

Contents

| | |
|--|----|
| Chapter 1: Red Receives the Letter | 1 |
| Chapter 2: Encounter at the Fork | 2 |
| Chapter 3: Wolf's Intrusion | 3 |
| Chapter 4: Red's Arrival and Suspicion | 8 |
| Chapter 5: Woodsman Intervenes | 14 |
| Chapter 6: A Choice of Forgiveness | 15 |
| Chapter 7: New Beginnings | 16 |

Chapter 1: Red Receives the Letter

Red carefully arranges jars of elderberry jam and a folded blanket into the basket, glancing at the sealed envelope her mother places on top.

Mother tightens Red's cloak strings, brushing off crumbs from her daughter's shoulder, and hands her the basket with a firm grip.

She warns Red about the dense fog in the forest and the recent sightings of a large animal near the old birch trail.

Mother stands by the doorway, her hand gently resting on Red's shoulder, her eyes filled with concern as she tries to emphasize the seriousness of the situation. Standing in the doorway, her hand resting gently on Red's shoulder, Mother's eyes brimmed with concern. "Listen to me, sweetheart," she said quietly, her voice soft but urgent. "The fog in the forest is thick this morning—so thick you can barely see a few steps ahead." She drew in a worried breath, glancing toward the shadowed woods beyond their cottage. "And just yesterday, Mr. Fletcher spotted a large animal near the old birch trail. I'm worried it could be dangerous." Her grip on Red's shoulder tightened, as if she could anchor her daughter to safety with touch alone. "Promise me," she murmured, searching Red's face, "that you'll stay on the main path and keep your eyes open." Red nods solemnly, clutching the basket a little tighter as she glances toward the shadowy trees beyond the cottage. Red nodded solemnly, her fingers tightening imperceptibly around the wicker handle of the basket. Beyond the cottage, the trees loomed with their cloaks of fog, shrouding the paths in uncertain gray. She caught her mother's anxious gaze and, with a quiet determination, assured her in a gentle voice that carried more resolve than bravado: she would be careful, she would stick to the main path—no matter how the mist curled or what shadows shifted in the distance. The promise nestled in her chest, unwavering. But the thought of her grandmother, ill and waiting, pressed Red forward. She had to bring the basket, and her mother's letter, no matter the risk. Red nods, her fingers gripping the basket handle, and promises to avoid the shortcut by the creek.

Red nods earnestly, tightening her grip on the basket handle as she glances toward the forest, her voice steady but her eyes betraying a hint of longing for the forbidden path. Red nodded earnestly, her fingers tightening around the basket's worn handle as she glanced toward the shadowed line of

trees. The main path wound safely through the woods, just as her mother had insisted, but the shortcut by the creek called to her—a memory of sunlit water and secret laughter from summers past. She steadied her voice, pushing longing aside. She would keep her promise; no matter how the forbidden path tempted her, she would take the route her mother trusted. “I’ll go along the main path, just as you said,” she assured, determination settling in her chest, “no shortcuts by the creek.” Mother lays a gentle hand on Red’s shoulder, her eyes soft but serious. Red’s mother laid a gentle hand on her daughter’s shoulder, her touch warm yet firm. Concern flickered in her eyes, softening her features even as her voice took on a quietly serious note. She reminded Red that the woods were always safer when one kept to the path, her words edged with the practical wisdom of someone who’d seen trouble find its way to the unwary—especially near that winding creek. “Good girl, Red,” she murmured, pride and worry mingling in her tone, “trouble can find you so quickly near that creek.” Mother watches Red step onto the porch, closing the door behind her, determined to ensure Red understands the importance of delivering the basket and letter safely to Grandmother.

Red’s footsteps echoed softly on the familiar wooden boards as she left the safety of home behind, the weight of her mother’s words lingering in her mind. The forest loomed ahead, its early morning hush broken only by the gentle rustle of leaves and the distant calls of birds. With each step down the winding trail, Red found herself scanning the trees for any sign of movement, her thoughts drifting between duty and the hope of a friendly face. As the path curved beneath the sheltering branches, Red soon approached a familiar fork in the road—where choices and chance so often shaped the journey ahead.

Chapter 2: Encounter at the Fork

Red pauses at the fork, her boots crunching on damp leaves as she consults the folded map her mother gave her.

She adjusts the woven basket on her arm, peering down each path in search of the quickest route to her grandmother’s cottage.

As she hesitates, Wolf—disguised as a lanky, dark-haired traveler in a tattered cloak—emerges from the shadows, sniffing the air and eyeing the basket.

He steps into Red’s path, brushing dirt from his sleeve with calculated nonchalance, and greets her with a toothy grin.

‘Lost, little one?’

‘he asks, voice smooth and curious, his gaze flicking between her face and the basket.

Red grips the handle tighter, recalling her mother’s warning, but forces a polite smile.

‘I’m just on my way to see my grandmother,’ she replies, sidestepping him to keep the fork in view.

Wolf circles closer, feigning interest in the map, his nose twitching as he inhales the scent of bread and herbs.

He gestures grandly down the left path.

'This way is faster—trust me.

I walk these woods every day.

' Red studies him, weighing his words against her map, and resolves to trust her instincts, choosing the right fork instead.

Wolf's ears twitch in annoyance, but he retreats into the brush, planning his next move.

As Red set off along her chosen path, the forest seemed to grow quieter, branches arching overhead in a protective canopy. Behind her, Wolf melted into the shadows, his frustration sharpening into resolve. While Red pressed forward, unaware of the game unfolding around her, another story was already beginning to play out elsewhere—one that would soon draw both traveler and predator closer to the heart of danger.

Chapter 3: Wolf's Intrusion

Red steps carefully around tangled roots, balancing the basket on her arm and scanning the undergrowth for signs of danger, motivated by her promise to her mother.

As she nears a fork in the path, Wolf, disguised as a traveling storyteller with a battered cloak, emerges from behind a fallen log, blocking her way.

Wolf greets Red with a sly grin, introducing himself and offering to guide her through a 'safer' shortcut, hoping to win her trust and affection.

Wolf leans forward slightly, his eyes glinting with mischief as he offers his paw in a gesture of polite invitation. Wolf leaned forward, his eyes glinting with mischief as he extended a paw in a gesture both polite and inviting, the corners of his mouth curled into a sly grin. "Well, hello there, Red," he purred, his voice warm and charming, as if their meeting were a delightful coincidence rather than a calculated encounter in the tangled woods. He glanced around—shadows flickered between the trees, accentuating his air of clever confidence. "Not everyone knows their way around here as I do," he continued, lowering his voice conspiratorially. "Perhaps you'd let me show you a shortcut? It's much safer—and, I daresay, a touch more interesting—with me as your guide." The offer hung between them, his loneliness masked beneath a veneer of flirtatious bravado and the promise of adventure. Red tilts her head thoughtfully, clutching her basket a little tighter as she studies Wolf's grin. Red tilted her head thoughtfully, her fingers tightening around the wicker handle as she took in the gleam of Wolf's grin. His offer sounded almost generous, but her mother's warnings echoed in her mind. "That's very kind of you, Wolf," she said, her tone gentle yet firm, "but I'm not sure my grandmother would want me straying from the path—she always says shortcuts can be tricky, even with a clever guide." Her eyes lingered on his, searching for sincerity beneath the surface charm, while her determination to honor her mother's instructions remained steady. Wolf leans in slightly, his grin widening as he gestures invitingly down a shadowy, overgrown trail. Wolf leaned in, the shadows shifting across his sleek fur as his grin widened, an invitation glinting in his eyes. With a deft flick of his paw, he gestured down the overgrown, secretive trail winding into the heart of the woods. "Ah, but that's precisely why you'd need someone clever at your side, Red—tricks and tangles are no match for sharp eyes and quick wit," he murmured, letting the promise of safety—and something more—curl enticingly between them. Red tucks her

basket closer to her side, eyes flickering with both intrigue and wariness as she studies Wolf's grin. Red tightened her grip on the basket, feeling the worn weave press into her palm as Wolf's grin widened, all sharp teeth and easy confidence. She studied him carefully, curiosity mingling with a wary sense of responsibility—she knew the woods well enough to trust her own instincts, and her mother's words echoed in her mind. The winding forest trails might tempt her, but she'd promised Grandmother to be cautious. "Sometimes the straight path is the safest," she said, her voice gentle yet firm, "even if it isn't the most exciting." With a quick glance toward the dappled sunlight ahead, she added, "Besides, I promised Grandmother I'd be careful." Wolf leans in slightly, his grin widening as he gestures invitingly toward a shadowy trail off the main path. Wolf leaned in, his grin broadening as he swept an inviting hand toward the shadowy trail curling away from the main path. The woods seemed to hush, as if listening in. "Careful is wise," he murmured, voice low and velvety, "but adventure rarely waits for permission." His eyes caught Red's, bright with the promise of something secret. "Imagine the stories you'd have to tell," he coaxed, "if you trusted me—just a little." The words slipped out, half challenge, half confession, as he lingered in the uncertain space between longing and mischief. Red adjusts the basket on her arm and glances down the familiar path, her eyes flickering between the Wolf and the shaded shortcut he suggests. Red shifted the basket on her arm, feeling the weight of her mother's hopes wrapped in gingham and twine. She cast a cautious glance down the winding path, sunlight dappled between the leaves, then back at the Wolf, whose sly grin flickered with unspoken intentions. Stories were all well and good, she thought, but as she met his gaze, Red's resolve settled. "Stories are wonderful, Wolf," she said, her voice gentle but firm, "but I'd rather bring home something for Grandmother to smile about than tales to make her worry." Her fingers tightened around the basket's handle, as if to anchor herself to her purpose, and she looked past the Wolf, searching for the safest way forward. Wolf leans in just a little, his eyes glinting with playful encouragement, as he gestures invitingly down an overgrown path. Wolf leaned in just a little, the sly gleam in his eyes matched only by the curve of his inviting smile. With a smooth flick of his paw, he gestured down the overgrown path winding through the tangled woods. "A thoughtful heart is a rare treasure," he murmured, his tone both teasing and sincere, as if confiding a secret meant only for her. "But perhaps, with the right company, you could bring your grandmother not just a smile, but a story worth telling." The words hung between them, laced with playful encouragement—and something softer, almost longing—while sunlight dappled the moss at their feet. Red tightens her grip on her basket and gives Wolf a polite but cautious smile, taking a small step back toward the familiar path. Red tightened her grip on her basket, fingers pressing into the worn wicker as she offered the Wolf a polite, cautious smile. She edged a step back, angling herself almost unconsciously toward the familiar path that led to her grandmother's cottage. The woods felt different with him standing there, sly grin curling at the edge of his mouth as he suggested a shortcut—something safer, he said, something unexpected. Red's gaze lingered on the tangled underbrush before flicking back to the Wolf, her curiosity at war with a sense of responsibility that pulsed steady in her chest. "Maybe," she said gently, her voice carrying the quiet warmth of someone who'd been trusted with something precious, "but I think my grandmother would prefer stories where I keep my promises, even if the adventure has to wait." Red hesitates, gripping the basket tightly and questioning Wolf about the route, determined to protect her grandmother and herself.

Red glances nervously at the dark, tangled woods beyond the fork, her knuckles white around the basket handle as she studies Wolf's expression for any sign of deception. Red lingered at the fork in the path, her grip tightening on the basket until her knuckles blanched. The woods ahead loomed, tangled and shadowed—a stark contrast to the familiar sunlit road by the old mill. She

darted a glance at Wolf, searching his eyes for any subtle flicker of dishonesty. “Are you sure this is the right way to Grandmother’s house?” she asked, her voice low but unwavering. Doubt gnawed at her as she studied the thicket’s brambled edge. “I’ve always taken the other road, never through here. It looks dangerous.” The thought of her grandmother lying sick and waiting, and the responsibility her mother had placed on her, weighed heavy. Red drew a steadying breath, determination hardening her features. “I can’t risk anything happening to her—or to me.” Wolf tilts his head, offering a toothy smile while subtly stepping between Red and the safer path. Wolf angled his head just so, a gleam of mischief in his eyes as he slid with practiced ease between Red and the sun-dappled trail she’d been eyeing. His smile was all teeth and charm, the sort that made promises as much as threats. “Trust me, little one,” he coaxed, his tone honeyed and persuasive. “This shortcut may look a bit wild, but you’ll reach your grandmother’s cottage much faster.” He let his gaze linger meaningfully on the basket clutched tight in her hands. “And you wouldn’t want to keep your dear grandmother waiting, would you?” Red narrows her eyes at Wolf, clutching the basket closer to her chest and taking a cautious step back. Red’s fingers tightened around the wicker handle as she edged away, her gaze fixed warily on Wolf. The woods felt suddenly silent, as if waiting for his answer. She studied him, recalling every story Grandmother had shared about the forest’s winding paths. Yet none had ever mentioned this supposed shortcut. With a furrowed brow and quiet determination, Red drew the basket protectively closer to her chest and asked, her voice steady but edged with doubt, “If this way is really safer, then why has Grandmother never spoken of it before?” Wolf offers a gentle, reassuring smile, gesturing invitingly toward the shadowy trail. Wolf offered her a gentle, reassuring smile, his eyes glinting with a mixture of mischief and sincerity as he gestured invitingly toward the shadowy, less-trodden trail. He leaned in just slightly, lowering his voice as if sharing a secret meant only for her. “Perhaps your grandmother simply wished to spare you the trouble of brambles and mud,” he murmured, a hint of warmth in his tone. “But I’ve wandered these woods for years, you know, and I’m familiar with every hidden path they keep.” Red steps back slightly, clutching her basket closer and scanning the shadows for any sign of danger. Red took a cautious step back, tightening her hold on the basket as she peered into the tangled shadows lining the path. The woods could be unpredictable, and every rustle of leaves kept her on edge. Memories of her grandmother’s gentle warnings echoed in her mind—Grandmother always said, “Better safe than sorry.” Red pressed her lips together, determination flickering in her eyes. She glanced at Wolf and shook her head, resolute. She’d promised to be careful, and that promise felt heavy in her chest now. No matter the temptation to stray or take shortcuts, she would stick to the route she knew—the one that kept her close to Grandmother’s wisdom and far from uncertainty. Wolf tilts his head, offering a sly smile as he blocks a bit more of the familiar trail with his broad frame, gesturing invitingly toward the shadowy shortcut. Wolf tilted his head, his sly smile deepening as he edged further onto the familiar trail, his broad frame subtly blocking Red’s way. With a smooth, inviting gesture toward the shadowy shortcut, he caught her wary gaze and let his voice drop to a coaxing murmur. Surely, he suggested, the safest paths weren’t always the ones she’d traveled before. Wouldn’t it be something—to surprise her grandmother by arriving early, taking a route no one would expect? As Red’s grip tightened around the basket, suspicion flickered in her eyes, but Wolf’s charm lingered in the air, teasing her curiosity with the promise of adventure. Red hugs her basket closer, taking a cautious step back and narrowing her eyes at Wolf. Red hugged her basket closer to her chest, the woven handle digging into her palm as she took a cautious step back from Wolf. Shadows stretched between the trees, their shapes unfamiliar and unsettling. She narrowed her eyes at him, voice low but steady. “But what if I get lost—or worse,” she murmured, glancing warily at the thicket beyond, “if something’s waiting in those shadows you know so well?” Determination flickered in her gaze, but beneath it lay the

tremor of responsibility and the quiet fear of the unknown. Wolf bends forward, lowering his voice and flashing a reassuring smile, his eyes glinting just beneath the brim of his fur. Wolf bent forward, the movement deliberate and graceful, lowering his voice until it was little more than a velvet whisper. His reassuring smile flashed beneath the overhang of soft fur, eyes glinting with a mischievous promise. “Oh, little one,” he murmured, weaving charm into every syllable, “the only thing waiting in those shadows is the sweet scent of wildflowers—and perhaps a friend to guide you safely through.” His gaze lingered on Red, quietly hopeful she might trust him, while her knuckles whitened around the basket’s handle, still wary but caught by the wolf’s clever warmth. Red takes a step back, clutching her basket tighter, her eyes narrowing as she studies Wolf’s face for any sign of deceit. Red instinctively took a step back, her grip tightening around the wicker handle of her basket. The dappled sunlight flickered across Wolf’s muzzle, but she kept her gaze fixed on his eyes, searching for any hint of mischief or falsehood. Her voice was steady, though a flicker of uncertainty colored her words. “How can I be sure you’re truly a friend,” she pressed, her tone both cautious and determined, “and not just leading me somewhere I shouldn’t go?” Wolf leans in, offering a reassuring smile, but his eyes flicker with something unreadable as he gestures invitingly toward the shadowed shortcut. Wolf leaned in, his presence warm and persuasive, offering Red a reassuring smile that softened his sharp features. Yet, beneath the charm, his eyes flickered with something unreadable—a glint that made the shadows seem deeper. With a smooth gesture toward the shortcut winding through the trees, he coaxed, “You can trust me because I know these woods better than anyone—and wouldn’t a true friend want you and your grandmother safe and happy?” The words rolled off his tongue easily, as if concern and camaraderie were second nature, even as his gaze lingered on her with a mixture of longing and something more complicated. Red hugs her basket close, taking a cautious step back toward the familiar path, eyes fixed warily on Wolf. Red hugged her basket tighter, the woven handle pressed firmly against her chest as she took a cautious step back toward the path she’d always trusted. Her eyes never left Wolf’s face—searching for sincerity, for any flicker of danger beneath that smooth, gray gaze. “If you truly want Grandmother and me to be safe,” she ventured, her voice steady despite the tremor in her heart, “maybe you could walk with me on the road I know. That way, you can be sure nothing happens.” The words lingered in the air, a gentle plea edged with determination, as she measured his reaction, unwilling to abandon the familiar trail for anything less than certainty. Wolf tilts his head, eyes gleaming, and steps back into the dappled shadow, inviting Red to choose her path. Wolf tilted his head thoughtfully, the gleam in his eyes catching the stray shafts of sunlight filtering through the leaves. He stepped back, half melting into the dappled shadow as if inviting Red to choose—the familiar path or the more treacherous shortcut. With a charming, almost wistful smile, he gestured toward the tangled thicket. “The thicket is no place for an old wolf’s bones,” he murmured, voice low and coaxing. “Why not prove your courage and take the shortcut, while I watch over you from here?” His words lingered in the air, half challenge, half promise, as Red hesitated, fingers tightening around her basket and suspicion flickering across her face. Red tightens her grip on the basket, taking a cautious step back from Wolf, her eyes narrowed with suspicion. Red’s fingers tightened around the handle of her basket, knuckles paling as she instinctively took a cautious step back. The wolf’s shadow flickered across the mossy path, but she held his gaze, suspicion sharpening her features. “If you truly cared about our safety,” she said, her voice steady despite the tremor of unease beneath, “you’d walk beside me the whole way, not just send me off alone into the shadows.” Her tone made it clear that she wasn’t about to be swayed by empty assurances, not when so much was at stake. Wolf tilts his head, eyes glinting, as he gestures subtly toward the shadowy thicket, inviting but not moving closer. Wolf tilted his head, a glimmer of mischief and something softer flickering in his eyes. His paw traced a subtle arc toward the darker edge of

the thicket, an unspoken invitation hovering in the hush between them. But he made no move to close the distance. Instead, his voice emerged low and persuasive, threaded with a gentle reproach. "If I walked with you, who would protect the woods from those who stray where they shouldn't?" For an instant, his gaze lingered on her white-knuckled grip around the basket, as if he could sense her resolve. "Sometimes," he continued, his words curling through the cool air, "true courage means trusting the wisdom of those who've made the journey before." Red steps back toward the familiar path, tightening her grip on the basket and keeping a wary eye on Wolf. Red stepped back toward the familiar path, her fingers tightening around the basket as she kept a wary eye on Wolf's restless pacing. Doubt lingered in her mind; the woodsman's warnings echoed louder than ever. Perhaps, she thought, true wisdom lay not in chasing the enticing promises of strangers, but in trusting the cautions offered by those who cared. With determination firming her resolve, she glanced back at Wolf, weighing the risk, and let the lesson settle in her heart as she continued toward her grandmother's cottage. The conversation grows tense as Wolf tries to charm Red with tales of the forest, while Red insists on staying on the familiar path.

Wolf leans in, voice silky, gesturing with a lazy paw toward the shadowed woods, eyes glittering with mischief. Wolf leaned in, so close Red could almost feel the warmth of his breath, his voice turning silky as he gestured with a lazy paw toward the shadowed woods. Mischief glimmered in his eyes. "Did you know, Red," he purred, his tone coaxing, "that just beyond these neat little stones, the forest sings with secrets?" He let the words linger, then continued, spinning the vision with practiced ease. "There's a hidden glen where the sunlight paints gold on the moss," he murmured, gaze flickering to catch her reaction, "and streams run so clear you can see the pebbles wink at you." With an inviting tilt of his head, Wolf let his charm settle in the hush between them. "It's not far at all—just a step or two from here," he promised, the suggestion hanging in the air. "Wouldn't you like to see it?" Red grips her basket tighter, eyes scanning the trees as if weighing the beauty against the danger. Red's grip on the wicker handle tightened as she listened, her gaze flickering between sun-dappled moss and the shadowy depths beyond the path. Wolf's voice lilted with promise, weaving images of fern-soft carpets and silvered streams, but Red shook her head, stubbornness sharpening her tone. "The moss and streams sound pretty, Wolf," she said, though her eyes never strayed from the familiar trail, "but Grandmother says the path is what keeps me safe, and that's exactly where I'm staying." Determination pressed her lips into a thin line; she would not let beauty—or danger—lure her from what she knew was right. Wolf leans in closer, voice soft and coaxing, gesturing with a paw toward the shadowy woods. Wolf leaned in, the tip of his nose almost brushing Red's shoulder, his voice dropping to a soft, coaxing murmur as he gestured with a graceful paw toward the tangled shadows of the woods. "Ah, but Red," he breathed, his eyes glinting with a mix of mischief and longing, "even safety can grow dull—imagine how much sweeter your story would be if you brought Grandmother a wildflower no one else has ever seen." The words slipped from him like silk, heavy with promise and danger, as he watched for the flicker of curiosity in Red's eyes, hoping she might follow where he led. Red tightens her grip on her basket, glancing pointedly at the winding path ahead. Red tightened her grip on the basket, her knuckles whitening as she glanced deliberately at the winding path ahead. Wolf's voice floated around her, velvet-soft, painting vivid pictures of hidden blossoms and secret glades, but Red's mind refused to wander. A wildflower might be lovely, she thought, but each step she took was measured with purpose. Grandmother would rather have her home on time than dawdling in places she'd been warned against. Even as the forest tempted her with its scattered petals and sun-dappled clearings, Red's resolve held firm—responsibility, after all, was a promise she intended to keep. Wolf leans in closer, lowering his voice to a persuasive whisper as his tail

flicks with anticipation. Wolf leaned in, closing the space between them until Red could feel the whisper of his breath against her ear. His voice dropped to a persuasive murmur, velvet-smooth and edged with anticipation, while his tail flicked in restless arcs behind him. “But imagine,” he coaxed, letting the words linger in the hush between them, “the look in her eyes if you returned with something truly rare—something only the bravest ever find, Red.” Red tightens her grip on her basket and takes a deliberate step forward along the path, her gaze unwavering. Red tightened her grip on the basket, feeling the woven handle press against her palm as she took a deliberate step forward along the winding path. The sun dappled through the leaves, casting shifting patterns across Wolf’s sleek fur, but she kept her gaze unwavering, refusing to be distracted by his easy smile or the melodic tales he spun about the wonders of the forest. Compassion flickered in her eyes, but determination anchored her voice as she said, “The bravest know when to say no, Wolf, and Grandmother’s eyes would be brightest just seeing me safe on her doorstep.” The words hung in the air, gentle but firm—a quiet resolve shaped by responsibility and love. Ultimately, Red decides to ignore Wolf’s suggestion and continues on her chosen route, leaving Wolf watching her with keen interest, plotting his next move.

As the forest path winds on beneath Red’s determined steps, the cottage ahead grows nearer, its quiet facade concealing the Wolf’s recent deception. Unaware of the danger lurking within, Red’s thoughts linger on her strange encounter, even as she crosses the threshold into a house that now feels subtly, inexplicably changed.

Chapter 4: Red’s Arrival and Suspicion

Red clutches her wicker basket and steps carefully over a tangle of roots as she approaches her grandmother’s cottage.

Wolf, in his human guise, emerges from behind a leaning birch, brushing pine needles off his cloak and blocking Red’s way with an exaggerated bow.

Red narrows her eyes and shifts the basket to her other arm, recalling her mother’s warnings.

As Wolf circles closer, sniffing the air and commenting on the smell of fresh bread, Red remains guarded but becomes increasingly confrontational, directly accusing Wolf of following her and questioning his motives.

Wolf circles a step closer, head tilted with feigned casual interest, eyes flicking toward the basket as his nose twitches appreciatively. Wolf drifted a step closer, circling her with languid ease, his head cocked as if lost in idle curiosity. The tip of his nose quivered, catching the scent that danced through the air—a warm, yeasty aroma mingled with something sweeter, more elusive. His eyes darted toward the basket cradled in her arms, pupils dilating in appreciation. “Mmm,” he murmured, voice velvet-soft and inviting, “what a delightful aroma wafting through these woods.” He let his gaze linger, a sly smile playing at his lips. “Is that fresh bread I smell, or perhaps something even more tempting nestled in your basket?” Red hugs the basket a bit closer to her side, her gaze flickering warily to the Wolf’s sharp eyes. Red hugged the basket a bit closer to her side, feeling the woven handle press into her palm, a small comfort beneath the Wolf’s calculating gaze. His nose twitched as he circled nearer, the air thick with the scent of freshly baked bread. She kept her voice steady, hoping to deflect his curiosity without seeming rude. “It’s just some bread

and a little honey for my grandmother,” she said, her words gentle yet firm, trying to assure him that what she carried wasn’t anything that should tempt a creature like him. Wolf tilts his head, voice soft and inviting, eyes glinting with calculated interest as he shifts a step nearer, pretending casual curiosity. Wolf tilted his head, a soft, inviting note in his voice as he closed the distance between them, eyes glinting with a calculated interest. He sniffed the air, catching the comforting scent of fresh bread lingering from Red’s basket, and let a wistful smile curl at his lips. “You know,” he murmured, pretending casual curiosity, “sometimes the simplest treats are the sweetest.” His gaze lingered on her, as if savoring the thought. “Your grandmother must be a lucky soul indeed.” With practiced ease, Wolf shifted a step nearer, angling to appear merely intrigued. “Tell me,” he asked, voice almost conspiratorial, “which path do you take to her cottage?” Red clutches the basket a bit tighter, shifting her weight anxiously and glancing toward the winding trail ahead. Red’s fingers tightened around the basket as she shifted her weight from one foot to the other, her gaze flickering toward the winding trail that disappeared beneath the dappled shadows. The wolf’s nose twitched, savoring the scent of fresh bread that curled invitingly through the air. Red caught his intent stare and, with a polite but purposeful nod, gestured toward the sunlit path stretching past the old oak. “It’s that way,” she said, her voice gentle yet resolute. “But I really should be on my way before the bread cools.” The urgency in her tone betrayed both her responsibility and her wish not to linger in the wolf’s unsettling company. Wolf tries to deflect suspicion with charm, claiming curiosity and concern for her grandmother, but Red challenges each explanation, her suspicion mounting as she references past troubles associated with Wolf.

Red steps back, her eyes narrowing as she positions herself protectively between Wolf and the cottage door, her voice trembling with a mix of fear and determination. Red instinctively stepped back, her eyes narrowing as she positioned herself between Wolf and the cottage door. The basket in her hands felt heavier, her grip tightening, but she refused to let her fear show. Her voice trembled—half fear, half determination—as she confronted him. “What are you doing here, Wolf?” The words came out sharper than she intended, but she held her ground. “You’re not supposed to be anywhere near this cottage.” She glanced past his hulking form toward the shadowed windows, her suspicion growing. “Are you following me?” Wolf takes a slow step back, his eyes darting between Red and the cottage, feigning casual interest. Wolf took a slow, deliberate step backward, letting the shadows of the cottage flicker across his fur. His gaze slipped from Red to the weathered door and back again, as if idly surveying the scene. With a practiced air of nonchalance, he let a half-smile curve his lips, his voice smooth and untroubled. “Me? Following you?” he echoed, feigning surprise as if the thought had never crossed his mind. He shrugged with casual elegance, eyes twinkling with playful mischief. “No, Red—I was just passing through,” he said, trying to sound indifferent, though a flicker of longing betrayed him. “Thought I heard something unusual, that’s all.” Red narrows her eyes, taking another cautious step back, her voice trembling with both fear and resolve. Red narrowed her eyes, taking another cautious step backward as she tightened her grip on the basket. Her heart pounded, fear prickling at her skin, yet determination steadied her voice. “Don’t lie to me,” she demanded, gaze fixed warily on the Wolf. “No one just passes through these woods without a reason—what do you really want?” Wolf tilts his head, watching Red closely, his eyes flickering with an unreadable intent. Wolf tilted his head, watching Red with a peculiar intensity, his eyes glinting with something unreadable. A sly, almost wistful smile tugged at the corner of his mouth as he replied, “Curiosity, maybe—it’s not every day I catch sight of someone so determined to protect a place like this.” His voice was smooth, playful, but beneath it lingered a note of genuine longing, as if he hoped she might see past his mask. Red edges closer to the cottage door, eyes narrowed, never letting Wolf out of her sight. Red edged

closer to the cottage door, her eyes never leaving Wolf's shadowy form. The basket trembled in her grip, and she tightened her hold as if it could shield her from doubt. She took a measured step back, voice steady but edged with suspicion. "Protecting it from what, exactly?" she asked, chin tilted in defiance, her gaze sharp and unwavering. "Wolves who pretend they're just curious, or something far worse?" Wolf steps forward, eyes narrowing as he watches Red's reaction, voice low and probing. Wolf stepped forward, the sharp glint in his eyes narrowing as he studied Red's every movement. He let his voice drop, coaxing yet edged with curiosity, "You sound awfully sure there's something worse lurking, Red—maybe you ought to tell me what you're so afraid of." His words curled in the air between them, probing, as if he could unravel her secrets simply by watching the way she clutched her basket tighter and retreated another pace. Red narrows her eyes, stepping sideways to block the cottage door, her body tense and ready to bolt or fight. Red planted her feet firmly in the mossy earth, shifting just enough to block the cottage door from the Wolf's line of sight. Her fingers tightened around the wicker handle of the basket, knuckles whitening with the effort to keep her voice steady. She studied the creature before her, searching for any hint of sincerity in those unsettling, amber eyes. "Maybe I would," she said quietly, her suspicion clear, "if I thought you weren't the very thing I should be afraid of." Every muscle in her body was tense, ready to spring away—or to stand her ground, if it came to that. Wolf tilts his head, eyes narrowing, stepping just close enough for Red to feel the tension in the air. Wolf tilted his head, eyes narrowing with that familiar mix of mischief and longing. He stepped just close enough for Red to feel the subtle tension curling between them, his presence almost tangible in the thickening dusk. Red instinctively stepped back, her grip tightening around her basket as suspicion flashed across her face. Sensing her wariness, Wolf let a sly smile touch the corner of his mouth and murmured, "If I were," his voice low and teasing, "wouldn't you already know it?" Red plants her feet firmly, raising her basket like a shield, her eyes never leaving Wolf's. Red stepped back, her grip tightening around the woven handle as she raised the basket between them—a flimsy shield, perhaps, but one she held with quiet conviction. She planted her feet firmly, refusing to let the tremor in her voice betray her resolve. Her eyes, steady and searching, never wavered from Wolf's. "Maybe I do know this path, Wolf," she said, her tone low but unwavering, "and that's exactly why I won't let you take another step closer." Wolf raises his paws in a gesture of surrender, eyes fixed steadily on Red, gauging her reaction. Wolf lifted his paws in a gesture of surrender, the moonlight glinting off his fur as he fixed his gaze on Red. There was a playful curve to his mouth, but something uncertain flickered deep beneath his charm. "Easy now, Red," he said softly, his tone coaxing rather than confrontational. "I'm not here to fight you." He watched her, noting the way she stepped back and tightened her grip, suspicion etched into every line of her posture. Wolf hesitated, then added, voice low and inviting, "But if you think I mean you harm, maybe you should tell me why you think that." Red plants her feet firmly, raising her basket defensively between them, eyes narrowed and unwavering. Red stepped back, her grip tightening around the wicker handle as she planted herself solidly between Wolf and the cottage door. Her eyes, sharp and unyielding, never left his. She raised the basket defensively, the woven lid trembling ever so slightly with the force of her resolve. "Every time you appear," she said, voice low and steady, "something bad follows." The memory of past trouble flickered behind her words. She squared her shoulders, making it clear she wouldn't be swayed. "And I'm not about to let you bring that kind of trouble to my door again." Wolf lowers his voice, eyes narrowing as he edges a cautious step back, his gaze never leaving Red's face. Wolf lowered his voice, a sly edge threading through his words as he edged a cautious step back, his gaze never wavering from Red's face. His eyes narrowed in a mixture of amusement and challenge, the corners of his mouth hinting at a smile he couldn't quite suppress. "So you blame me for every shadow in these woods—tell me, Red," he

drawled, letting her name linger between them, “do you really believe I’m the only danger hiding here?” Red stands her ground, eyes narrowed, her stance shifting subtly into a defensive position as she watches Wolf’s every move. Red’s grip tightened around the basket as she stepped back, refusing to let Wolf intimidate her. Her eyes narrowed, every sense alert, and she shifted her stance just enough to be ready for whatever might happen next. Watching Wolf’s every subtle movement, Red spoke, her voice low but unwavering. She wasn’t fooled by appearances or empty assurances. “I believe the real danger,” she said, the words edged with her quiet determination, “is the one clever enough to pretend it isn’t a threat—so tell me, Wolf, what are you really after?” Wolf’s eyes narrow as he glances toward the cottage, his stance shifting subtly, testing Red’s resolve. Wolf’s eyes narrowed, a glint of mischief flickering as he stole a glance at the cottage behind her. His weight shifted forward, almost imperceptibly, as if testing how close he could venture before she bolted. “Maybe I’m after the truth—the kind you keep locked behind that door, Red,” he murmured, his voice silky with insinuation, watching her grip tighten with every word. Red stands her ground, her eyes never leaving Wolf as she shifts to block the cottage entrance, voice steady despite the tremor in her hand. Red planted herself firmly before the cottage door, refusing to give an inch. Her eyes, unwavering, fixed on the Wolf, even as her fingers trembled around the handle of her basket. She shifted her body, subtly blocking any chance he had of slipping past her. “If it’s truth you want,” she told him, her voice steady though her grip betrayed her nerves, “you’ll have to earn it—because nothing behind this door is yours for the taking.” The words rang with a quiet determination, making it clear she would not be easily swayed. Their exchange grows tense, with Red refusing to let Wolf approach further and insisting on his true intentions.

Wolf flashes a wide, toothy grin, trying to appear friendly and nonchalant as he shifts his weight from paw to paw. Wolf flashed a wide, toothy grin, doing his best to appear friendly and nonchalant as he shifted his weight from paw to paw. He let his eyes linger on Red, hoping his charm might mask the flicker of loneliness beneath his bravado. “Oh, I was just stopping by to check on your dear grandmother,” he said with an easy, practiced warmth. “You know, making sure she’s feeling well. It’s what any good neighbor would do, right?” The words tumbled out as if they cost him nothing, but in truth, he clung to the hope that this small deception might bring him a little closer to the companionship he so desperately craved. Red narrows her eyes, folding her arms as she studies Wolf’s face for any hint of deception. Red narrowed her eyes, folding her arms across her chest as she studied the Wolf’s face, searching for any crack in his confident smile. “Is that so?” she said after a moment, her tone edged with gentle skepticism. “Funny, I don’t remember you ever visiting before.” Every word was measured, her curiosity sharpened by responsibility and a lingering sense of unease. Wolf flashes another wide grin, leaning casually against the doorframe as Red narrows her eyes, stepping closer to peer past him into the cottage. Wolf flashed another wide grin, all teeth and easy charm, as he lounged against the doorframe. Red narrowed her eyes, suspicion sharpening her gaze as she stepped closer, trying to peer past his lean figure into the dimness of the cottage. But Wolf only shrugged, the picture of innocence, and said with an airy nonchalance, “Well, I suppose I’ve just become more neighborly lately—everyone needs a little company now and then, don’t you think?” His tone was light, almost playful, but beneath it lingered a quiet longing, the hope that perhaps this time, his cleverness might buy him the connection he craved. Red narrows her eyes, stepping closer to Wolf, watching his reaction carefully. Red narrowed her eyes and stepped a little closer, her gaze fixed on Wolf as if trying to read the truth behind his easy grin. She noticed the way his attention lingered on her grandmother’s cottage, and the concern burrowed deeper inside her. “Maybe,” she said quietly, her voice edged with careful curiosity, “but you seem awfully interested in her today—did something happen?” Even as she spoke, Red’s mind

raced through memories of Wolf's past kindnesses and her own responsibility to protect her ailing grandmother, searching for answers in the way he shifted under her scrutiny. Wolf leans forward slightly, his grin widening as he watches Red for her reaction, trying to appear sincere. Wolf leaned forward ever so slightly, his grin widening as he studied Red, hoping to catch some flicker of interest in her eyes. He tried to sound casual, almost sincere, as he explained that it was nothing out of the ordinary—he'd simply heard the old woman wasn't quite herself lately. That was all, he insisted, just thought he'd lend a paw. Beneath his charm, a restless loneliness urged him to make the gesture seem heartfelt, even if a hint of mischief lingered at the corners of his smile. Red narrows her eyes and glances pointedly at Wolf's empty paws, shifting her basket protectively behind her. Red narrowed her eyes, letting her gaze linger meaningfully on Wolf's empty paws. Instinctively, she shifted her basket behind her, the handle pressed firmly into her palm. "It's considerate of you to check on Grandmother," she said, her voice gentle but edged with a perceptiveness that belied her youth. "But if she's unwell, I can't help but wonder—why didn't you bring anything to help her?" Wolf shrugs with an exaggerated innocence, his eyes flicking toward the closed bedroom door, trying to gauge Red's suspicion. Wolf offered an exaggerated shrug, his shoulders lifting with feigned innocence as his amber eyes flicked toward the closed bedroom door—searching Red's face for any trace of suspicion. A slow, charming grin spread across his muzzle, and he leaned in just a little, as if confiding a secret. "Ah," he said, letting the word hang in the air before continuing with a disarming smile, "I suppose I left in such a hurry that I forgot—my concern got the better of my planning." His gaze lingered hopefully on Red, weaving the words between his longing for connection and the clever impulse to win her trust. RedWolf tilts his head, eyes keen, testing Red's response as he fidgets with his paws. Wolf's grin lingered, sly and earnest all at once, as he tilted his head and watched Red with sharp, searching eyes. His paws fidgeted restlessly against the mossy earth, betraying a nervous energy that seemed at odds with his smooth voice. "If you'd like," he offered, his gaze never wavering from hers, "I could fetch something now—unless you think my company alone isn't quite enough?"

Red's fingers tightened around the wicker handle of her basket, heart quickening at the wolf's peculiar blend of charm and vulnerability. She studied the way his ears flicked in anticipation, sensing his desire to be useful—or perhaps simply to belong. The woods rustled softly behind them, a gentle reminder of the responsibilities she carried, but also of the connections she could not ignore. Wolf gives a toothy, reassuring smile, but his eyes flicker with a hint of unease as he subtly blocks the doorway behind him. Wolf flashed a toothy, reassuring smile, his charm on full display, though a flicker of unease darted behind his amber eyes. As he subtly shifted his weight, blocking the doorway with casual precision, he offered, "Oh, no need for that—your company is more than enough." His voice held a low, velvet warmth, the words rolling off his tongue with practiced ease. "And besides, I wouldn't want to trouble you further." The statement lingered in the air, a blend of flirtation and carefully disguised intent, as Wolf watched Red, hoping she'd linger just a little longer in his presence. Red narrows her eyes and steps closer to Wolf, her tone growing sharper as she studies his expression. Red's eyes narrowed as she edged closer to Wolf, her gaze intent on catching every subtle flicker in his expression. There was a new sharpness to her voice, a note of suspicion threading through her words as she studied him. "It's curious," she remarked, letting the observation hang between them, "how you happened to appear just when Grandmother fell ill—almost as if you were expecting it." Wolf flashes a toothy grin, his eyes flickering with restrained eagerness as he shifts his weight, subtly blocking Red's view of the bedroom door. With a flash of his teeth, Wolf angled himself just enough to obscure Red's line of sight to the bedroom door. His eyes shimmered with barely contained anticipation, as if he

couldn't help but savor the tension in the air. "Well," he purred, letting his charm smooth each word, "sometimes a little intuition goes a long way—perhaps I simply have good timing." The subtle boast hung between them, a playful glint in his gaze betraying just how much he hoped she would be impressed. RedWolf leans against the doorframe, his grin unwavering but his eyes searching Red's face for any sign of trust. Wolf leaned against the doorframe, his grin steady, though Red could see the way his eyes searched her face—probing for some flicker of trust. The basket felt heavier in her arms as she shifted her weight, uncertain whether to believe him. His voice softened, almost unguarded, as he said, "Or maybe I just care more than you think, Red." The words lingered, threading between them, and Red wondered if it was possible for someone like Wolf to be both dangerous and sincere at once. Red narrows her eyes and steps closer, watching Wolf's expression for any sign of deception. Red took a measured step forward, her gaze sharpening as she studied the subtle flicker in Wolf's eyes. She caught the way his grin lingered just a second too long, hinting at something beneath the surface. "Care can take many forms, Wolf," she said, her voice gentle but edged with caution. "But yours seems to arrive with a hint of hunger—should I be worried?" The words slipped out quietly, almost as if she was testing their weight, searching his face for any sign that her suspicion might be justified. Wolf leans in with a playful glint in his eye, testing Red's reaction. Wolf leaned in, the playful glint in his eye betraying both mischief and a deeper longing for connection. Grinning, he brushed a stray leaf from Red's shoulder and let his gaze linger just a moment too long. "Worried?" he teased, voice smooth as velvet. "Oh, Red, my appetite is strictly for conversation—unless you'd prefer something spicier." His words hung between them, half challenge, half invitation, as he searched her face for any sign of intrigue. Red narrows her eyes, folding her arms as she studies Wolf's expression for any crack in his charming facade. Red paused at the edge of the clearing, the basket tucked securely in the crook of her arm. Her gaze lingered on the woodsman, shadows flickering across her features as she considered him. With a gentle, almost teasing lilt, she said, "Well, I'd hate for our conversation to get too heated, but you do have a knack for showing up when things are most... vulnerable." The words slipped out as she shifted her weight, her curiosity piqued and her tone threaded with genuine concern, the memory of past encounters coloring her voice. Wolf leans in with a reassuring smile, though his eyes glint with an unreadable intent. Wolf leaned in, the reassuring curve of his smile at odds with the unreadable glint in his eyes. His voice, low and velvety, carried just enough warmth to soften the edge of his words as he explained, "Vulnerability invites kindness—or suspicion, I suppose—but I assure you, my intentions are as harmless as a spring breeze." The charm in his tone lingered in the air, inviting trust even as something deeper and more conflicted flickered beneath his gaze. Red narrows her eyes and steps closer, watching Wolf intently for any sign of deceit. Red narrowed her eyes, her gaze sharp and unyielding as she stepped closer to Wolf. She studied the set of his jaw, the glint in his eyes, searching for any hint of falsehood beneath that too-easy grin. With a calm steadiness that belied the tension thrumming beneath her skin, she said, "A spring breeze can stir up all sorts of trouble if you're not careful, Wolf—so why don't you show me exactly what you're doing here, before I decide whether to trust that grin?" Wolf gestures toward the bedroom with a sweeping motion, his grin unwavering as he steps aside to let Red lead the way. Wolf's grin didn't falter as he swept his paw toward the bedroom door, a flourish as effortless as it was inviting. Stepping aside, he let Red take the lead, his eyes bright with mischief and hope. "Of course, Red," he said smoothly, his voice a velvet purr as he gestured her forward. "Why don't we check on your grandmother together, so you can see for yourself that my paws are clean?" The words slipped from him with practiced charm, but beneath the showmanship lingered a restless longing—a hope that, perhaps, Red might finally see him as more than a shadow lurking in the wood. Wolf, rather than intimidating her, attempts to prove his innocence and neighborly concern

by suggesting they check on the grandmother together.

Red, still wary, agrees conditionally, maintaining her protective stance.

Wolf lingers, watching her, his motives caught between genuine loneliness and a desire for connection, but now under sharper scrutiny from Red, who is determined to shield her grandmother and uncover Wolf's true intentions.

Outside, a sudden sound breaks the tense standoff, drawing both Red's and the Wolf's attention toward the shadowed doorway. As the uneasy silence thickens, the presence of another—unexpected and forceful—begins to make itself known, shifting the balance inside the cottage. The air grows taut with anticipation, just as footsteps approach, heralding the arrival of someone who may alter the course of their confrontation.

Chapter 5: Woodsman Intervenes

Red, gripping her wicker basket, steps onto the stone path and knocks on her grandmother's door, her boots leaving imprints in the muddy earth.

The Wolf, disguised in a patchwork shawl, cracks the door open and tries to mimic Grandmother's frail voice, urging Red to come inside.

WolfThe Wolf pulls the shawl tighter, feigning a trembling hand as he opens the door wider, eyes glittering hungrily from the dimness within. With a practiced, honeyed tone, Wolf called out from the shadowed bed, the edges of his voice trembling just enough to sound frail. "Oh, my sweet child, do come in," he coaxed, his clever eyes tracking Red's silhouette as she hesitated in the doorway. The wind rattled the shutters, and he pressed a trembling paw—disguised beneath a blanket—against his brow. "The wind is biting today, and your poor old grandmother aches so." He resisted the urge to grin as he beckoned her closer, his gaze lingering on her bright cheeks. "Step closer, dear, let me see your lovely face in the light." The words slipped from him like a caress, half invitation, half plea, as he fought the gnawing ache of loneliness and the thrill of his own deception. Before Red can cross the threshold, the Woodsman bursts from the underbrush, his axe slung over his shoulder, voice firm as he addresses Red: 'Wait, Red.

Something's wrong here.

' He scans the Wolf with narrowed eyes, nostrils flaring as he catches a whiff of wet fur beneath the borrowed shawl.

The Wolf, sensing threat, drops the act and bares his teeth, backing into the dim cottage.

The Woodsman stands protectively between Red and the door, axe ready, as Red inches closer, peering over his shoulder and demanding, 'Where is my grandmother?

' The Woodsman's decisive intervention halts the Wolf's deception and forces a confrontation, preventing Red from entering and prompting the Wolf to reveal his true form.

With the Wolf subdued and the grandmother safe once more, the tension in the cottage slowly ebbs, replaced by uneasy silence. Red and the Woodsman exchange wary glances, their relief tempered

by the sight of the defeated Wolf. As the dust settles, a new question hangs in the air—what should be done with the creature whose actions nearly shattered their lives? The moment calls for more than mere justice; it offers an unexpected opportunity to confront anger, fear, and the possibility of mercy.

Chapter 6: A Choice of Forgiveness

Red steps carefully over slick roots, clutching the basket and the letter as she approaches the cottage door.

Wolf, in his human guise, emerges from behind a birch tree, brushing stray twigs from his coat and sniffing the air.

He intercepts Red, bowing theatrically to block her path and asks, 'Will you trust me to help your grandmother?

' Red, recalling his earlier deception, responds with suspicion and pointed questions, making it clear she hasn't forgotten his past behavior.

Red crosses her arms, her gaze sharp and unyielding as she watches Wolf closely for any sign of dishonesty. Red crossed her arms, her posture firm, and fixed the Wolf with an unwavering stare. The memory of his earlier deception still fresh in her mind, she narrowed her eyes, refusing to let her guard down. "Fresh water, huh?" she said, her tone edged with skepticism. "Funny how quick you are to help now, after the last time you tried to trick me." She studied him, searching for any flicker of dishonesty behind his offer. "Why should I trust you to bring anything back but trouble?" Wolf lowers his voice, keeping his stance nonthreatening as he gestures toward the distant sound of running water. Wolf's voice softened, a low, almost conspiratorial rumble as he inclined his head toward the faint, enticing rush of water somewhere beyond the trees. Careful not to crowd her, he kept his posture open, his paws tucked close rather than outstretched, every line of his body signaling that he meant no harm. "You have every right to doubt me, Red," he admitted, his gaze meeting hers with a disarming sincerity that nearly masked the flicker of longing beneath. "But you need water, and these woods—well, there's no one who knows them better than I do." A hint of a smile touched his muzzle, sly and hopeful. "Let me show you I can be useful. Not just... dangerous." Red crosses her arms, her gaze fixed sharply on Wolf, refusing to let her guard down. Red crossed her arms, the woven basket pressed against her side, and kept her gaze fixed sharply on Wolf. She refused to let her guard drop, not after his earlier deception. Though his words promised help—fresh water, wild herbs—she couldn't ignore the uneasy prickle of danger at her nape. Useful doesn't erase dangerous, she reminded herself, her voice low but steady as she addressed him. "So tell me, Wolf, if I let you go, what's to stop you from vanishing into those trees and leaving me stranded?" Her question lingered in the air, edged with suspicion and a determination that would not be easily swayed. Wolf lowers his head slightly, meeting Red's gaze with a hint of sincerity, his tail still but his ears alert for her response. Wolf lowered his head just enough to catch Red's wary gaze, a flicker of sincerity brushing his features. His tail, for once, stilled behind him, though his ears remained keen, tuned for the smallest change in her breathing. "If I wanted to leave you stranded, Red, I would have done it already," he murmured, his tone softer than before, as if confessing rather than boasting. "But I'm still here, offering help because maybe I'm more than just my mistakes." The words lingered between them, earnest and uncertain, as he watched for any sign that she might let her guard slip, even for a moment. Red

crosses her arms, studying Wolf's face for any hint of deceit as he turns toward the stream. Red folded her arms across her chest, her gaze fixed on Wolf's profile as he turned toward the stream. She searched his features for any flicker of dishonesty, the memory of his earlier trickery still sharp in her mind. Still, she let her voice carry a hint of challenge as she called after him, "Maybe, but trust isn't given for free—bring back that water, and we'll see if you've earned a drop of it." Wolf acknowledges her distrust and honestly pleads for a chance to prove he can be more than his mistakes.

Red thrusts the empty jug into Wolf's hands, her gaze sharp with warning, but her posture betrays a flicker of hope mingled with anxiety. Red hesitated only a heartbeat before thrusting the empty jug into Wolf's hands, her gaze sharp and unyielding. Yet in the tense line of her shoulders and the way her fingers lingered a moment too long on the handle, a flicker of hope mingled with her anxiety. "Here—take this," she said, voice low and firm, the weight of her trust unmistakable. "But be quick about it. I'm counting on you to bring it back, Wolf. Don't make me regret this." Wolf grips the empty jug firmly, nodding with a flash of resolve before slipping into the trees. Wolf gripped the empty jug with a sudden, almost theatrical firmness, letting the weight of Red's trust settle between his claws. He met her eyes—just a flicker of something earnest beneath the usual glint—and flashed a crooked smile. "You have my word, Red—I'll be back before you know it." With that pledge lingering in the air, he nodded, a flash of resolve crossing his features, then slipped into the shadows of the trees, the promise echoing behind him as he vanished into the undergrowth. Red remains guarded, refusing to offer trust easily, but allows Wolf to fetch water only after making her expectations and doubts explicit.

She sternly hands him the empty jug, warning him not to betray her trust.

Wolf promises sincerely to return quickly.

As Wolf bounds off, tail flicking beneath his coat, Red wipes mud from her boots and knocks on the cottage door, still determined but more wary than before, intent on delivering the basket and letter herself.

As the cottage door creaked open and Red stepped into the familiar warmth within, the weight of her decision lingered in the air. Outside, the Wolf's figure disappeared into the trees, his fate no longer shaped by vengeance but by the uncertain hope of a second chance. Inside, Red's heart wrestled with both relief and apprehension, knowing that forgiveness was only the first step on a much longer road. With the basket still in her grasp and the letter to deliver, she braced herself for whatever changes the day's choices would bring, unaware that the path ahead would soon reveal possibilities she had never imagined.

Chapter 7: New Beginnings

Wolf lingers at the forest border, ears twitching as he recalls Red's unexpected kindness—her offering him bread earlier that day.

Woodsman's footsteps approach, axe slung across his shoulder.

Confronting Wolf, Woodsman warns, 'Stay away from the cottage.

' Wolf, instead of acting defensive, speaks with genuine emotion: 'You know, I've roamed these woods for years, and never once have I met a soul quite like her.

Most folk run at the sight of me, but she—she offered me a piece of her bread.

Wolf sits beneath a tree, gazing thoughtfully into the distance, recalling the girl's gentle gesture. Wolf reclined beneath the dappled shade, his golden eyes tracking the path where Red had passed minutes before. A wistful smile played on his muzzle as he mulled over the encounter. He'd roamed these woods for years, slipping between shadows and outwitting hunters, but never had he met anyone quite like her. Most folk scattered at the mere snap of a twig or the glint of his teeth. Not Red—no, she had looked him straight in the eyes and, with a gentleness as warm as spring sunlight, offered him a piece of her bread. The memory lingered, unexpected and sweet. Kindness like that, he thought, catches you off guard. ' Woodsman observes Wolf's conflicted demeanor, recognizing a softer side.

Wolf's tail lowers, and, still longing for company, he decides not to provoke Woodsman further.

He shakes his fur and retreats deeper into the woods for now, leaving Woodsman vigilant but thoughtful, scanning the shadows and reflecting on Wolf's words as he guards Red and her grandmother.

As dusk settles over the forest, peace lingers at the edge of the trees, and a quiet hope stirs in the hearts of those who remain.