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Chapter 5: The Wolf’s Deception

Red approaches the mossy cottage, alert and resolute, her basket in hand and her intentions clear: to warn Grandmother of possible danger.

Elias emerges from the trees, vigilant and protective, confronting Red and the mysterious Wolf with a firm stance.

The Wolf, cloaked in the guise of a traveler, circles warily, making his presence and intentions known not with threats but with negotiation;

he claims he seeks something promised to him, not violence.

Grandmother, courageous and practical, asserts control over her home, demanding truth and transparency from each visitor before allowing anyone inside.

Red insists that no one enters until all intentions are honestly spoken, standing guard with Grandmother.

Elias voices his suspicion of the Wolf, but offers the chance for him to swear his intentions.

The Wolf accepts, swearing by Grandmother’s hearth that he seeks only what was bargained, not bloodshed, but warns that hunger can drive desperation.

Red glances over her shoulder, voice low but steady, her eyes flickering between the stranger and the dark patch of woods where the Wolf’s gaze glints. Her fingers tighten around the basket handle, every muscle tensed, caught between distrust and fear. Red paused, her grip tightening around the basket as she glanced over her shoulder. The stranger lingered close, intent and unreadable, while somewhere in the tangled shadows, the Wolf’s eyes flashed with hidden purpose. Cautious but unwilling to betray her fear, Red kept her voice low and steady as she addressed the stranger. She needed answers before she took another step. She wasn’t certain what this newcomer wanted from her, and made it clear she’d rather understand his purpose before going any farther. Her gaze flickered pointedly toward the glinting eyes in the woods. If he intended to follow her, she

warned, he should remember—he wasn't the only one watching. Grandmother invites each to step forward and prove themselves, refusing to let fear or secrecy govern her threshold.

Ultimately, all parties agree to face one another honestly in the light, prepared to judge who is friend and who is foe, prioritizing truth and safety above distrust and violence.

Grandmother squints into the swirling mist, her knuckles whitening around the spoon's worn handle as she pushes the door open a little farther, listening for any answer in the hush. Grandmother squinted into the swirling mist, her knuckles whitening around the worn handle of her spoon as she nudged the door open a bit farther. The hush outside pressed in, thick and expectant, and she called out, her voice steady but gentle, "Is anyone out there?" Her gaze swept the gloom, sharp and searching despite her years. "It's just me now—don't you go sneaking about," she warned softly, holding the battered spoon aloft, a quiet strength in her posture. After all, this old spoon had seen more than its share of porridge, and she meant for any visitor, human or otherwise, to know it. GrandmotherShe leans forward, squinting into the swirling mist, her knuckles whitening around the spoon's worn handle. Grandmother leaned forward, squinting into the swirling mist beyond her threshold, her knuckles whitening around the spoon's worn handle. The fog pressed thick and silent against the cottage door as she cracked it open, peering into the gloom with a patient, weathered gaze. "This fog's no friend," she said softly, her voice carrying a gentle warning into the haze. "If you're lingering, best show yourself before supper gets cold." —————

As calm settles over the cottage and the last echoes of danger fade into the mist, the small family gathers to catch their breath, hearts pounding but safe at last. Yet as they tend to Grandmother and piece together the remnants of their interrupted day, a new uncertainty stirs—one that arrives quietly, tucked in the folds of an unexpected letter addressed to Red. The ordeal with the wolf now behind them, another chapter begins, carrying Red toward an invitation that promises to change the course of her journey once more.

Chapter 1: Red Receives the Invitation

Red sat at the worn wooden table, tracing the grain with her fingertip as her mother sliced warm bread, steam curling above each slice.

Her mother, brow furrowed, pressed a sealed envelope into Red's hands, emphasizing the urgency: the envelope must reach Grandmother before nightfall.

Red's MotherShe squeezes Red's hands around the envelope, her eyes searching Red's face for reassurance, worry flickering beneath her stern tone. Red's mother pressed the sealed envelope into her daughter's hands, her grip firm but gentle. Her brow remained furrowed, and she searched Red's face for reassurance, worry flickering beneath her stern tone. "This must reach your grandmother before nightfall," she insisted, her voice low and urgent. "She's counting on you."

She squeezed Red's fingers tighter around the envelope, as if hoping the pressure would impart her caution. "The woods are unpredictable," she continued, unable to hide her concern. "Stay on the main path, don't linger." Her gaze softened, love and anxiety mingling in her eyes. "I trust you, darling—but promise me you'll be careful." Red clutches the envelope tightly, glancing once at her mother before stepping toward the forest path, her heart pounding with a mix of determination and worry. Red clutched the envelope tightly, feeling the crisp edges press into her palm as her mother's worried eyes lingered on her. Determined to reassure her, she offered a quick, earnest

promise, her voice steady despite the flutter of nerves beneath her ribs: “I promise, Mama—I’ll go straight there and back, and I won’t talk to anyone along the way.” With one last look at her mother, Red drew in a breath, squared her shoulders, and stepped toward the forest path, the weight of responsibility and love urging her forward even as uncertainty flickered at the edge of her thoughts. She stressed the importance of the journey, warning Red to stay on the main path and not to linger or talk to strangers.

Red gently turns the sealed letter in her hands, eyes shifting from the ornate symbol to her mother’s face, searching for answers. Red turned the small envelope over in her hands, her thumb lingering on the wax seal pressed into its center. It looked official—important, even. She glanced up at her mother, curiosity burning brighter than ever. “This wax seal,” she said, her voice gentle but insistent, “it looks important.” Red hesitated for a moment, searching her mother’s face for clues. “Where exactly are we going on this journey?” she asked quietly, her quick mind already racing through possibilities. A pang of concern tugged at her. “Is there something I should know before we leave?” Red wanted to be ready, whatever awaited them beyond the edge of the familiar woods.

Red’s MotherShe gently places her hand over Red’s, her eyes lingering on the seal as her voice softens with concern. Red’s mother set her hand gently atop Red’s, her thumb brushing over the wax seal as if she could smooth away the weight it carried. Her gaze lingered on the deep crimson symbol, and when she spoke, her voice was low, threaded with caution and care. The seal, she explained, held both a warning and a promise. Their journey would lead them through the old woods to Grandmama’s cottage, but there were paths Red must avoid and truths her mother hadn’t yet shared. The concern in her eyes made it clear—she would do anything to keep her daughter safe, even if it meant shielding her from secrets for a little longer. Red leans in closer, her hand tightening around the sealed letter, her expression both anxious and eager for answers. Red leaned in closer, her fingers tightening around the sealed letter as she studied the intricate wax emblem. Curiosity flickered in her eyes, mingled with a hint of anxiety. She swallowed, voice quiet but urgent, “What kind of truths are these, Mother?” The question tumbled out before she could stop herself, driven by a need to understand. Was there danger lurking ahead, or was there something about Grandmama she had never been told? The possibilities pressed at her chest, eager and fearful all at once, as she waited for her mother’s answer. Red’s Mother gently folds the letter, her eyes lingering on the seal as she reaches for Red’s hand. Red’s mother folded the letter with deliberate care, her fingers pressing gently over the wax seal as if sealing her worries inside it. Her gaze lingered on that small stamp, her brow creased with the weight of unspoken fears. She reached for Red’s hand, holding it firmly but tenderly, and her voice softened, edged with caution. “Some dangers are clear as day, Red, but others hide behind kindness and secrets.” Her thumb brushed over Red’s knuckles, a silent plea for her daughter to understand. “Grandmama’s house holds both, and you must listen closely to what isn’t said.” Red leans forward, her voice hushed, fingers tracing the edge of the wax seal as her eyes search her mother’s face for answers. Red leaned forward, her breath barely stirring the silence between them. Her fingers traced the edge of the wax seal, feeling its cool ridges as if it might yield some secret. Curiosity flickered in her eyes, but beneath it was a steadier flame—a need to understand, to protect. “I’ll listen, Mother,” she said quietly, her gaze searching her mother’s face for any sign of what lay unspoken. “But please—what should I watch for in those woods? And what aren’t you telling me about Grandmama?” Red’s Mother gently presses the wax seal into Red’s palm, her gaze lingering on the edge of the darkening woods. Red’s mother pressed the wax seal gently into her daughter’s palm, her fingers lingering a moment longer than necessary. Her gaze drifted toward the shadowed line where the trees thickened, worry etched into the corners of her eyes. “You must watch for shadows that whisper, and for eyes that linger

too long, Red,” she said quietly, her voice low and earnest. “Grandmama’s house is a haven, yes, but it’s also a place where old debts and promises wait to be claimed.” The words hovered between them, heavy and protective, as she tucked a stray curl behind Red’s ear and tried to smile, despite the gathering dusk. Red leans in, gripping the wax-sealed letter tighter, her voice hushed with both fear and determination. Red leaned in, her fingers tightening around the wax-sealed letter as if its secrets might slip away. The flicker of curiosity in her eyes was shadowed by worry. Her voice, barely louder than a whisper but edged with resolve, reached her mother. “If there are debts and promises waiting,” she asked, determination mingling with fear, “how will I know who to trust when I get there?” Red’s Mother gently places her hand on Red’s shoulder, her gaze softening as she speaks. Red’s mother moved closer, her hand settling gently on Red’s shoulder—steady, reassuring, but not without the weight of worry. The flicker of curiosity in Red’s eyes didn’t escape her notice. Softening her gaze, she watched her daughter study the wax seal, and her voice came low and careful, shaped by years of caution. She reminded Red that trust was never earned by words or pleasant smiles alone. It was found in subtle moments—a trembling hand reaching out, a fleeting truth reflected in Grandmama’s eyes. “Let your heart guide you through those truths,” she said, her touch lingering, her tone both protective and practical, as if hoping her daughter would carry those words like a lantern through the shadowed woods. Red promised to follow these instructions.

Red’s MotherShe moves closer to the window, her voice firm but gentle, one hand pointing toward the dark cluster of trees beyond the garden. Her eyes search Red’s face, waiting for her daughter’s reply. Red’s mother stepped closer to the window, her silhouette framed by the pale morning light. With a firm but gentle touch, she pointed toward the dark cluster of trees that loomed just beyond the garden’s edge. “Red, listen to me,” she said, her voice steady, every word weighted with concern. “Stay on the path—don’t wander into the woods, no matter what.” Her gaze lingered on her daughter’s face, searching for understanding, for a promise. “There are things out there you don’t understand, and not everyone you meet is kind.” She hesitated only a moment, then added, “Promise me you’ll keep to the path and come straight back home.” Red nods solemnly, glancing toward the dark trees with a mixture of curiosity and apprehension. Red nodded solemnly, her gaze drifting toward the shadowed line of trees at the forest’s edge. Curiosity flickered in her eyes, tempered by a quiet apprehension that tightened in her chest. She heard her mother’s warning, firm and insistent, as the older woman pointed to the darkness beyond the window. Pressing her lips together, Red drew in a steadying breath and said, her voice soft but unwavering, “I promise, Mother—I won’t stray from the path, no matter what I see or hear.” However, Red’s curiosity led her to question the significance of the wax seal and whether there was more to the journey than delivering a message.

Her mother, unusually tense, alluded to secrets and past debts connected to Grandmother’s house, warning Red to be wary of hidden dangers and to trust her instincts above appearances.

The conversation took on a more mysterious and foreboding tone, with Red’s mother hinting at old promises and dangers that were not previously discussed.

Red, driven by concern for her grandmother as well as a desire to uncover the truth behind her mother’s warnings, prepared to depart, her resolve deepened by the new layers of mystery.

The kitchen filled with the sound of Red’s boots scuffing across the stone floor as she set out, more alert and cautious than before.

The morning air pressed cool against Red's cheeks as she stepped beyond the threshold, basket in hand, the weight of her mother's warnings echoing in her thoughts. Each step away from the safety of home drew her closer to the shadowed edge of the forest, where the familiar path awaited, and the unknown seemed to rustle just beyond the trees. As Red approached the winding entrance to the woods, her senses sharpened, attuned to every whisper and movement, knowing that the journey ahead would soon test both her courage and curiosity.

Chapter 2: Encounter at the Forest Path

Red steps carefully over twisted roots, her basket swinging at her side, scanning the underbrush for wildflowers to bring to her grandmother.

She pauses, bending to pick a cluster of violets, when a faint snapping of twigs makes her straighten and grip her cloak tighter.

Elias emerges from behind a thick trunk, axe slung over his shoulder, eyes narrowed in cautious appraisal.

He halts a few paces away, planting his boots firmly, his voice low and steady as he calls out, warning her about the dangers in the woods and questioning her presence.

Elias halts a few paces away, boots planted firmly in the soft earth. His eyes scan the gloom beyond her, wary but unwavering, as he waits for her reply. Boots firmly planted in the soft earth, Elias halted a few paces away, his silhouette tense against the tangle of trees. His gaze swept the shadowed undergrowth beyond her, measuring every flicker of movement with practiced caution. "Not safe to wander here alone," he warned, voice kept low and steady, betraying neither fear nor invitation. The woodsman's eyes lingered on the restless gloom, as if expecting trouble to emerge at any moment. "Shadows move quick in these woods, and not all of 'em are friendly." He studied her, wary but unwavering, trying to determine whether she was here by accident or intent. "You looking for trouble, or just lost your way?" Elias expresses concern that the wolf may be closer than he thought and says he needs to warn others, but he still offers to accompany Red.

Elias glances nervously at the edge of the woods, his hand tightening around the handle of his lantern as he considers his next move. Elias's gaze flickered nervously toward the shadowy line where the woods met the fading light, his grip tightening around the worn handle of his lantern. The rumors had been spreading for days—whispers of a wolf moving closer, of livestock found torn and half-eaten at the edge of the village. He had dismissed them at first, certain that such a beast would never stray so near. But now, with the uneasy hush settling over the forest and the tracks he'd found not an hour earlier, doubt gnawed at him. If the wolf truly was this close, he couldn't afford to hesitate. The thought pressed on him with growing urgency: he needed to warn the others before nightfall. Red, undeterred and determined, insists she must reach her grandmother and expresses guilt over past lateness.

Red stands tall, her eyes unwavering, her grip tightening on the small basket she carries as she prepares to set off down the forest path. Red stood tall at the edge of the winding forest path, her grip tightening around the handle of the small basket she carried. Determination flickered in her eyes as she lifted her chin, undaunted by the shadows beneath the ancient trees. "I'm going to my grandmother's cottage," she said, her voice steady and sure, every word ringing with quiet resolve. Grandmother was waiting for her, and Red knew, with a fierce certainty, that nothing

would stop her from making sure her loved one was safe. The promise of danger in the woods was not enough to turn her back; compassion and courage guided her steps as she set off beneath the emerald canopy. She accepts Elias's offer, and as they continue, Elias gestures toward fresh paw prints in the mud, pointing out signs Red missed.

Red checks their watch nervously, quickens their pace down the dimly lit hallway. Red glanced anxiously at her watch, the faint glow barely illuminating the trembling hands. She quickened her pace down the dimly lit hallway, boots echoing on the worn floorboards. Her grandmother was expecting her—she couldn't afford to be late again. Last time, the old woman had waited for hours, her patience wearing thin. This time Red owed her more than just another apology, and the weight of that promise pressed her onward, determination sharpening her every step. Red listens intently, her curiosity piqued, asking about the forest, the wolf, and the truth behind the stories.

The two move cautiously forward, leaves crunching underfoot, setting the stage for a wary alliance.

Elias offers a warm, reassuring smile, stepping beside her without crowding, his posture open and protective, signaling genuine concern rather than control. Elias offered her a warm, reassuring smile as he stepped to her side, careful not to crowd her. His posture remained open, protective but never imposing—he wanted her to feel safe, not trapped. “If you're heading through the woods,” he said gently, “you ought to let me walk with you for a while.” There was nothing pushy in his tone, only a quiet concern born of experience.

He glanced toward the shadowed tree line, eyes narrowing as if searching for something only he could see. “I know the tracks of the wolf,” he continued, voice low and steady. “Where he hunts, where he lingers. It's easy to miss the signs if you don't know what to look for.” He hesitated, searching her face for understanding. “I'd hate for you to run into trouble alone.”

Elias shifted his weight, making it clear he wouldn't press if she refused. “I'm not trying to intrude,” he added, honest as ever. “I just want to make sure you're safe.” His gaze was unwavering. “Trust me; I've lived out here long enough to spot danger before it finds us.”

As Red and Elias exchanged a knowing glance, the forest seemed to shift around them, shadows lengthening with the promise of both adventure and peril. With their path chosen and the stakes quietly raised, they pressed on together, unaware of how swiftly their journey would turn from a leisurely stroll into a desperate race against time. The distant call of a raven echoed through the trees, signaling that every step now carried them closer to the unknown awaiting at Grandmother's cottage.

Chapter 4: Race to Grandmother's Cottage

Red clutched the basket tighter, her boots splashing through puddles as she hurried along the winding path, eyes scanning for movement between the trees.

Elias jogged beside her, axe gripped in one hand, pausing every few yards to listen for rustling in the undergrowth.

As a low growl echoed from deeper within the woods, Elias motioned for Red to stay behind him, cautioning her to avoid drawing the wolf's attention.

Elias scans the shadowy trees, placing himself protectively between Red and the source of the growl, his hand subtly reaching for the hilt of his knife as he crouches low, signaling for Red to do the same. Elias's eyes narrowed as the low growl reverberated through the trees, a chilling undertone threading the twilight air. Instinctively, he shifted, placing himself squarely between Red and the shifting shadows where the sound had come from. One hand hovered near the hilt of his knife, the other motioning for Red to crouch low and keep close. "Did you hear that?" he murmured, his voice barely louder than the wind. "Something's out there—keep behind me, Red. We can't risk drawing its attention." Every muscle in his body was taut, senses stretched thin, as he prepared for whatever might emerge from the gloom. RedShe scanned the darkening trees, eyes wide, heart thudding in her chest, ready to follow his lead. Red nodded, her throat tight as she swallowed back the tremor in her chest. Instinctively, her grip tightened around the worn handle of her axe—her lifeline—while she edged closer to Elias, drawing courage from his steady presence. The low growl reverberated once more from the depths of the woods, and though her heart pounded, Red pressed forward, determined to follow his lead. EliasHe shifted his stance protectively, scanning the shadowy underbrush for any sign of movement. Elias drew a steady breath, his posture shifting instinctively to shield Red as the low growl reverberated through the trees. Eyes narrowed, he swept his gaze across the tangled underbrush, searching for the slightest hint of movement. Without turning, he raised a hand—a silent signal for caution—and his voice dropped to a barely audible whisper, edged with quiet authority. "No sudden moves," he warned, the words blending into the hush of the forest. "If it senses we're afraid, it'll come closer." The tension in his stance made it clear: every second counted, and every action had to be measured. RedShe glanced up at Elias, jaw set, the tremor in her voice betraying her nerves even as she tried to steady her grip on the axe. Red glanced up at Elias, her jaw set in stubborn determination, though a faint tremor in her voice betrayed her nerves as she tried to steady her grip on the axe. The low growl from deeper in the woods pulsed through her chest, but she refused to let fear root her to the spot. "I'm not afraid," she whispered, forcing conviction into the words even as her heart hammered. "Just tell me when to run or when to fight." Red nodded, steeling herself and gripping her own axe, ready to act if necessary.

Elias crouches low, scanning the underbrush intently for any sign of movement, hand instinctively moving to rest on his weapon. Elias crouched low, his eyes narrowing as he scanned the tangled underbrush for any flicker of movement. The wolf's scent hit him more sharply here, pungent and unmistakable—far fresher than it had been just minutes before. Every instinct told him the creature couldn't be far ahead now. His hand moved of its own accord, settling over the worn grip of his weapon. He forced himself to breathe evenly, muscles coiled and ready, knowing he needed to stay alert. In the wilderness, even a single misstep could cost dearly, and Elias was not one for carelessness—not with the wolf this close. Elias slows his pace, scanning the shadows and gripping his weapon tighter as he follows the trail. Elias slowed his pace, every instinct alert as he moved through the deepening gloom. Shadows pooled beneath the tangled undergrowth, and he gripped his weapon tighter, the familiar weight a comfort against the unknown. The wolf's scent was fresher here, sharp and unmistakable—a warning as much as a trail. He kept his steps careful and silent, mind racing. If the wolf was anywhere nearby, it would be watching him already. Elias reminded himself, with grim resolve, to move quietly and keep his weapon ready; out here, caution was survival. Elias reminded her not to make sudden moves, noting that fear might attract the wolf.

Red whispered her resolve, assuring Elias of her readiness to fight or flee at his signal.

The wolf's scent grew stronger, making Elias even more alert.

He moved quietly, weapon at the ready, convinced the wolf could be watching them.

Together, with heightened caution and determination, Red and Elias pressed forward, both bracing for an imminent encounter as they searched for any sign of Grandmother's cottage.

As Red and Elias navigated the final stretch toward Grandmother's cottage, the air thickened with anticipation and dread. Every step brought them closer not only to their destination but also to the wolf's lurking presence. Just as the shadows deepened and the cottage appeared through the trees, an unexpected voice cut through the silence—forcing both Red and Elias to confront the wolf's cunning, and the choices it would soon demand.

Chapter 3: Wolf's Tempting Proposal

Red and Elias walk together along the forest path toward Grandmother's cottage.

Red pauses to admire wildflowers while Elias remains alert, scanning the undergrowth.

The Wolf appears, disguised as a weary traveler, and greets them with a courteous nod, asking about their destination.

Elias steps protectively between Red and the Wolf.

The Wolf inclines his head politely, keeping a respectful distance, eyes watchful but not overtly threatening. He gestures subtly toward the winding trail that leads to the cottage, his tone charming yet tinged with curiosity. The Wolf inclined his head with practiced politeness, maintaining a careful distance as his keen eyes traced their every movement—alert, but never quite crossing into menace. With a subtle, inviting gesture toward the winding trail that vanished into the woods, he let a charming note slip into his voice, curiosity glinting beneath the surface. “Good afternoon,” he said smoothly, almost as if sharing a private jest. “I couldn’t help but notice you walking this way—headed for the cottage, I presume? It’s rare to see travelers on this path.” His gaze lingered, warm and inquisitive. “May I ask your purpose?” RedShe tightened her grip on the basket, watching the Wolf warily for any sign of ulterior motives. Red tightened her grip on the basket, her knuckles whitening as she watched the Wolf with wary eyes, searching his face for any hint of deception. When he greeted them with a courteous nod and inquired, in that smooth voice of his, whether they were headed toward the cottage, Red hesitated, glancing quickly at Elias for reassurance. Then, with a mixture of caution and polite resolve, she answered, “We’re just visiting family—my grandmother lives in the cottage up ahead.” EliasHe met the Wolf’s gaze steadily, subtly positioning himself a half-step closer to Red. Elias met the Wolf’s gaze without flinching, his posture subtly shifting as he placed himself a half-step nearer to Red. Though his voice remained smooth, there was a measured caution behind each word as he replied to the inquiry. “Just making sure Red gets there safely—these woods can be unpredictable.” Even as he spoke, his eyes never left the Wolf, protective resolve evident in every line of his stance. The WolfHe steps slightly to the side, gesturing toward the path as if inviting them to continue, but his gaze lingers on Red, watchful and curious. The Wolf stepped smoothly to the side, his gesture polite and inviting, as though he were merely another traveler wishing them well on their way. Yet his eyes never left Red, their gleam betraying a keener interest than his courteous nod suggested. His smile widened,

lips curling with practiced charm as he remarked, “How fortunate your grandmother is to receive visitors—these woods hold many stories, and not all are told by friendly faces.” The words hung in the quiet air, the Wolf’s gaze lingering on Red with a watchful curiosity that felt almost predatory beneath the surface of his genteel tone. RedShe subtly stepped closer to Elias, her gaze steady on the Wolf, signaling both caution and resolve. Red subtly stepped closer to Elias, her grip tightening around her basket as the Wolf’s courteous nod hung in the air. She kept her gaze steady, projecting caution yet refusing to show fear. “We appreciate the warning,” she said, her voice calm but firm, “but we know these woods well enough not to get lost in stories—or in trouble.” The words carried both reassurance and resolve, her compassion for Elias clear even as she refused to be swayed by the Wolf’s smooth manner. The WolfHe stepped aside from the path, a gesture both inviting and unobtrusive, his gaze lingering on Red and Elias as he awaited their response. The Wolf stepped aside from the narrow path, his movement graceful, almost deferential, as if extending an unspoken invitation. His eyes, sharp and appraising beneath the brim of his traveler’s hat, lingered on Red and Elias with a glimmer of amusement. With a courteous nod, he let his voice slip into a velvet-soft cadence. Wisdom and caution serve you well, he remarked, each word polished and reassuring. Perhaps, he suggested, he might accompany them a short way—after all, safety in numbers is never unwelcome. The offer hung in the air, clothed in civility, but there was a subtle insistence beneath his charm, a wolfish patience as he awaited their reply. Red hesitantly explains they are visiting family—her grandmother.

The Wolf offers a bundle of herbs as a gift for Grandmother, claiming their health benefits.

Red trails her fingertips along the rough birch bark, glancing around with wide, curious eyes. Her voice is soft, a hint of wonder and nervousness in its tone. Red tightened the ribbon of her hood, her gaze flitting between the sun-dappled path and the shadowed woods ahead. She hesitated only a moment before stepping forward, her heart steady despite the stories she’d heard. “I’m just on my way to see my grandmother,” she explained to the curious squirrel perched on a low branch, its bushy tail twitching. Her voice was gentle, but determination shone in her eyes. “She lives on the other side of the forest.” The words seemed to propel her feet onward, each step fueled by both love and a spark of adventure, as she ventured deeper into the thicket, keenly aware of the unknown but unwilling to let fear slow her journey. Red is uncertain and seeks Elias’s guidance.

Instead of outright rejecting the herbs, Elias suggests examining them together and proposes testing a small amount for safety, demonstrating his cautious nature but also a willingness to learn.

Red, reassured by Elias, accepts a single leaf and inspects it, still anxious.

Red shifts her weight from foot to foot, her eyes flickering anxiously between Elias and the Wolf, fingers hovering uncertainly above the bundle. Red hesitated, her fingers brushing the edge of the bundle Elias had offered her. The object felt oddly heavy in her hands, as if it carried a secret weight. She glanced up at him, curiosity flickering in her eyes, but uncertainty lingered in her voice as she quietly asked, “Elias, do you really think I should take this? It just—feels strange.” Her words hung in the air, woven with concern for her grandmother and a brave determination to do what was needed, even if the path ahead was unfamiliar. Elias steps slightly closer to Red, signaling quiet encouragement, while the Wolf leans in eagerly, eyes gleaming with anticipation. Elias stepped a little closer, his presence a quiet shield between Red and the eager glint in the Wolf’s eyes. He met Red’s uncertain glance with a steady, reassuring gaze, offering her a gentle nod. “If you trust your instincts, Red,” he murmured, his voice low but unwavering, “I’ll support your choice—just remember, sometimes what feels strange can help us grow.” The Wolf leaned in,

voice low and earnest, pressing the bundle into Red's hands as his amber eyes searched her face for a flicker of trust. The Wolf leaned in, his voice dropping to a low, earnest rumble as he pressed the bundle into Red's uncertain hands. His amber eyes, sharp and hungry, searched her face for the smallest flicker of trust. "Please, Red—herbs like these kept my whole family strong through the harshest winters; I'd never steer you wrong." The words curled around her, warm and persuasive, as his grip on the bundle tightened just enough to make refusal seem foolish. RedShe shifted her weight, torn between caution and the hope of newfound strength. Red bit her lip, uncertainty flickering in her eyes as she shifted her weight from one foot to the other. The bundle, pressed insistently toward her by the Wolf, seemed to thrum with silent urgency. Her fingers hovered above it, trembling with hesitation, and she glanced quickly at Elias, searching for some sign of reassurance or guidance. But the decision waited for her alone—caught between the instinct to draw back and the hope that accepting this burden might reveal a hidden strength she hadn't yet discovered. EliasHe reached out a hand, inviting Red to bring the bundle closer so they could examine it side by side. Elias extended a calloused hand, palm open in a silent offer to share the burden of Red's uncertainty. Sensing her hesitation as she glanced in his direction, he shifted closer, his presence steady and intent. There was a quiet reassurance in his voice, tempered by the caution of someone who trusted little and observed much. "If you're unsure," he said softly, coaxing rather than commanding, "we can look at the herbs together—no harm in learning more before you decide." The wolf's eyes glittered with impatience, but Elias kept his gaze on Red, urging her to bring the bundle closer so they could examine its contents side by side. RedShe drew the bundle closer but did not yet unwrap it, her eyes searching Elias's face for reassurance while the Wolf watched expectantly. Red's fingers tightened around the bundle, its coarse cloth pressing into her palms. She hesitated, her gaze flickering to Elias, searching his eyes for some silent assurance. The Wolf loomed closer, its expectant stare making her heart flutter with unease. Swallowing, Red nodded slowly, her voice barely more than a whisper as she said she'd look together with Elias—maybe then she'd feel better about it. Even as she spoke, the words seemed to steady her, and with a final glance at Elias, she drew a trembling breath and began to unwrap the bundle. The Wolf carefully unwrapped a corner of the bundle, holding it out invitingly for Red and Elias to inspect, his amber eyes keen and persuasive. The Wolf's clawed fingers worked deftly, peeling back the coarse cloth to reveal the bundle's contents. He extended it just enough for Red and Elias to peer inside, a hint of a smile playing at the edges of his mouth. His amber eyes, sharp and persuasive, lingered on Red, drawing her closer with their magnetic promise. "Of course," he murmured, voice smooth as velvet, "let me show you the leaves up close." He leaned in, the bundle hovering invitingly between them, and continued, "See how vibrant they are; their scent alone can clear a weary head."

Red hesitated, uncertain, her gaze flickering to Elias for reassurance. But the Wolf pressed the bundle closer, his posture insistent yet impossibly polite, making it nearly impossible to refuse. The subtle shift in his demeanor was calculated—just enough charm to mask the hunger beneath. Red hesitated, her hand trembling as she held the bundle closer to Elias, seeking reassurance in his steady presence. Red hesitated, her fingers curling tighter around the bundle as the Wolf pressed it insistently into her arms. She brought it closer, inhaling the earthy aroma that rose from within, but uncertainty lingered in her eyes. Glancing toward Elias, seeking the steady comfort of his presence, she murmured, almost to herself, that the contents did indeed smell fresh—yet her voice betrayed her concern as she asked if he was certain they were safe for her. The Wolf met Red's gaze, earnest and unwavering, gently nudging the bundle toward her open hands. The Wolf met Red's gaze, eyes earnest beneath the shadow of his traveler's cloak as he nudged the bundle

softly toward her palms. “Absolutely, Red—I’ve used these same herbs myself,” he assured, his voice velvet-smooth, persuasive as a lullaby. He pressed the bundle closer, the gesture gentle yet insistent, as if to coax away her hesitation. “I promise, nothing but good has ever come from them.” EliasHe offered Red an encouraging smile, his hand steadying hers as she hesitated over the bundle. Elias studied the Wolf’s earnest expression, his eyes narrowing ever so slightly as he weighed the situation. Sensing Red’s hesitation, he offered her an encouraging smile and steadied her trembling hand over the bundle. “Let’s just try a small bit first,” he suggested quietly, his voice low and reassuring. “Caution and trust can go hand in hand.” His words were gentle, but there was a firmness in them—an insistence that safety need not be sacrificed for kindness, especially with the Wolf watching so closely. RedHer breath quickened, caught between the Wolf’s eager encouragement and Elias’s steady, watchful gaze. Red’s breath quickened, her fingers trembling as she hovered over the small bundle the Wolf offered. She glanced at Elias, searching his steady eyes for a flicker of reassurance, but the Wolf pressed the single leaf insistently toward her. Reluctantly, Red accepted it, the cool edge crinkling between her uncertain fingers. With a final, anxious look at Elias—a silent plea for guidance—she brought the leaf closer to her lips, her heart pounding with equal parts fear and resolve. The Wolf presses the herbs’ virtues, but ultimately Elias politely declines the further offer, stating they can gather herbs themselves.

Elias steps back with a gentle nod, hands folded, signaling respectful resolve. Elias stepped back, folding his hands with a gentle nod that spoke of both gratitude and finality. His eyes, watchful and steady, lingered on the offer for a moment before he replied in his low, careful voice. “Thank you for your offer, truly. But I believe we can manage to gather the herbs ourselves.” There was no rudeness in his words—only a quiet insistence and the protective caution of a man used to fending for himself in the wild. “Your help is appreciated, though—we’ll be all right from here.” With that, Elias’s stance made it clear the conversation was at its natural end, his measured politeness a shield as much as a courtesy. The Wolf inclines his head, a faint smile touching his lips before he steps back, giving Elias and his companions space. The Wolf inclined his head, a faint, unreadable smile curving his lips as he regarded Elias and the wary circle of companions behind him. With a graceful step backward, he withdrew from their path, his golden gaze lingering just a moment too long. “Of course—may your search be fruitful, then.” The words slid out smooth as velvet, cordial and laced with a subtle irony that only the truly attentive might catch. He offered them space, the gesture magnanimous on its surface, though something in the tilt of his head suggested a promise—one that flickered between courtesy and quiet threat. The Wolf withdraws, wishing them luck.

The encounter leaves Red and Elias more wary, but with Red’s curiosity satisfied and Elias’s protective instincts affirmed.

As the wolf disappears into the tangled woods, an uneasy quiet settles between Red and Elias. Their path forward is now free of immediate threats, yet the encounter has sown seeds of caution and lingering questions. With the basket still secure and their trust in each other newly tested, they prepare to resume their journey—unaware that the choices made today will soon bring deeper truths to light, and challenge the boundaries of friendship and desire.

Chapter 6: Revelations and Romantic Decision

Red stands by the stacked firewood, brushing dirt from her skirt as she surveys the repaired window Elias has just finished hammering into place.

Red folds her arms, glancing from the window to the tree line, worry flickering across her face before softening her tone for Elias. Red folded her arms, her gaze drifting from the newly mended window to the shadowy tree line beyond. Unease flickered across her face, brief and unmistakable, before she brushed a stubborn streak of dirt from her skirt and looked at Elias with softened eyes. “You did a good job, Elias,” she said quietly, gratitude clear in her voice. “I’m grateful—truly.” Still, her brow creased as she lingered by the stacked firewood, surveying the patchwork glass. “I just wish we didn’t have to fix the window at all,” she admitted, her tone hushed as if afraid the woods might overhear. “Nights feel different lately, don’t they?” Elias sets down his hammer, glancing over his shoulder at the darkening treeline, his jaw tightening just a bit. Elias set his hammer down with a quiet clink, the muscles in his forearm flexing as he released it. He cast a wary glance over his shoulder at the darkening treeline, jaw tightening almost imperceptibly. “You’re right, they do,” he said, his voice low, edged with the exhaustion of someone always anticipating the next threat. “And I wish I could say this was the last window I’d have to mend for you, Red.” The words hung between them as Red dusted the dirt from her skirt, sunlight slipping away behind the trees and shadows lengthening around the stacked firewood. Red offers Elias a small, tired smile, her fingers lingering on the edge of the windowsill as she glances out into the shadowed woods. Red brushed the last flecks of dirt from her skirt, her gaze drifting to the mended window where Elias stood nearby. She offered him a small, weary smile, her fingers lingering on the edge of the windowsill as if seeking reassurance in its solidity. Beyond the glass, the woods pressed close and unfamiliar, shadows shifting in the moonlight. Yet with Elias beside her, the uncertainty felt less consuming, and as she looked out into the night, she found herself quietly admitting, “Still, having you here makes it easier to believe tomorrow will be quieter than tonight.” Elias wipes sweat from his brow, the scent of fresh pine clinging to his shirt, and sets the hammer down.

Elias leans back against a half-finished wall, gazing at the framework with a tired but satisfied smile, his fingers tracing the grain of the wood. Elias straightened, pausing to wipe the sweat from his brow as the hammer hung loosely in his hand. The sharp, clean scent of pine clung to his shirt, burrowing into the folds of his memory. It was almost as if the woods themselves wanted him to remember—every swing of the hammer, every aching muscle, was a reminder that this hard work meant something. The effort was grueling, yes, but with each log added to the growing walls of the cabin, it felt undeniably right. Maybe, when the last board was nailed and the roof stood firm against the sky, he’d finally have a place that belonged to him alone. The two share a moment reflecting on the recent repairs and the lasting tension in the woods, expressing gratitude and a growing sense of partnership.

Red gently curls her fingers around Elias’s hand, her thumb brushing over the roughness of his skin, her gaze searching his face for answers. Red hesitated at the edge of the clearing, her fingers worrying the frayed edge of her cloak as she glanced over at Elias. The memory of cold water and desperate hands tugged at her thoughts. She took a breath, her voice soft but steady as she spoke. She never truly thanked him—for everything. For pulling her from the river that night, when fear threatened to swallow her whole, and for staying by her side even when there was nothing in it for him. The question that had been circling in her mind spilled out at last, gentle but insistent. Why? Why had he chosen her, of all people? Was it simply chance, or was there something more beneath

the surface? She studied his face, searching for answers in his quiet gaze, her own curiosity shining through. Elias's fingers turn beneath Red's, gently curling around her hand, his gaze steady and open, searching her face for understanding. Elias's fingers turned beneath Red's, his touch gentle yet firm as he curled his hand around hers. His gaze was steady, open—a silent invitation for trust—as he searched her face, as if trying to gauge whether she'd understand the truth he carried. He spoke quietly, the words shaped by a rough honesty and a caution born of experience. He couldn't have walked away, he explained, not when he'd seen that stubborn fight still burning in her eyes. Maybe it had been chance, a twist of fate, or maybe it was the way she'd reached for hope, even as the water threatened to close over her. Whatever the reason, he had stayed. Red's thumb brushes gently over Elias's knuckles, her gaze searching his face for any sign of hesitation or truth. Red stepped closer, her gratitude mingling with a question she couldn't quite shake. As her thumb brushed gently over Elias's knuckles, she studied his face, searching for any flicker of hesitation or hidden truth. She laid her hand over his, the warmth a quiet reassurance between them. "Your belief in me," she murmured, voice low but steady, "it changed something inside, Elias." The words hovered in the space between them, vulnerable and earnest. "I suppose I need to understand if you saw in me what I still struggle to see myself." Her eyes didn't waver, reflecting both her curiosity and the courage it took to ask. Elias's hand trembles slightly beneath Red's touch, his gaze steady but softened by vulnerability. Elias's hand trembled, almost imperceptibly, beneath Red's gentle touch. He kept his gaze fixed on her, the familiar wariness in his eyes softened now by something far more vulnerable. After a moment's hesitation, he drew a slow breath, as if gathering words he rarely spoke aloud. "I saw a strength in you that reminded me of the part of myself I thought I'd lost," he admitted, voice low and earnest. His thumb brushed unconsciously against her fingers, betraying a longing he tried to hide. "And perhaps saving you was my way of reclaiming it." Red, motivated by lingering questions and gratitude, asks Elias why he chose to stay and help her, leading to an honest exchange about their motivations and the hope they've inspired in each other.

Elias hesitates, voice low and tentative. He studies Red's face, waiting for any sign—an encouraging glance, a nod, a gentle smile—that might tell him how she feels. Elias shifted his weight uneasily, glancing over at Red with a furrowed brow. The silence between them felt thick, prickling at the back of his neck like the threat of a coming storm. He cleared his throat, his voice hesitant as he finally spoke. "Red... is this okay?" The words hung in the air, fragile and uncertain. Elias rubbed a calloused hand against his sleeve, eyes searching hers for some reassurance. "I—I'm not sure where we stand right now," he admitted, honesty etched in every line of his face. Though the forest was full of dangers, it was the uncertainty between them that made him feel truly exposed. Red softens her gaze, tilting her head slightly as she takes a tentative step closer, inviting honesty without pressure. Red softened her gaze, her head tilting just enough to signal gentle curiosity rather than pressure. She stepped closer, her movements quiet and unhurried, inviting honesty. Sensing Elias's hesitation, she offered him a reassuring smile, her voice low and steady as she told him, "It's okay, Elias—just tell me what you're feeling, and we'll figure this out together." Her words hung between them, an unspoken promise that whatever burden he carried, he wouldn't have to bear it alone. Elias's voice is low and uncertain, his hands fidgeting at his sides as he waits for her answer. Elias hesitated, his body tense with uncertainty. He turned to face her fully, his hands fidgeting at his sides as though searching for something solid to hold onto. His eyes, usually so guarded, now searched hers with an unspoken plea for reassurance. When he finally spoke, his voice was low and hesitant, colored with the weight of his caution. "I just don't want to cross a line we can't come back from, Red." The words hung between them, fragile and honest,

revealing the depth of his concern and the boundaries he was desperate not to break. Red steps closer, her gaze steady and reassuring, offering him a gentle nod. Red stepped closer, her gaze unwavering, the warmth in her eyes meant to steady him. She could see Elias's uncertainty, the way his hands hovered at his sides, as if he needed her blessing to move forward. With a gentle nod, she offered reassurance, her voice quiet but firm: "You won't cross any lines unless I ask you to, Elias—I'm right here with you." The words hung between them, a lifeline. Elias's shoulders eased, and he searched her face once more, finding the permission he needed in her steady presence. Elias exhales softly, the tension in his shoulders easing as he studies her face for further reassurance. Elias hesitated, the weight of the woods and all its lurking threats pressing down on him, before he finally turned to face her. His gaze lingered on her face, searching for traces of the reassurance he desperately needed. As her expression softened, he exhaled softly, the tension in his shoulders slowly melting away. "Thank you, Red—I just needed to hear that from you," he admitted quietly, honesty roughening his voice as he let himself trust her, just for a moment, against his cautious instincts. Their conversation deepens as they openly discuss their feelings, with both admitting their care for one another and their desire to move forward together, yet also carefully respecting boundaries and consent.

Grandmother opens the cottage door, welcoming them inside for supper, expressing her pride and love for who they are becoming.

Red and Elias, hands still close but not yet crossing into full physical intimacy, exchange a smile before heading in, united by trust, honesty, and the shared trials they've overcome.

As dusk settled gently over the woods, Red and Elias stepped inside, the warmth of the cottage and the promise of tomorrow lighting their path forward, together.