



MARY MECHAM

SCARLETT  
AND THE  
DARK WOODS

A RED RIDING HOOD RETELLING

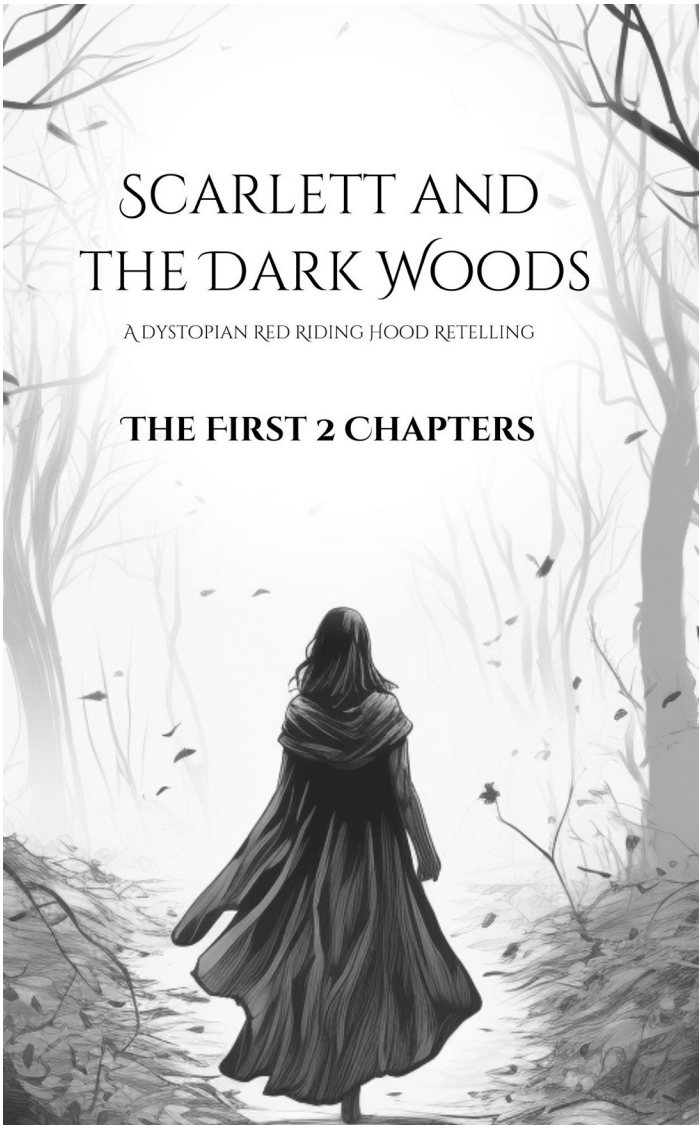
AUTUMN FAIRY TALES



# SCARLETT AND THE DARK WOODS

A DYSTOPIAN RED RIDING HOOD RETELLING

**THE FIRST 2 CHAPTERS**





# CHAPTER I



Crisp autumn air swirled my crimson cloak behind me as we strolled along the perimeter of our village, checking the magical boundary that protected us from the wild beasts that lived in Darkwood Forest. I felt keenly aware of the silvery strands of Gran's unique brand of magic woven into every fiber of the spiked border that rose as tall as a man and surrounded our town on all sides with only a single rusted gate as a weakness. It was reassuring to know that the years she had invested into strengthening the walls would keep Hamelin safe forever. I couldn't see beyond the barrier, but I still sensed glowing eyes watching from the forest's dark edge. I held my head high. I had no need to fear whatever creatures lurked in the forest.

"Look here, Scarlett," Gran said in her husky voice, pointing an ancient and gnarled finger at a place near eye level in the border. I closed my eyes to feel the magic better and ran my hand over the spot she indicated. There was a tangle in the magical fibers.

"A knot," I confirmed, aware that even if Gran could see better, the strands of magic were invisible to everyone other than myself. It would be simple enough to fix, but I glanced over my shoulder to ensure that no one other than Gran would see me. I couldn't risk being reported to the elders for undocumented magic use and get fast tracked for a Shunning. No one was around, so I stretched my fingers out, prepared to correct it, but Gran forestalled me with a gentle swat to my knuckles.

"Save your magic, lass. Don't take away my fun."

The corner of my mouth twitched as I watched my grandmother mend the small snarl in the protective boundary. Gran's independence never wavered, not even when her vision faded and she'd begun to walk with a cane. She staunchly refused to have others care for her, and I loved her for it. When any youth tried to stop her doing a task out of fear for her safety, she would clout them over the head with her walking stick and snap at them that she was old, not dead, and would do it herself. I rather hoped to be like her when I got to be her age.

"Are you ready for the Shunning tomorrow?" Gran asked after she fixed the knot.

"Is anyone ever ready?" I returned, then shrugged indifferently. "Before I sat in on the council of elders, I was worried about my friend Nix. She hasn't been doing well in her studies, and during the history recital last week, she forgot her part and got several more marks against her name."

"Oh, I wouldn't worry about a little thing like that. The elders know that youth will struggle from time to time. I never counted that against anyone."

"Yes, but you're different, Gran. You always see the good in people."

“True,” she confirmed, and a smile tugged at her thin lips. “But we can’t all achieve perfection as I have.”

I laughed. During their meeting, the elders had agreed on selecting a magic user, though they never gave names around apprentices, and Nix had no powers. The vast majority of magic users were men, and most often, the person chosen to be shunned was a man who was mistreating others and abusing his magical abilities. Naturally, someone like that couldn’t serve Hamelin and deserved to be cast out.

A sudden memory burned to the front of my mind, and I sobered. “Remember Tad?”

Gran’s face darkened, and the wizened lines in her face seemed to sharpen. That was the year that the elders had voted to cast out a six-year-old boy who had shown signs of dark magic. In addition to early indicators of powerful magic and an overabundance of energy, he had a perfect memory and could instantly recall everything anyone said or did. It made the rest of the villagers very nervous to be around him, as they all feared he would report them to the elders for some misdeed that would chalk marks up to their name and later get them shunned, but that didn’t stop me from remembering that he was only six years old.

I could still see his tiny face streaked with tears and his shoulders slumped as he was sent away. He had disappeared from where he huddled down to sleep outside the gate that first night, but whether the wild beasts had taken him or he tried to make it to the next village, no one knew. His mother vanished the same night, and it was suspected that she’d abandoned the rest of her family to go with him. We hadn’t heard about either one since.

Gran had resigned as an elder in protest the year that Tad was sent away, but the rest of the community and the

other two elders held strong and insisted that whoever was chosen had to be rejected from our community, and that was the end of Tad. It was one of the many reasons Gran had encouraged me to keep my powers hidden; she knew my ability to drain others of their magic for my own use would be feared. Consequently, any experimentation I did with my magic had to be done in secret, away from the prying eyes of Hamelin's other residents, who were always eager to throw the spotlight onto anyone else when it came time for a Shunning.

Gnawing dread tore at the insides of every person in Hamelin each time the Shunning was mentioned. They were all deathly afraid that somehow, someday, they or someone they loved would be chosen next and forced out of our community where everyone was educated and no one ever went hungry. The ever-present threat of the marking system forced good behavior from all who wanted to remain in the safety of Hamelin, far from the reaches of those hardened criminals who dwelt in the forest, shunned over the years. Twice in my memory, the elders had called for an additional Shunning when a resident gained too many marks against their name, so the fear of being shunned was never isolated to just the autumn equinox, but an ever-present threat that contributed to every decision made and hovered at the forefront of everyone's minds.

"It's always a tragedy when a child is chosen," Gran sighed in her creaky voice. "You're too young to remember them all, but other children have been cast out. It's rare though, darling. It's typically grown men who engage in criminal behavior, so don't worry. You needn't fear for yourself or your friend."



Gran shuffled on, and I slowly followed, still meticulously checking the border for any weaknesses to point out to Gran. I couldn't stop myself from glancing up at the top of the perimeter's border fence, as if I could see the entire forest beyond, not just the treetops, and wondered if any of those who had been shunned still lurked in the shadows, waiting for someone to stray just beyond the village's safety. Just because we couldn't see them didn't mean they weren't there.

The village storyteller, Piper, often told children the stories of those who had been shunned before, and the tales always seemed to end with them prowling the edges of the forest, waiting to pounce on an unsuspecting child and drag them back to their lairs to consume. I supposed he was to thank that no children had ever stepped foot outside the village; they were all too frightened.

Though I didn't quite believe that Tad was prowling the perimeter of the town, there had been other people cast out that I did fear. At the first Shunning I could remember, the man who was cast out could conjure fire with his bare hands. Another had the ability to read minds. One boy not much older than myself was a shapeshifter and had been thrown out when I was a very small child. All of those people, we were told, were far too dangerous to be around the rest of the villagers of Hamelin.

"Back where we started," Gran said eventually, gesturing to a spot on Hamelin's main street, the only entrance to the outside world.

I glanced up, surprised that we had already circled the entire town. Gran's limited vision never seemed to prevent her from knowing exactly where she was. She had every square inch of the village memorized.

I slowly walked beside Gran and couldn't help scanning the face of every person I saw. Who would be shunned by the community the next day? Was it the tailor, whose merchandise was proudly displayed in a shop window? He had been accused of cheating a customer some months ago and was a known magic user. Or would it perhaps be the woman pinning laundry up beside her small cottage with a dog curled at her feet? She had been heard shouting at her husband on more than one occasion.

My eyes jumped to each new individual I saw, and several times, other people met my gaze with the same suspicious, mistrusting look that I felt. Would *I* be chosen? I couldn't imagine that I would—my marks in my studies were near the top of my class, I never got into trouble, and it had been prophesied that I would one day be an elder; I was apprenticed to them. I controlled my magic and kept it well hidden, so even though I had the capability of using my stored magic to do any number of things, from conjuring fire to making objects move, as far as anyone else knew, I had no powers. No, I was not so much afraid for myself as I was for some of my friends and neighbors.

A young child's squalling pierced the peaceful air, and my head snapped around at once, quickly spotting the culprit. It appeared as though the little girl being frantically shushed by her mother had somehow ripped an arm off her rag doll and now wailed loudly. The mother glanced up and down the street, anxiety written all over her face. I schooled my features to look as though I couldn't hear the small girl's sobs and hoped that no elders were nearby. Disturbing others and failing to control your emotions were worthy of marks against your name, even if the child was only a year old, and the mother could get a mark as well, for neglecting to control her child adequately.

Gran, bless her, began to sing loudly to help mask the sound of the crying. I hastily joined my alto to Gran's tremulous soprano, whose vibrato matched the quavering child's voice. The mother scooped her daughter up and hurried her inside to muffle the crying, and it wasn't until we were sure that the daughter had ceased her tantrum that we desisted.



As we passed the schoolhouse on our way back home, the voice of the teacher, Pierre, floated out from where he was teaching the lower school, recounting the history of our village and enumerating the many ways in which our elders kept us protected, provided us with food, and helped our society thrive by means of the annual Shunning. I felt the tendrils of his light blue magic drifting about in the room, gently persuading the students to stay focused on the lesson at hand.

Gran and I walked by a crowd of small children too young for school being entertained by Piper, the village storyteller, who was Pierre's brother. I could sense faint strands of deep-red magic flowing from him to each of the children, keeping them mesmerized with the story he was telling. I paused momentarily to listen.

"And then," he whispered dramatically, "who was around the corner, but the Big, Bad Wolf!" He imitated a wolf's low growl and leapt at one of the children, who shrieked and fell over backwards into another child's lap.

"But those little pigs weren't worried, because they

had..." He flipped something golden into the air and stared expectantly at the children as he caught it again.

"The lucky coin!" they all shrieked as one. Piper was well-known throughout town for keeping his good-luck talisman on him at all times, claiming that it had kept him safe from the Shunning throughout the years.

"That's right! But that day in the deep, dark woods, they *lost it!*" With a flick of his fingers lasting less than a second, the coin vanished. Gasps went up from the knot of youth sitting with crossed legs at his feet.

"Piper's so good with the children," Gran laughed quietly.

I smiled at the strawberry-blond man. He was a few years older than I and had a charming, charismatic personality that made him an instant favorite among children. We had never been close friends, *per se*, but I knew and admired him for his abilities. I felt the fibers of storytelling magic drift toward me, drawn by my ability to drain others of their magic. As far as I knew, no one other than Gran was aware of my ability to sense the magic around me, nor did they know that I could collect and re-use the magic in any way I saw fit. So much power in one person would undoubtedly be feared.

Piper spotted one little boy waving merrily at Gran and looked in our direction. The storyteller flicked his hand at us, shooing us away, but his grin disproved any perceived annoyance. "Get out of here, Agatha, I need to keep these children entertained! Their parents are all preparing the feast for tomorrow's Shunning."

"What, scared an old woman is going to be competition for your stories?" Gran immediately taunted. "Don't you always say that your stories are entertaining enough that you don't need your powers? Don't stop just because the

almighty Agatha of Clearwater is passing by! Or are you too intimidated by me?"

He rolled his eyes, grin still plastered across his face, and shifted his focus back to the small children around his feet. "And what do you think that Big, Bad Wolf said when he saw those delicious-looking little pigs?"

Piper snarled and pulled his jacket up over his head, flapping the empty sleeves at the children as he gave a perfect imitation of a wolf howling at the moon. "I'm going to *eat you for my supper!*" The children all shrieked and scattered as Piper lunged at them again. They scampered to hide behind the well, then would dart out and tug playfully at Piper's trouser legs before dashing away again.

If I hadn't been afraid to use the magic I had collected, all stored within my chest, I could have created a wolf tail to appear and poke out from Piper's trousers, but squandering my magic on frivolity and revealing my powers was pointless.

Gran and I watched their game for several more minutes before moving on. The squeals of the children died away as we drew near our small cottage.

"He has so much energy," I commented. "Piper, I mean. He runs around with those children all day and never seems to get tired."

Gran gave a sly smile and sighed, "Remind me what he looks like again. Is he handsome? My old eyes aren't what they used to be."

"Gran! That isn't what I meant!"

Gran chuckled. "You're almost eighteen, child. If you want to put in a pairing request to the elders, you'd better hurry, or they may assign you to marry someone like Old Bart."

"They will not, and you know it. They will assign me to whomever is best suited for me."

"Whomever they *think* you're best suited for. Maybe Old Bart requested you."

I wrinkled my nose. "Old Bart requests every girl who comes of age. I don't know why he hasn't been shunned yet. I hope it's him this year."

Gran made a slight choking noise, and I hastened to place my hand at her back before she waved her knobby cane to ward me off. "Bite your tongue, child. Being shunned shouldn't ever be wished on anyone."

"Sorry."

Gran *tsked* several times as she shook her head. "You're young. I'm sure you only want to ensure that handsome storyteller of yours isn't the one who gets shunned. Maybe he has been waiting around for you to come of age so he can make his own pairing request to the elders."

"Gran!"

Her skin was textured with wrinkles that only deepened as her face cracked into a cunning smile. "What?" she asked innocently. "It isn't unheard of for young couples to sneak off during the post-shunning feast and—"

"I'll go through the proper channels to be paired, thank you very much." I sniffed with dignity. "People who run off and ignore the rules are likely to end up with someone they aren't compatible with. The elders study everyone for years to make sure that they're matched appropriately."

"Look at you being a hopeless romantic. On your wedding day, you can sign a contract and calculate an equal division of household financial responsibilities."

"At least we would know we're well suited for each other."

"You're allowed to notice when men are handsome."

They've certainly been noticing you lately. Enjoy that figure before you grow old like me."

My face flamed bright red, and I began to splutter incoherently. Gran continued to laugh at me all the way across the threshold.





## CHAPTER 2



The three elders stood shoulder to shoulder on the platform. The youngest of them, Octavius, was the strapping village farmer who was nearly forty years my senior. He stepped forward confidently, his freckles standing out prominently in the same way Piper's did. Everyone fell silent at once. No dogs barked, no babies cried. It was as though we were all holding our breath, waiting. Waiting for the announcement of who was going to be cast out.

"Our village," Octavius began, widening his arms in a sweeping gesture, "has a long and glorious history, and to truly grasp the magnitude of the ceremony today, we must go back many years." He cleared his throat. "During the centuries in which we have lived here, we set up a reigning government, led by three elders elected by the people...."

I heard several quiet groans from the crowd, and only the fear of having an additional mark against my name kept me from joining in. None of us wanted another one of Octavius's long-winded speeches. We all just wanted to know if we were safe for another year. I tuned out the dull

recounting of Hamelin's history that Octavius loved to tell at every opportunity. We didn't need to hear the same thing over and over. Every child knew this story.

No prisons, thumbscrews, or gallows were needed in our criminal justice system when we were faced with the ever-present threat of the Shunning. No resources were wasted on jails or guards when our citizens were compelled to govern themselves and abide within the laws. My mind began to stray. Despite my confidence that I wouldn't be chosen, scenes from the last year began popping up in my mind, and I bit my nails. I didn't have the worst record, but I wasn't perfect either.

I had joined several other students in locking Pierre in the school cloakroom in a spur-of-the-moment prank. I hadn't shown any of my magical abilities like many of my peers had done, hoping to prove their worth to the community. I had only avoided doing so at Gran's insistence, and now wondered if doing so would count against me. Would they see me as a less valuable member of society? Surely not—Gran told me that men tended to fear women with power, so I had hidden my ability to absorb and re-use magic for my own purposes, a much more powerful gift than most of the others.

"When our secluded utopia began to experience criminal behavior, the elders of Hamelin knew they needed to act!" Octavius said, and my attention was sharply brought back. He was getting to the point.

"And thus, the Shunning was established. Every year leading up to this ceremony, the elders review the ledger from the previous year, to see who has had the most marks against them. A mark is given for a variety of reasons. It could be from criminal behavior, or from the improper use of magic. It's noteworthy that not all magic is dark. In fact,

some is very helpful to our society. In order to operate a peaceful and prosperous town, we must all do our parts, magic and non-magic alike. We cannot sustain a community in which magic users are allowed free reign to do anything they choose. Their powers must be kept in check, for the greater good.

“Some have the ability to make our food multiply and feed our people!” Octavius bowed to the crowd, who politely applauded his contributions. “Others have the power to enchant children with the magic of storytelling.” Piper flashed a brief grin at the crowd. “And others can heal those with injuries.” He nodded toward Gran’s friend Arthur, who waved.

“As long as magic users channel their magic toward the good of the community, they don’t receive marks against their name. Quite the contrary—they become invaluable, and for that, we are eternally grateful.”

Several of the young children were growing antsy and began fidgeting, twisting their fingers and bouncing on the balls of their feet. I could feel the nervous energy from many of the adults as well, and saw many shifty looks exchanged. The same question was on everyone’s minds.

Octavius’s face grew grim. “This year, however, the elders have identified one magic user who has shown themselves to be a credible threat to our society.”

Murmuring broke out. I glanced around at those that I knew possessed powers. Pierre could manipulate emotions, but I couldn’t imagine that he would be cast out. He used his abilities to help children develop a love of learning, and they hung on his every word about mathematics and the history that Octavius had just recited.

Eugene the tailor had been accused of cheating a customer once, but otherwise he used his simple ability to

change any item's color for the benefit of all by crafting artistic clothes and cloaks that were worn by all the townspeople. Arthur, the oldest in the village besides Gran, was a healer, and could use his abilities to purge any illness. I was flummoxed as I continued to run through the mental list of those who possessed powers. Which magic user was a threat? Was it perhaps another child, as Tad had been, whose powers were not yet known to the community at large? Had my own powers been discovered?

Octavius waited until all the whispering died down. "Once the name of the shunned is announced, they will be asked to leave and never come back. They are not to talk to anyone, nor are you permitted to talk to them. When a tree has a withered or dying branch, the wise gardener removes the diseased portion of the plant. Today, we will be pruning one member of our community. This we will do for the good of the many."

"For the good of the many," we all chanted back.

"Form the lines."

We all moved into place, lining the main street of the village, and all eyes snapped back to Octavius. He gestured for the other two elders to stand beside him on the raised platform and unrolled a small scroll.

"The person chosen for this year's Shunning has a list of crimes, including but not limited to—physical abuse of fellows, neglect in assigned duties, condescension, arrogance..." Octavius continued listing a lengthy catalog of faults, and I wanted to scream with frustration. *Just say the name!*

My eyes scanned the crowd again, trying once more to guess who the guilty party could be, flicking my eyes from the blacksmith's wife to the teenage boy who disrespected Pierre during class, to the grumpy old man who shouted at

children. Old Bart looked unfazed by the proceedings and winked at me, after which I hurriedly looked away. Gran's speculation still rang in my ears about Old Bart wanting to request to be paired with me. I'd have to remember to submit a request for anyone but him, but at a later time. I didn't think I could stomach any additional stress that day.

Piper caught my eye, his face twisted into a similar expression of concern and fear. He tried to give me an encouraging smile, but everyone felt too sick with dread to do anything as pleasant as smile. Did Piper fear for himself or his brothers? He stood next to his two brothers—Pierre the teacher and Otto the huntsman. I wholeheartedly disliked Otto, despite having no reason to do so. Though I had never sensed any threads near Otto in the same way I had with his brothers, and his duties as a huntsman required no magical powers, a dark, leeching aura still existed around him. I couldn't ever adequately explain, either to myself or Gran, why it made me uncomfortable, but it did.

The aura sent chills up and down my spine each time I shared physical proximity with him, and I consequently avoided him whenever possible. No one else appeared to share my reservations, so I kept my opinions to myself, as always, and let my eyes continue their scan of my surroundings. Many were doing exactly what I was and furtively searching the congregation, all while running through the list of their family and friends, praying that it wasn't one of them. The dying sun's rays did little to warm my face, but removed my cloak gleaming with Gran's silvery threads of protective magic and draped it over my arm, too nervous to be cold. I spotted beads of sweat on Gran's forehead that matched everyone else's gleaming faces. Was she just as nervous as the rest of us?

“In conclusion,” Octavius said, and my attention snapped back to him, “the elders have determined that this individual, though he or she has been of value in years past, has become too negligent and abusive and threatens the community at large. We must be prudent, for the good of the many.”

“For the good of the many,” we chanted once again, our voices taut with tension. The frantic exchanges of expressions grew to a frenzy, then all settled on Octavius as he inhaled deeply.

“The person to be shunned from this moment on, henceforth and forever is—”

We all collectively held our breath.

“Miss Agatha of Clearwater.”



Finish reading *Scarlett and the Dark Woods* to see what happens when Scarlett goes after her gran! This book is available on Amazon, Kindle Unlimited, and on audio!