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Chapter 5: Red and Wolf Clash and Reveal Hidden Feelings

Red steps carefully over a fallen log, clutching her basket as she searches for the path to her grandmother’s cottage.

She is alert, determined to prove her independence, and ready to confront any obstacle.

The Wolf, watching her from behind a tree, approaches—his demeanor a mix of dramatic flair and genuine concern.

Red stands tall, her eyes narrowed and fists clenched at her sides, refusing to show any sign of fear as she confronts the Wolf. Red planted her feet firmly on the leaf-strewn path, refusing to let the tremor in her chest travel to her voice. Her fists clenched at her sides and her eyes narrowed in defiance as she met the Wolf’s gaze, unblinking. “Step aside, Wolf,” she demanded, her tone unwavering, determined not to betray a hint of fear. “Whatever game you’re playing, I won’t let you stand in my way.” She squared her shoulders, her chin lifting in challenge. “Tell me—why are you blocking my path?” Wolf narrows his eyes, muscles tensed, making no move to let her pass, the forest around them oddly still as he waits for her next move. Wolf’s gaze sharpened, eyes narrowing as he remained rooted in place, the tension in his muscles clear beneath his bristling fur. The forest held its breath, every leaf and shadow poised, as Red squared her shoulders and demanded to know his purpose for blocking her way. With a dramatic tilt of his head, Wolf let a wry smile flicker across his maw, his charm barely masking the longing in his voice.

“Proving yourself is a noble cause, Red,” he admitted, the words slipping out with practiced ease, though a hint of insecurity clung to their edges. He stepped no closer, yet made no move to let

her pass, intent on measuring her mettle. “But my reasons are not a game—I’m here to see if your resolve matches your words.”

The statement hung between them, heavy as the hush of the woods, and Wolf watched her closely, longing for a connection but uncertain how to bridge the distance. Red narrows her eyes, planting her feet firmly as she braces for whatever challenge Wolf presents. Red narrowed her eyes, planting her feet firmly in the soft earth as she faced the Wolf’s looming presence. Determination flickered in her gaze; she refused to let fear show. Bracing herself for whatever challenge he might present, she squared her shoulders and demanded, “Then watch closely, Wolf, because nothing—not even you—will stop me from reaching my goal.” The words rang out, crisp with defiance, her resolve as unyielding as the path she was determined to follow. Wolf narrows his eyes and takes a deliberate step forward, casting a shadow across Red’s path. Wolf’s eyes gleamed with a cunning light as he narrowed them, his silhouette stretching long and dark across Red’s determined stance. He stepped forward, each movement measured, as if savoring the tension he created. “We’ll see if your determination survives the trials ahead, Red,” he murmured, voice low and almost fond, though the words themselves threatened. Letting the moment hang, he let a wry smile flicker at the edge of his mouth. “For I’m the first of many obstacles you’ll face.” Beneath the bravado, a flicker of longing glimmered in his gaze—a silent hope that she might prove herself, or perhaps even reach him in ways no one else had managed. Red lifts her chin defiantly, her grip tightening on the basket as she steps forward, eyes locked on Wolf. Red lifted her chin defiantly, her grip tightening on the basket as she stepped forward, refusing to let the Wolf’s looming presence unsettle her. Determination burned in her eyes as she squared her shoulders, meeting his gaze without flinching. If he thought a single wolf could break her spirit, he was gravely mistaken—he underestimated just how far she was willing to go. Instead of merely warning her about hunters and trying to impress her, Wolf engages in a tense but open conversation about their respective fears and motivations.

Wolf sweeps his head lower in an exaggerated bow, his golden eyes glinting with hopeful mischief as his tail wags slowly behind him. Wolf swept his head low in an exaggerated bow, the gesture almost theatrical, his golden eyes flickering with hopeful mischief. His tail wagged slowly behind him, betraying both nerves and anticipation. He circled closer, brushing past low ferns, and let his voice curl through the green hush like smoke.

“Red,” he murmured, the name lingering with a wistful note, “I couldn’t help but notice you wandering alone—such courage.” He straightened just enough for his gaze to catch hers, earnest and a little too eager. “It would be a shame if someone as remarkable as you went unaccompanied through these wild woods.” His smile tilted, more longing than sly. “Allow me to offer my company, if only to prove that not all wolves are as fearsome as the stories say.” Red tilts her head, a hint of a smile playing at her lips as she watches Wolf’s theatrical bow, curious but not yet convinced. Red tilted her head, a hint of a smile playing at her lips as she watched Wolf’s theatrical bow. He circled ever closer, brushing past low ferns with a flourish as if expecting her awe, but she remained unconvinced, her curiosity sharper than any performance. “Is it bravery you see,” she asked lightly, her gaze steady and unafraid, “or simply a girl who knows her own path?” Wolf lifts his gaze with a hopeful glint in his eyes, his tail swishing softly as he waits for Red’s response. Wolf lifted his gaze, a hopeful glint flickering in his eyes as his tail swished softly behind him. He circled closer, brushing past low ferns with deliberate grace, each step betraying both his longing and his uncertainty. Pausing just shy of Red, he let his voice flow, smooth and edged with unspoken yearning: “Perhaps it’s a bit of both,” he mused, his tone threading wisdom and daring together. “It takes wisdom to know your path, and a touch of daring to walk it alone—and I find myself

eager to see where yours might lead.” The words hung between them, earnest and dramatic, as Wolf waited, heart drumming quietly, for Red’s response. RedWolf grins, his eyes glinting with playful challenge as he edges just a step closer, awaiting Red’s response. Wolf grinned, his eyes glinting with playful challenge as he edged just a step closer, the ferns brushing against his sleek fur. Red felt the prickle of anticipation in the air as he lowered his voice, almost conspiratorial. “And perhaps, if you’ll allow it, I might learn a thing or two from your courage—if not, I shall have to impress you with my own.” His words lingered between them, half a jest, half an earnest invitation, as if daring her to step further into the game he was weaving. Wolf lowers his head even further, sweeping a paw in an exaggerated flourish, his amber eyes glinting with playful hope as he watches for Red’s response. Wolf lowered his head even further, sweeping a paw in an exaggerated flourish as he circled closer, his amber eyes glinting with playful hope. The low ferns brushed against his flank, but he scarcely noticed, intent on catching Red’s gaze. With that trademark charm laced through his voice, tinged by an undercurrent of longing, he murmured, “Then let us both be bold, Red—may our steps teach and tempt one another along the way.” The words hung in the air between them, a dramatic invitation spun with more bravado than certainty, as Wolf waited, trying not to betray the flicker of insecurity that danced beneath his confident smile. The two exchange philosophical remarks about courage, danger, and trust, with Wolf offering to accompany Red and guide her through the woods to avoid hunters.

Wolf’s ears flatten and his gaze darts anxiously toward the shadowed trees, the low rumble of his warning vibrating in the hush between them. Wolf’s ears flattened against his head, a flicker of unease betraying the charm he wore like a second skin. His gaze darted anxiously toward the shadowed trees, where the hush between them seemed to thicken with threat. “Red, listen to me—there are hunters in these woods tonight,” he murmured, voice low and edged with urgency, the warning rumbling deep in his chest. He glanced at the dark thicket, eyes lingering as if he could see the danger gathering there. “They’re closer than you think,” he added, longing for her to heed the caution he rarely gave so freely. “Stay on the path, and do not linger.” The words trembled with something more than fear—something unspoken, desperate for connection. “If they catch a scent out here, it won’t go well for either of us.” Red steps closer, her voice hushed, eyes scanning the shadows between the trees. Red took a cautious step closer, her boots stirring the moss underfoot as she lowered her voice to little more than a whisper. Her gaze darted restlessly among the tangled shadows between the trees, searching for any sign of movement. “Why are you warning me, Wolf—aren’t you afraid they’ll see us together?” she murmured, curiosity and suspicion threading her words even as she glanced back to where the deeper thicket loomed. Wolf’s ears flatten as he scans the shadows, muscles tensed as if ready to bolt at the faintest snap of a twig. Wolf’s ears flattened, his gaze darting through the shifting shadows as if every rustle spelled disaster. Muscles coiled beneath his sleek fur, ready to spring away at the faintest snap of a twig. He kept his voice low, almost conspiratorial, as his eyes flicked toward the darker thicket—a subtle warning glinting in their depths. “Fear runs both ways, Red—I’m as much their prey as you are,” he murmured, the words tinged with a dramatic longing that betrayed his usual confidence. “And tonight, mercy will be in short supply.” Red steps closer, her voice low, studying Wolf’s tense posture beneath the moonlight. Red stepped closer, her boots crunching softly on the moss, and let her gaze linger on Wolf’s tense silhouette beneath the moon’s pale gaze. She watched the way his eyes flickered toward the darker thicket, the warning he’d offered about prowling hunters still echoing in her thoughts. Yet curiosity pressed against her caution. Voice low, threaded with both empathy and challenge, she studied him and murmured, “If you’re truly afraid, why risk coming out of the shadows for me?” Wolf’s ears flatten as a distant crack of twigs echoes through the

trees, his body tense and ready to bolt. Wolf's ears flattened at the distant crack of twigs echoing through the trees, every muscle in his lean body tensed, poised to flee at a moment's notice. He cast a wary glance toward the darker tangle of thicket, the shadows shifting as if they, too, were listening. His gaze lingered on her, something vulnerable flickering behind his charming bravado. "Even a wolf knows when a storm is too fierce to face alone," he murmured, voice low and edged with dramatic longing, "and I'd rather not see you lost to it." The admission hung between them, raw and honest despite his usual cunning, more plea than warning. Red steps closer, her gaze steady but searching his face for any sign of deceit or reassurance. Red stepped closer, her boots pressing into the moss as she lifted her chin, refusing to flinch beneath his watchful gaze. She searched his face, alert for the slightest hint of guile or kindness, her voice low and unwavering as she asked, "Then tell me, Wolf—if I leave the path now, will you guide me somewhere safe, or am I just trading one danger for another?" Her words hung between them, threaded with both suspicion and a quiet hope, as his eyes flicked again toward the shadowed thicket beyond. Wolf steps forward, muscles tense, ears pricked for any distant sound, his gaze locked on Red with an earnest, almost pleading intensity. Wolf stepped forward, muscles taut beneath his fur, every sense sharpened as his ears strained for the faintest hint of danger. His gaze found Red, earnest and nearly desperate, the longing in his eyes barely concealed by a mask of charm. "If you trust me, Red," he murmured, his voice low and coaxing as his glance flickered toward the shadowed thicket, "I'll lead you through the foxglove hollow—hidden from hunter and wolf alike." The words hovered between them, heavy with promise and insecurity. "But you'll have to keep close, and silent," he added, a plea woven through his dramatic caution, as if connection hung on her answer. Their relationship grows more complex, shifting from adversarial tension to a wary partnership, as Red considers accepting his help while maintaining her independence and skepticism.

The scene ends with both characters acknowledging the dangers around them, and preparing to face the trials ahead together, setting the stage for a dynamic alliance rather than immediate confrontation.

Red stops just short of a puddle, boots sinking into the soft earth. Her eyes narrow at Wolf, hands balled into fists inside her cloak. Red stopped just short of a puddle, her boots sinking into the soft, yielding earth. She watched Wolf through narrowed eyes, feeling the weight of his gaze and the silence that stretched between them. Her fists tightened inside her cloak, knuckles pressing against the letter and the treats she carried for her grandmother. The forest was unusually quiet, their footsteps stirring mud and scattering acorns, and the tension seemed to grow thicker with each step. Red couldn't help the wry edge to her voice as she finally spoke, her curiosity and wariness intertwined. "Funny, how you always find me when the forest is quiet," she remarked, her gaze fixed steadily on Wolf. "Makes me wonder what you're hunting this time." Wolf narrows his eyes, his stance tense as he circles Red, boots grinding into the wet earth. Wolf's eyes narrowed, the gleam of calculation flickering behind his lashes as he began to circle Red. His boots ground slow, deliberate patterns into the wet earth, crushing scattered acorns beneath his heels. The tension between them thickened with every measured step, a storm gathering in the hush between raindrops.

"Careful, Red—sometimes it's not the prey I find," he warned, voice low and edged with drama, "but the threat stalking the paths it shouldn't tread." The words coiled in the air, half caution, half challenge, betraying a longing for connection even as he kept himself at a wary distance. Red tightens her grip on the basket, eyes narrowing as she plants her feet firmly in the mud, refusing to give way. Red tightened her grip on the basket, her knuckles whitening as she planted her feet

deeper into the slick mud. Acorns rolled under her heels, but she refused to budge, holding her ground with stubborn resolve. Her eyes narrowed at her companion, tension coiling in the space between them. She spoke quietly, words edged with defiance: threats didn't need to stalk when they'd already marked their ground—maybe he was just too busy sniffing for weakness to notice. Wolf narrows his eyes, jaw clenched, as he steps just close enough for Red to feel the weight of his presence. Wolf narrowed his eyes, jaw clenched with a tension he tried to mask as confidence, and stepped forward—just close enough that Red could sense the subtle shift in the air between them. Their footsteps stirred the mud and scattered acorns, each movement thickening the silence, until his voice slipped out, low and almost accusing, “Maybe it’s your scent that keeps drawing trouble deeper into the trees, Red.” Red tightens her grip on the basket, jaw set, eyes flashing as she takes a deliberate step closer, refusing to look away. Red tightened her grip on the basket, her knuckles whitening as she took a deliberate step forward. Mud squelched beneath her boots, and scattered acorns rolled away from her path, but she didn’t falter. Her jaw was set, eyes flashing with defiance as she refused to break her gaze. “Maybe it’s not the scent of trouble you smell,” she said, her voice low and steady, “but the fear you keep denying.” The words hung in the damp air, sharp as the chill that threaded through the woods, daring her companion to challenge her resolve. Wolf’s eyes narrow, his shoulders tense as he steps closer, boots grinding into the mud and acorns underfoot. Wolf’s eyes narrowed, a flicker of something wounded darting through the cool gleam of his gaze. Shoulders tensed, he stepped closer, boots grinding into the sodden earth and sending acorns skittering. The sharp air between them seemed to crackle. “Fear sharpens the senses, Red—pity you mistake it for weakness every time.” His voice was smooth, almost teasing, but the longing that haunted the edges of his words was impossible to miss. Red’s grip tightens on the basket handle, knuckles pale, as she plants her boots firmly in the mud between them. Red’s grip tightened around the basket handle, her knuckles blanching as she planted her boots more firmly in the sodden earth between them. The woods pressed close, their footsteps having churned the mud and sent acorns skittering, but it was the tension in the air that made her heart beat faster. She lifted her chin, eyes fixed unflinchingly on the Wolf. Weakness, she thought, wasn’t in seeing danger, but in denying it. “Weakness is pretending the shadows aren’t closing in,” she said, voice low but clear. “I see them, Wolf, and I know which ones belong to you.” Wolf’s gaze narrows as he steps closer, boots grinding acorns beneath his heel. Wolf’s gaze narrowed, a glint of calculation flickering behind his eyes as he stepped closer. His boots ground acorns into the damp earth, each movement deliberate, bridging the shrinking gap between them. The tension thickened, settling in the murky air. With a sly, almost wistful curve to his lips, he murmured, “Then you know enough to keep your eyes open, Red—some shadows bite back.” His words slipped out, half warning, half challenge, lingering just long enough to betray the longing tucked beneath his charm. —————

As the tension between Red and Wolf lingers in the air, neither is willing to break the silence that settles over the clearing. The grandmother’s admonishments echo in Red’s thoughts, mingling with her uncertainty about what comes next. With the truth laid bare and the shadows of the forest pressing in, Red realizes that a choice must be made—one that will shape not only her future, but Wolf’s as well. As dusk deepens and the path home grows dim, Red gathers her resolve, prepared to face the Wolf once more and decide the terms of their uneasy truce.

Chapter 2: Red Encounters the Wolf and Makes a Deal

Red walked briskly along the path, clutching her basket and adjusting the strap on her red cloak, eyes scanning the shadows for movement.

As she rounded a bend, a sleek gray wolf stepped soundlessly from behind a bramble, his fur dusted with dew, blocking the trail.

The Wolf dipped his head in a practiced, almost theatrical bow, ears flicking, and spoke in a low, smooth voice, 'Going somewhere important, little traveler?

' Red halted, tightening her grip on the basket and taking a cautious step sideways, her gaze flicking to the Wolf's paws and then to his amber eyes.

The Wolf watched her with a half-smile, tail swishing, careful not to advance.

Red, remembering her mother's warnings, replied with measured boldness, 'I'm visiting my grandmother.

Why do you care?

' The Wolf circled a few paces, nose twitching as he caught the scent of pastries and paper, and said, 'Perhaps we might help each other.

The woods are full of surprises—maybe some are dangerous, some are not.

' Red weighed her options, then offered, 'If you show me the safest way, I'll share some treats.

' The Wolf's ears perked, and he nodded, 'A fair deal.

But only if you promise not to mention me to anyone you meet.

' Red agreed, and together they moved deeper into the woods, Red keeping a wary pace beside him.

The Wolf led her past a tangle of roots, gesturing with his snout, and Red watched every movement, determined not to let her guard down until she reached her goal.

As the Wolf disappeared into the shadows, Red lingered among the wildflowers, her mind buzzing with the strange bargain she had just struck. With a final glance down the winding path, she gathered her courage and pressed on toward her grandmother's cottage, unaware of what awaited her. Soon, she would stand at her grandmother's door, the letter changing everything and setting her on a course far more urgent than she could have imagined.

Chapter 1: Red Receives the Letter and Accepts the Mission

Red stands at the kitchen table, her fingers tracing the wax seal on a folded letter.

Her mother, apron dusted with flour, hands her a woven basket lined with a cloth and filled with jars of preserves and fresh bread.

As her mother explains the importance of delivering the letter and treats to Grandmother, she tightens the knot on Red's cloak and checks the contents of the basket.

Red's Mother I pull Red's cloak snug around her shoulders, check that the basket is well-packed, and look her in the eye with a gentle, reassuring squeeze of her hand. Red's mother knelt beside her, fingers deft and gentle as she pulled the scarlet cloak snug around Red's shoulders. She checked the basket one last time, making sure the bread was fresh, the cheese wrapped tight, and the broth still warm from that morning. Sliding the folded letter atop the bundle, she paused, her gaze earnest.

"Everything Grandmother needs is right here," she said, giving Red's hand a reassuring squeeze. "She's been so lonely since she fell ill. Your visit—your care—will mean the world to her." The weight of her trust settled between them, quiet and steady.

Red's mother brushed a stray curl from her daughter's cheek, her voice low and practical. "I'm counting on you to deliver these safely. The woods can be tricky, so stay on the path and don't dawdle." She held Red's gaze, strong and loving. "You're carrying more than food—you're carrying our love. Grandmother is depending on you, and so am I." Red clutches the basket to her chest, her eyes bright with determination and a hint of worry. Red's fingers curled tightly around the wicker handle, pressing the basket to her chest as her mother's words lingered in the morning air. Determination sparked in her eyes, though a shadow of worry flickered beneath. She straightened her shoulders, nodding with resolve. Of course she would do exactly as her mother asked—walk straight through the woods and deliver every last treat and the letter to Grandmother, just as instructed. That was a promise she intended to keep. Red listens intently, then straightens her shoulders and tucks the letter into her satchel, determined to prove her capability.

She steps to the door, pausing as her mother places a gentle hand on her arm and warns her to keep to the path.

Red's Mother She gently grips Red's arm, her eyes searching her daughter's face for understanding, her voice soft but firm with worry. Red's mother reached out, her hand gentle yet insistent as it curled around her daughter's arm. She didn't let Red slip past the doorway immediately. Instead, her gaze lingered on Red's face, searching for a flicker of understanding, of promise. Her voice, though soft, carried the weight of all her worry and love. "Stay on the path, sweetheart. Don't let anything tempt you away, no matter how curious you get." The concern etched in her features made it clear this was more than an everyday warning—it was a plea from a mother who understood the woods far better than her daughter ever could. "It's not as safe as you think out there." Red offers a reassuring smile, but her fingers twitch on the basket handle, betraying a flicker of restless curiosity. Red lingered at the threshold, her basket swaying gently as her fingers flexed around the handle—a subtle sign of the impatience simmering beneath her measured smile. Her mother's hand found her arm, warm and gentle, and Red felt both comforted and restrained. The familiar warning hovered in the air, unsaid but clear. Red met her mother's gaze with determined eyes. "I promise, Mother," she said, her voice steady despite the restless urge to move, "I'll keep to the path—I'm not a little child anymore." Even as she spoke, curiosity shimmered just beneath her composure, hinting at the quiet thrill she felt standing at the edge of the woods. With a nod, Red lifts the basket and pushes open the door, cool air brushing her cheeks as she steps outside, the crunch of gravel under her boots marking the beginning of her journey.

Unbeknownst to Red, shadows stirred deeper in the woods, moving swiftly along hidden trails toward the very same destination. While she set out with determined steps and her mother's words still echoing in her mind, another traveler had already chosen a far more cunning path. As Red ventured beneath the tangled boughs, fate was already at work ahead of her, altering the course of her journey before she could even imagine.

Chapter 3: Wolf Reaches Grandmother's Cottage First

Wolf arrives at Grandmother's cottage ahead of Red, padding quietly through the undergrowth.

Instead of the strictly civil and wary exchange from the original plot, Wolf's demeanor is more urgent and poetic—he warns Grandmother of mysterious disturbances in the woods, hinting that more than just Red is approaching.

He describes the forest as restless, mentioning a stranger crossing boundaries and an imminent, unspecified change.

Grandmother, sharp and defensive, presses Wolf for clarity and makes it clear she won't tolerate any trouble.

Wolf insists his intentions are harmless and specifically mentions a young woman (Red) approaching, but frames her arrival as part of a larger, more ominous shift.

Wolf dips his head in a respectful bow, his eyes briefly meeting hers with a measured calm. His posture is relaxed but poised, every movement deliberate as he establishes a courteous, almost courtly distance between them. Wolf dipped his head in a gesture that balanced respect and practiced ease, his silver eyes flickering up to meet hers with a measured calm. Every line of his body was relaxed but carefully arranged, his movements deliberate as he maintained a courteous, almost courtly distance between them. His voice—smooth, low, edged with a hint of longing he could never confess—curled through the hush of evening as he said, “Good evening, madam. I trust the night finds you well?” He urges Grandmother to prepare for the unknown, stressing that caution is not just wise, but necessary.

Wolf emerges from the thicket, nose lifted to catch the scent lingering in the air, eyes alert to the shifting shadows. Wolf slipped from the thicket, his movements fluid and deliberate, nose lifted to catch the lingering scent of something unfamiliar. He paused, ears flicking toward the shifting shadows beneath the ancient pines. The woods were quieter than usual tonight—too quiet, he thought, as if the trees themselves were holding their breath. A restless energy hummed in the air. He let out a low, dramatic sigh, unable to keep the longing from his voice as he announced, “The trees whisper secrets tonight.” His gaze swept from the silver streams to the shadowed boundary where old rules had always held sway. “From the shadowed pines and silver streams, I bring tidings,” he continued, struggling to mask the uncertainty beneath his clever façade. “A stranger has crossed the old boundary, leaving footprints where none should tread.” The silence pressed in around him, heavy and expectant, and Wolf's insecurity flickered in his eyes as he admitted, “The woods are restless, and the silence is heavy.” He lingered on the words, sensing the inevitable, and with a dramatic flourish, he declared, “Change is coming.” Grandmother remains cautious and resolute, but is left more unsettled than in the original version, her preparations now tinged with unease about broader threats in the woods.

Grandmother grips her stick tighter, eyes narrowed, and stands firm in front of the doorway, refusing to let anyone pass until she hears a satisfactory answer. Grandmother's knuckles whitened as she gripped her stick, barring the doorway with a resolve that belied her frail frame. Her sharp eyes narrowed, sweeping over the unexpected visitor on her stoop. "Speak up, now!" she demanded, her voice cutting through the hush of the woods. "What brings you pounding at my door at this hour? I won't have any trouble under my roof." She stood firm, her presence alone making it clear that no one would cross her threshold without answering to her satisfaction.

Unbeknownst to Grandmother, the Wolf's persistence soon wears down her defenses, allowing his deception to succeed—but her suspicions linger as she plans her next move from within her makeshift prison. Meanwhile, the forest path echoes with footsteps and the rustle of a familiar red cloak draws nearer, as Red approaches the cottage, blissfully unaware of the danger that now awaits her inside. As the door creaks open once more, the delicate balance between predator and prey is about to shift, setting the stage for an encounter neither visitor nor resident could have fully anticipated.

Chapter 4: Red Arrives and Discovers the Ruse

Red steps onto the porch, her boots scraping against the warped boards.

She knocks sharply, noting the unusual silence inside.

Grandmother, wrapped in a quilt, peers out from her rocking chair near the window, lips twitching with restrained amusement.

Red pushes open the door and immediately senses something off—the faint musk of wet fur lingers in the entryway.

She scans the room and spots Wolf awkwardly perched on Grandmother's stool, eyes wide and tail tucked.

Wolf attempts to mimic Grandmother's voice, greeting Red with exaggerated warmth, but Red quickly grows suspicious, noticing the differences in 'Grandmother's' voice and hands.

Wolf, curled up in Grandmother's bed, adjusts the shawl and attempts to soften his voice, adding a quavering gentleness and a wide, toothy smile meant to seem grandmotherly. Curled beneath the heavy quilt, Wolf tucked Grandmother's shawl closer around his shoulders, the fabric scratchy against his fur. He willed his voice to tremble with a frail sweetness as he beamed, baring teeth in what he hoped passed for a grandmother's gentle smile. "Ah, my sweet darling Red!" he called, stretching the words with exaggerated warmth that danced dangerously close to melodrama. "Come closer, child, come into the light so your dear old Grandmother can see that precious face." He angled his head just so, longing and nerves fluttering in his chest, and added with a wistful sigh, "I've missed you terribly!" Red hesitates at the doorway, peering into the dimly lit room with a slight frown of concern. Red hesitated at the doorway, her hand lingering on the worn

frame as she peered into the dimly lit room. The air inside felt thick and unfamiliar, shadows clinging to the corners. With a slight frown of concern, she tilted her head and studied the figure in the bed. Something about the voice that greeted her—a little too warm, a little too eager—set her nerves on edge. Still, her tone was gentle as she stepped forward, curiosity and worry mingling in her gaze. “Grandmother, your voice sounds a little different today—are you feeling alright?” Wolf pats the blanket awkwardly, his eyes fixed hungrily on Red while forcing a quivering, affectionate smile. Wolf patted the edge of the blanket, the motion betraying an awkwardness he tried desperately to hide. His eyes, fixed hungrily on Red, glimmered with a longing he could neither voice nor suppress. Forcing his quivering lips into what he hoped passed for an affectionate smile, he summoned the brittle, wavering tones of Grandmother’s voice. “Oh, dearest, it’s just a tickle in my throat,” he managed, the words laced with exaggerated warmth. “Come nearer, let me hold your hand and feel the warmth I’ve longed for.” Beneath the performance, his heart pounded with the hope—for connection, for closeness—that he could never quite admit, even to himself. Red hesitantly steps closer, placing her small hand into Wolf’s paw, her eyes narrowing with growing curiosity. Red hesitated at the edge of the bed, uncertainty flickering across her face as she studied the figure beneath the quilt. At last, curiosity nudged her forward. She stretched out her small hand, placing it gingerly into Wolf’s oversized paw. Her fingers tensed, and her brow furrowed as she traced the coarse fur and felt the unnatural thickness of his grip. “Well, alright, Grandmother,” she murmured, her voice tinged with suspicion, “but your hands seem much bigger and rougher than I remember—have you been working in the garden a lot?” Wolf gently pats Red’s hand, trying to mask his sharp claws beneath the blanket. Wolf’s paw, carefully draped in the scratchy warmth of Grandmother’s blanket, hovered for a moment before coming to rest atop Red’s small hand. He patted with exaggerated gentleness, all the while conscious of the sharpness lurking beneath his fur and fabric. Summoning a tremulous sweetness, Wolf let his voice waver in a familiar quaver, striving for both warmth and concealment. “Oh, my precious child,” he crooned, the words rolling out with dramatic flair, “age does funny things to our bodies—these old hands have grown strong from baking you treats and knitting you scarves!”

He watched Red’s face for any flicker of suspicion, longing mingling with the insecurity that pricked his heart. If only connection were as simple as mimicry and soft words, Wolf thought, as he pressed his claws further into the fold of the blanket, desperate to hide the truth that lay beneath. Red hesitates, glancing at Wolf’s unusually large eyes, her brow furrowing with cautious curiosity. Red hesitated on the threshold, her hand tightening on the basket’s handle as she studied the figure nestled beneath the patchwork quilt. Something about Grandmother’s eyes—strangely large, almost luminous in the dim afternoon light—made her brow crease in wary curiosity. From beneath the covers came a voice, syrupy and unusually warm, coaxing, “Red, why don’t you sit right beside me, so I can look into those sparkling eyes of yours—I’ve waited all week to gaze upon your lovely face!” The words, though tender, seemed to echo oddly in the small room, and Red’s pulse quickened with a flicker of doubt. Instead of simply pulling off Wolf’s disguise, Red directly confronts Wolf, accusing him of trespassing and hiding his intentions, referencing tracks she saw and suspicious activity around the cottage.

Red narrows her eyes, sets the basket on the table with a thud, and strides forward, planting herself firmly between Wolf and the door. Red narrowed her eyes, her gaze sharp with suspicion as she set the basket down on the table with a deliberate thud. Without hesitation, she strode forward, planting herself squarely between Wolf and the doorway, ensuring there was no way past her. Her voice was firm, nearly trembling with indignation as she demanded, “What are you doing here, Wolf? I thought I made it clear you weren’t welcome anywhere near my grandmother’s cottage.”

Wolf raises his paws placatingly, his eyes darting from Red to the closed bedroom door. Wolf lifted his paws in a placating gesture, his eyes flickering anxiously from Red's piercing gaze to the closed bedroom door. The storm had left the cottage shrouded in uneasy silence, and Red's suspicion pressed on him like the damp air. He summoned his most charming smile, hoping to smooth the tension, and said softly, "Easy, Red—I'm just checking on the old lady, making sure she's all right after that storm last night." His voice carried an edge of dramatic concern, but beneath it lingered a longing for her trust, for connection he rarely managed to keep. Red plants herself between Wolf and the door, her gaze unwavering. Red narrowed her eyes, setting the basket on the table with a decisive thud before striding forward to plant herself squarely between Wolf and the door. Her gaze didn't waver, sharp with suspicion. "Don't play innocent with me," she demanded, voice low and steady. "I saw your tracks circling the garden before dawn." Wolf leans casually against the doorframe, eyes flickering between Red and the closed bedroom door. Wolf leaned with calculated ease against the doorframe, his posture relaxed but his eyes unable to settle, flickering restlessly between Red and the shut bedroom door. As she narrowed her gaze at him and set her basket down with a decisive thud, striding forward with suspicion etched in every line of her body, Wolf offered her a disarming half-smile. "Tracks don't mean trouble, Red—maybe I was looking for shelter myself." The words slipped out smooth as velvet, but beneath his charming tone lingered a note of uncertainty, an unspoken longing for her to believe him. Red folds her arms tightly across her chest, her stance blocking the Wolf's path toward the inner rooms. Red narrowed her eyes, setting the basket firmly on the table before striding forward, her boots thudding softly against the worn floorboards. She planted herself squarely in the Wolf's path, arms folded tightly across her chest—a living barricade between him and the inner rooms. Her voice was low but unwavering as she demanded, "If you were truly seeking shelter, you wouldn't have hidden when I called out this morning." WolfRed folds her arms, her stance blocking Wolf's path to the kitchen. Red planted herself firmly between Wolf and the kitchen, arms folded and eyes narrowed in quiet accusation. She set the basket on the table with a decisive thud, blocking his path as effectively as any locked door. Her gaze was unflinching as she demanded an explanation, voice low with suspicion. "You always have a reason ready," she said, her words slicing through Wolf's usual charm. "But none of them explain why Grandma's door was left open and her cupboard rifled through." Red squares her shoulders, her hand tightening around the basket's handle as she glares at Wolf, daring him to lie again. Red squared her shoulders, jaw set with determination as she marched across the creaking floorboards. Setting her basket down with a quiet thud, she leveled a hard glare at Wolf, her fingers still clenched tightly around the handle. "So you admit you were inside—what exactly were you searching for, Wolf?" she demanded, her voice sharp with suspicion and a hint of hurt, daring him to offer another lie. Wolf's gaze flickers to the shadows in the corner of the room, his posture tense as he braces for Red's reaction. Wolf's gaze flickered uneasily to the shadows pooling in the corner of the room, his muscles tensing as if he might bolt at any moment. Red, basket set firmly on the table, advanced with a glare that demanded answers. Wolf hesitated, the usual gleam of cunning in his eyes dulled by something more vulnerable. At last, he drew in a breath, voice low and colored with a longing he couldn't quite hide. He told her he'd been searching for answers—something strange had been happening in these woods, he confessed, and her grandmother, he feared, might be at the center of it. Red steps closer, jaw set and fists clenched, blocking the doorway with her body. Red set the basket down with a deliberate thud, her jaw tightening as she stepped forward and blocked the doorway with her small, determined frame. Her fists were clenched at her sides, knuckles white, and her eyes narrowed, reflecting a mix of fear and fury. She drew herself up taller, refusing to be intimidated. "If you so much as hint that my grandmother's involved in your twisted schemes," she warned, her voice low but unwavering, "you'll regret ever

setting paw in these woods.” The threat hung in the air, her stance leaving no doubt she meant every word. Wolf’s eyes flash as he steps back, his stance tense but defiant, watching Red’s every move. Wolf’s eyes flashed with a wary brightness as he took a measured step back, his sinewy frame taut with tension—defiant, yet betraying the flicker of uncertainty beneath his bravado. He watched Red’s every movement, tracking her as she set the basket down with a deliberate thud and strode forward, her gaze sharp and demanding. Wolf drew in a breath, the corners of his mouth curving into a crooked smile that didn’t quite reach his eyes. “Careful, Red—sometimes the truth bites harder than any wolf could,” he warned, his voice rich with dramatic flair, but edged with a longing that lingered between them, unspoken. Red steps closer, her fists clenched and her gaze unwavering, blocking Wolf’s path to the door. Red narrowed her eyes, setting the basket down on the table with a soft thud. She strode forward, positioning herself squarely between Wolf and the door, her fists clenched at her sides and her gaze unwavering. “Then let me prove whose bite is sharper,” she demanded, voice low but steady. “Tell me what you really found in her cottage.” Wolf leans forward, eyes glinting, as he pulls a folded scrap of parchment from his fur and holds it just out of Red’s reach. Wolf leaned forward, a glimmer of mischief flickering in his eyes as he produced a battered scrap of parchment from the depths of his fur. He held it between them, just out of Red’s reach, savoring the moment and the subtle tension it conjured. “What I found,” he confessed, voice low and thick with intrigue, “was a hidden letter tucked beneath her floorboards—sealed with a crest I’ve never seen before.” His gaze lingered on the folded paper, then flicked back to Red, hungry for her reaction, craving connection even as he cloaked his vulnerability in theatrics. Red squares her shoulders and steps between Wolf and the doorway, her eyes cold and unwavering. Red set the basket down with a determined thud, her jaw tight as she strode forward. Without flinching, she squared her shoulders and stepped between Wolf and the doorway, blocking his path. Her eyes, cold and unwavering, never left his. “Show me the letter, Wolf,” she demanded, voice low but unyielding. “Or I’ll tear up every floorboard myself until I find it.” Wolf slowly reaches into his coat, pulling out a worn envelope and holding it just out of Red’s immediate grasp. Wolf’s hand moved with deliberate slowness, slipping into the folds of his battered coat. He drew out a worn envelope, letting it dangle just beyond Red’s reach, his eyes glinting with a challenge he hoped would mask the uncertainty twisting inside him. “Easy, Red,” he said, his voice all velvet and mischief, though a faint tremor betrayed a deeper longing. “I have the letter right here, but if you snatch it without listening, you might miss what it reveals.” The envelope fluttered between his fingers, a fragile promise suspended in the charged space between them. Red crosses her arms, her eyes fixed on Wolf, daring him to deceive her. Red narrowed her eyes, determination flickering in their depths as she set the basket down with a quiet thud. Crossing her arms, she strode forward, placing herself squarely between Wolf and the half-lit room beyond. Her voice was steady, but there was a challenge in it as she fixed him with an unwavering gaze. “Then read it aloud, Wolf—every word, while I watch your every move.” Wolf carefully unfolds the weathered letter, his claws trembling just slightly as he holds it out for Red to see. Wolf tilted his head, a sly glint flickering in his eyes as he traced a claw along the rough bark of an ancient pine. He let out a theatrical sigh, as if the weight of the entire forest pressed upon his narrow shoulders. “Very well, Red,” he murmured, voice edged with both mischief and a hint of vulnerability. With a flourish, he recited, as if delivering a secret meant for the wind alone: “To whomever finds this: beware the shadow that walks between trees, for not all who wear the woods are what they seem.” The words lingered in the hush beneath the branches, half warning, half longing for someone—anyone—to truly hear him. Red crosses her arms, stepping closer so she can see both the letter and the Wolf’s eyes, her stance unwavering. Red narrowed her eyes, setting the basket down with a deliberate thud on the table. Crossing her arms, she stepped closer, her resolve solidifying with every inch.

She wanted to see both the crumpled letter in the Wolf's paws and the flicker in his gaze. "Keep reading, Wolf," she demanded, her voice firm and unwavering. "And don't you dare skip a line—if there's any warning in that letter, I want to hear every detail." Wolf glances up from the letter, locking eyes with Red as the room seems to grow colder. Wolf's paw hesitated over the faded script, his eyes flickering with something unspoken as he looked up from the letter. The room seemed to tighten around them, air growing brittle as Red set her basket on the table with a dull thud and advanced, suspicion sharpening her gaze. Wolf's voice, low and edged with a theatrical gravity, broke the silence.

"The letter goes on," he said, allowing the words to linger in the chill between them, "'Trust only those whose eyes reflect the moon, for the true threat wears a familiar face.'" As he spoke, his gaze never left Red's, as if searching for some sign that she, too, felt the weight of the warning threading through the ink and shadows. RedWolf holds the letter up, watching Red closely for her reaction, his tail twitching with unease. Wolf held the letter aloft, his yellow eyes fixed intently on Red as his tail gave an uneasy twitch. Red narrowed her gaze, lips pressing into a thin line as she set her basket down on the battered table and strode forward, her curiosity flaring despite the edge of worry in her chest. Wolf's voice came low and deliberate, probing the air between them: "So, Red, does your grandmother have any enemies who might want to leave her a message like this?" Red squares her shoulders, stepping between Wolf and the open door, her gaze unwavering and hand resting on the hilt of her dagger. Red's eyes narrowed as she set the basket down on the table with a decisive thud. She squared her shoulders, positioning herself firmly between Wolf and the open door, her gaze unwavering. One hand hovered near the hilt of her dagger—just in case. "My grandmother has lived here longer than any shadow in these woods," she declared, her voice steady with determination. "If someone wants to threaten her, they're threatening me too." The words hung in the quiet cabin, a promise sharpened by the edge of her empathy and resolve. WolfRed steps closer, her eyes fixed on Wolf's paw clutching the letter, daring him to defy her. Red narrowed her eyes, the basket landing on the table with a thud as she closed the distance between them. Her gaze flicked to Wolf's paw, where he clutched the letter as though it were a shield. Wolf felt the heat of her stare, that unyielding resolve she wore like armor, and some small, reckless part of him longed for her to see beyond his cunning veneer. But Red was relentless. She stepped closer, her voice low and unwavering as she demanded, "Hand over that letter, Wolf—because if there's a threat in these woods, I won't rest until I've hunted it down myself." The confrontation escalates as Red presses Wolf to explain himself, leading Wolf to reveal he found a hidden letter beneath the floorboards, warning of a mysterious threat in the woods.

Wolf fidgets with his hands, unable to meet Red's eyes, his voice wavering as he confesses. Wolf hesitated, his usual bravado flickering beneath a sheen of vulnerability. He ran a restless hand through his fur, casting a sideways glance at Red as if searching for courage in her eyes. The words tumbled out—halting, uncertain. "Red, I—I need to tell you something," he began, his voice barely above a whisper.

He stared at the ground, unable to meet her gaze, the drama of confession tightening his shoulders. "The way we met," he said, pausing to gather the shreds of honesty he so rarely allowed himself, "it wasn't really by chance." His breath caught, and the admission sounded almost painful. "I—I planned it. I thought if I could just impress you, maybe you'd see me differently."

Wolf's charm faltered, insecurity bleeding through. He swallowed hard, words rushing out before he could stop them. "I know it was wrong, to manipulate things like that—and I'm sorry. I just..." he trailed off, longing heavy in his eyes. "I didn't know how else to talk to you." Red steps back,

her brows knitted in shock as she tries to process his confession. Red took an involuntary step back, her brows knitting in shock as Wolf's words hung in the air between them. She looked at him, searching his face for any sign that this was all a joke, that he hadn't truly orchestrated their meeting from the start. But his uneasy silence only deepened her disbelief. "You—you set the whole thing up?" The words tumbled from her lips, thick with hurt and astonishment. She shook her head slowly, struggling to reconcile the Wolf she thought she knew with the one standing before her now. "I can't believe you did that, Wolf." Wolf's voice trembles as he looks at Red, shame written across his face. Wolf's voice trembled as he finally looked at Red, shame etched deep across his face. He stammered, searching for words, then let them spill out—confession heavy and raw. It was messed up, he admitted, but the thought of her never noticing him had terrified him more than anything. He couldn't help it; she haunted his mind, impossible to forget. Every scheme, every clever plan he'd crafted had been nothing more than desperate attempts to catch her attention, to close the distance between them. Red's voice trembles between anger and hurt, her hands clenching at her sides as she looks away from him. Red's voice trembled, caught somewhere between anger and hurt, as she forced herself to look away from him, her hands clenched tight at her sides. The sting of his confession pressed against her chest, and she drew a shaky breath before speaking, her words laced with wounded disbelief. "You could've just talked to me, Wolf," she managed, her gaze fixed on the shadows at her feet. "Did you really think I wouldn't have cared if you'd just been honest?" Wolf lowers his gaze, wringing his hands as Red's eyes search his face for truth. Wolf's gaze fell to the forest floor, unable to meet Red's searching eyes. His hands twisted together, knuckles whitening as he wrestled with words that stuck in his throat. When he finally spoke, his voice was barely more than a whisper, heavy with the weight of what he'd kept hidden. He confessed, stammering, "I was scared... scared that if I showed you the real me, you'd just walk away without a second thought." The admission trembled in the space between them, raw and vulnerable, as if Wolf feared that even now, the truth could drive her from his side. Red takes a step back, her eyes searching Wolf's face for any trace of honesty, hurt flickering across her features. Red took a step back, her boots crunching softly in the undergrowth as she studied Wolf's face, searching for any flicker of honesty amid the tangled emotions. Hurt flashed across her features, raw and unguarded. Maybe she would have been surprised, she thought, but at least that surprise would have been real. Now, uncertainty gnawed at the edges of her trust—she wasn't sure she could believe in what they'd shared anymore. Wolf looks down, voice trembling, unable to meet Red's eyes as the weight of his confession settles between them. Wolf's gaze dropped to the forest floor, the shadows hiding the tremor in his hands but not the one in his voice. He couldn't bring himself to meet Red's eyes—not now, not after the words he knew he had to say. When he finally spoke, his confession slipped out in a fragile whisper, thick with regret. "I understand if you hate me, Red," he managed, each syllable weighted with longing and fear. "But I needed you to know the truth, even if it ruins everything." The words seemed to hang in the air between them, heavy as the secret he'd carried alone for so long. Red demands he read the letter aloud.

Grandmother coughs to mask a chuckle, then waves Red closer with a mischievous twinkle in her eye. A raspy cough rattled Grandmother's chest, though the glimmer in her eye betrayed more amusement than illness. She stifled a chuckle behind her hand, then beckoned Red closer with a sly wave, her lips curling in a half-smile. "He does have a flair for drama, doesn't he, dear?" she murmured, her voice low and teasing. The firelight danced across her lined face as she leaned in, eyes sparkling with mischief. "I suppose some wolves simply can't help being the center of attention." Red steps closer to Grandmother, her tone light and conspiratorial. Red grinned, the familiar warmth of Grandmother's teasing settling comfortably between them. Stepping closer, she

rolled her eyes in mock exasperation—a gesture meant more for Grandmother’s amusement than her own. “Honestly,” she murmured, her voice dropping to a playful whisper, “I think he’d put on a show just for the squirrels if they’d watch.” The words carried a fondness that lingered in the air, mingling with the scent of fresh bread and the gentle hush of the cottage. GrandmotherShe pats the quilt beside her, inviting Red to sit and share the joke. Grandmother suppressed a cough, but the glint in her eye betrayed the humor she couldn’t quite contain. With a gentle pat on the patchwork quilt beside her, she beckoned Red to settle in close and share the moment. “He does have a flair for drama,” she teased, waving Red closer. “Oh, and he’d demand applause too,” she added, her tone dry with amusement, “never mind if it’s just acorns tapping together.” The tense interrogation shifts when Wolf confesses his orchestration of their meeting, admitting he manipulated events to impress Red.

Red is hurt by his dishonesty, but Grandmother lightens the mood with witty remarks about Wolf’s flair for drama.

The chapter ends with Red, still wary but curious, standing between Wolf and Grandmother, the air now filled with a mix of tension, new mysteries, and reluctant camaraderie.

As the uneasy alliance settles into the cottage, uncertainty lingers between the three. Red’s trust in Wolf remains fragile, but Grandmother’s playful forgiveness hints at the possibility of cooperation. Outside, a distant howl pierces the quiet, reminding them that the forest holds dangers beyond their walls. With new suspicions and bonds forming, the group is soon thrust into an unexpected crisis—one that will test Wolf’s loyalty and force him to make a perilous choice for Red’s sake.

Chapter 6: Wolf Risks Himself to Protect Red

Red grips the letter in her pocket, glancing between Wolf and the approaching Hunter.

Hearing the Hunter call out, ‘Who’s there?’

’ Red stands, brushing wet leaves from her cloak, and steps forward to block the Hunter’s line of sight.

Wolf freezes, ears flat, body pressed low against the tree.

Driven by loyalty and the desire to protect Wolf, Red speaks quickly, ‘Just me, sir.

I was gathering herbs for my grandmother.

’ The Hunter narrows his eyes, scanning the thicket.

He steps closer, boots sinking into mud, but Red shifts, deliberately coughing and drawing his attention.

Wolf, recognizing Red’s risk, edges back, tail low, ready to flee if needed.

The Hunter inspects the ground, then relents, nodding at Red’s explanation.

As he moves off, Red turns, beckoning Wolf to follow, both vanishing deeper into the woods, their alliance solidified by the shared danger.

Together, Red and Wolf disappeared beneath the sheltering trees, leaving behind the shadows of fear and stepping into the quiet promise of their newfound trust.