability to communicate and connect to the animal kingdom.

I'm almost back to the cabin when the snow begins to fall in big, fat flakes.

The fox huddles inside my jacket, enjoying my body heat. I'll let it stay with me for as long as it wants, but eventually, it will leave. The wild always does, but now we'll be connected.

The wind shifts, and my steps falter over a new scent.

On cue, a hulking shape emerges from around the corner. A bear with a maw so massive one bite would end me. His roar blows my bangs off my forehead. The grizzly's huge head bends closer, his fangs mere inches from my face.

Two wolves who were lounging on the porch flank in behind me, their fur a mottled mix of brown, grey, and black. Growls emanate from their throats. Their ire bleeds into my psyche because they want to attack this threat in front of them. I'm the only reason they don't.

"Your breath is atrocious, Silver."

Silver the Beast, and the boy I've been crushing on since forever, with the power to turn into any animal. The grizzly bear is his favorite.

His close-set eyes morph from a glowing red into soft amber.

I've always been envious of Silver's ability to transform. I may be able to communicate with creatures big and small, but I'm still always human, never truly one of them.

Silver's body begins to quiver and shrink, the hair receding back into human skin.

I busy myself by petting my protectors and giving some guttural commands that our new fox friend is off-limits.

Transformation is never a pretty sight. Plus, he'll be naked, and the one time I watched in fascination as his body turned back into a human, he teased me relentlessly. What I learned from that one weak moment is that he gains muscle and is hairier after he morphs back from a larger animal. I have my theories about why he avoids the smaller creatures.

"All clear," his deep voice rumbles now that he's dressed. "Got you this time."

My snorty laugh sneaks out as a fat flake lands on his Roman Nose. His long hair and trim beard shine platinum under the light of the moon. Hence his nickname.

I toss my rusty-colored braid behind me. "What are you doing here at two in the morning?"

"You know how Snow hasn't given up on those kids?"

"Yeah." Snow. Pitch-dark hair and chapped bloody lips do fit the moniker of Snow White. She may not be happy about being our unofficial leader—she was the oldest—but her amiable nature endears her to everyone, especially the kids. If that doesn't work, she can camouflage into any background. We affectionately refer to her as our secret agent. It helps her ferret out others like us, good or bad.

Our town isn't huge, so when twins, a boy and a girl, disappeared, everyone searched for them. The theory is that they wandered away, lost to the tundra, their bodies never to be found.

Snow's been obsessed.

"She thinks she found where they might have gone. One of the mines." His tone is guarded.

"And?"

"Whatever she found scared her."

Despite my jacket, the hairs on my arms stand.

"She's at Rose's now, shaking like a leaf."

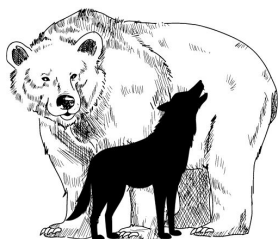
Me, Silver, Rose, and Snow. The four of us make up the main leadership core, our friendship forged by being among the first to get abilities. Rose? You guessed it. Sleeping Beauty. She'd sleep her life away if you let her. She also has golden hair, and leaf-green eyes and can manipulate plants. All the boys love her.

"Let's go." I expel the fox in my jacket, and it runs off with the wolves, friends for now.

No discussion. We will not wait for the morning or the others.

Though the rifle is still slung over my back, I walk over and yank my axe free—just in case.

Chapter Two



At the entrance to the mine, a huge arched doorway leads into the mountain.

Silver, now as a bear again, sniffs for any signs of life. He's told me that bear sight is like having night vision goggles. If he's seeing anything right now, you could sure fool me, but in the mines is when it will be most beneficial.

Seconds tick by. This needs to be over with. We've dealt with others who've abused their powers. They always start small, but soon, they've grown into something else.

Silver motions his massive head toward the opening and takes off, running on all fours.

I trail behind him at a much slower pace.

When I catch up, we slip into total darkness.

I rest one hand on Silver's furry back, while the other clenches the handle of my axe as he leads me deeper. He keeps me upright as I stumble over a loose rock, but the show of weakness makes my cheeks burn.

The smell. Well before any inkling of light.

Gingerbread.

Not what I expected.

As we turn, and the rock walls around us waver with light.

My eyes adjust, and we pass other darker openings until we reach a mining pocket transformed into a furnished living room, warm and inviting.

A woman sits in the rocking chair near the fire. A woman I know.

A shaft left behind by former miners vents smoke through the ceiling, perhaps the reason Snow found a mine so deep below the surface.

Ms. Lazar sleeps. Her hair is rolled up in curlers, and her red and black plaid flannel with the white lace around the neck makes her appear motherly. She owns a bakery in town. People are always telling her she should go to New York or Paris with her tasty creations.

The cookies piled high on the tray beside her are works of art. Various shapes and sizes. Colorful icing. It's enough to make my mouth water.

Wait. Blood.

Silver lets out a low, rumbling growl. He smells it, too.

Ms. Lazar's eyes pop open. She rises fast, her hand on her chest, nearly knocking over her cup of tea beside the confections. "What's that beast doing here?"

Her angry, deep voice? Not at all motherly.

Then there's the barely discernable splatter of gore on her garment.

I grab a nearby lantern. “Don’t move, or you’ll provoke him.” I leave Silver to watch her. The twins must be here somewhere. The lingering trace of iron in the air leads me to the next cavern.

Inside, pockets of emeralds sit encased in rock. Gems, which kept our town alive until they were depleted. *How is this possible?*

With a touch, one of the stones pulsates underneath my fingers. A green glowing string wisps out, creating a tether around my wrist.

Indistinct whispering.

I release the stone, and it vaporizes. A hiss escapes my lips at the slight burn left behind.

Instinct urges me to hurry if only to leave this place far behind. My feet scuttle deeper, scattering pebbles and broken rock as I plunge deeper into the darkness.

Within, a cage against the back wall.

Inside, the missing twins.

At least most of them.

The boy has only one leg.

The girl has only one arm.

They sleep against each other.

A roar rips through the air, and then a crash.

The twins awaken as I sprint back, roaring unintelligible warning cries.

Silver rests unconscious on the stone floor. A chair with a blanket is overturned beside him, a star-shaped object embedded in his nose.

Please be alive. Surely, after what she did to the twins, she wants us alive.

Over him stands Ms. Lazar. Her skin now glows red as her robe. Cookies in hand, expression hungry, she flicks her wrist.

Throwing-star cookies? One zips past my ear.

I raise my axe, and a cookie hits the metal head, exploding into crumbs. At the same time, I dive, and my body slams into the rock floor behind a velvet couch.

Plunk. Something sharp sinks into the cushion.

“Ms. Lazar. You know me. I’ve been to your wonderful bakery. These weaponized cookies you’ve concocted are fantastic. What a strong sedative you’ve laced them with!”

Another one explodes on the wall over my head.

“From one cookie lover to another. How did you do it?” As her forehead creases, I crawl over to the other end of the couch.

“You’re never leaving here alive.”

“Then tell me your secret?” I peek along the floor at her feet, the toes long and red with spiked white nails like my chickens.

“Why not?” She cackles. “It takes money to be successful. When I found the emeralds, I was going to sell them, but then one spoke to me. It gave me the key. You also need something unique to succeed. All I needed was a pinch of flesh.”

Bile rises in my throat. Sugar and cannibalism Ugh. Must be the sickest thing ever.

I lay my axe down and slip off my rifle. I’m quick and silent, my barrel seeking a bead on that beastly lower body hidden by simple flannel.

Her face pops into view beside the tip of the gun, eyes bulbous, chin wet.

Saliva drips onto the floor from her sideways head.

She flings the couch away and springs on top of me.

Her sharp, long teeth snap at me, but the rifle I shove against her neck holds her back.

My wolves. If only I can reach them. Too late for that. “Silver!” How much longer can I hold her off? “Silver!” I close my eyes and turn my head away from her foul breath and spit.

Her hissing head rolls away.

It’s gone. Literally gone since it doesn’t stop rolling until it hits the far wall with a sickening squelch.

Silver stands before me in human form, my axe gripped in one hand.

I shove Ms. Lazar’s remaining corpse off and my exhausted body deflates.

He grins ear to ear, twirling the axe in his hand. “I see the appeal.” He laughs as the weapon clatters on the ground then grabs the blanket off the fallen chair to wrap around his waist. He extends his hand. “She offered me a cookie, and then bam! I’m out.” His volume lowers. “Then I heard your voice bring me back to the living. Thanks for saving me.”

“Thanks for saving me.”

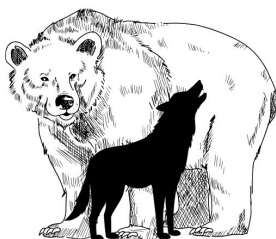
He moves in, his gaze on my lips, his face inches from mine.

Wet fur mixed with sweat stinks, but to me, it’s home.

I want nothing more than to kiss him.

Instead, I turn and vomit.

Chapter Three



The twins will be okay, except I doubt they'll be eating pastries any time soon. That's how Ms. Lazar enticed them into the woods. Not lost. Kidnapped.

Before returning them to their families, Rose made them appendages by twisting vines and wood together, mixing her magic to endow them with articulation. Snow added her ability to camouflage so they look normal. If they stay on the island, the magic will grow with them, and over time, they may forget they aren't real.

We went back and secured the emeralds by sealing off that branch of the mine with some leftover explosives. Maybe they are the reason we have powers, maybe not. Definitely the reason for Ms. Lazar's evil shenanigans. If any more show up on our island. Well, Silver and I will be here to face them.

My nickname is Red, after Red Riding Hood.

I may have powers, but life is still normal.

I'm waiting for my first kiss, but happily ever after will come along one day. For now, I have kindling to chop and chickens to protect.

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My life, talent, imagination...well everything, is due to God the Creator and my Lord and Savior Jesus Christ.

About the Author

Julie Fugate is a young adult author who writes books about revenge, mysteries and nature gone wrong. Her short stories have won contests, and her characters are fearless underdogs.

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