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Chapter 6: A Hunter’s Arrival Forces a Choice

Red arrives at the cottage path, basket in hand, boots crunching on wet leaves as she scans for signs of her grandmother.

Lucien, standing nearby, is engaged in a tense exchange with Hunter, who confronts Lucien directly about his intentions regarding Red and the truth he claims to possess.

Their conversation reveals that Lucien is not simply a helpful outsider but someone who believes Red deserves to know information that Hunter may be withholding from her.

Hunter remains deeply suspicious, warning that some truths may be harmful, and insists on keeping Lucien under close watch.

Hunter steps forward, blocking Lucien’s path with a squared stance and narrowed eyes, his posture radiating distrust and a readiness to defend. Hunter moved with quiet purpose, stepping forward until he stood squarely in Lucien’s path. His stance was rigid, shoulders squared and eyes narrowed with suspicion, every line of his body radiating a protective wariness. Blocking the way with a boldness that brooked no argument, he fixed Lucien with a hard stare and demanded in a low, gruff voice, “What are you doing here, Lucien? State your business—now.” Lucien’s gaze never flinches from Hunter, his voice low but edged with challenge. Lucien didn’t so much as flinch under Hunter’s hard stare; his gaze held steady, cool and unblinking. He stood just beyond Hunter’s reach, the

faintest curl at the corner of his mouth betraying both defiance and something softer—a longing he barely masked. When Hunter’s gruff demand cut through the hush of the woods, Lucien’s response came low and edged with challenge. “I’m here to make sure she knows the truth—no matter how much you want to keep it from her.” His voice, though quiet, carried a weight that clung to the space between them, refusing to be dismissed. Hunter squares his shoulders, blocking Lucien’s advance, eyes narrowed and jaw clenched in warning. Hunter squared his shoulders, stepping deliberately into Lucien’s path and planting himself firmly between the stranger and the cottage door. His eyes narrowed to wary slits, jaw clenching in a clear warning. “Truth’s a sharp blade in the wrong hands,” he said, voice low and gruff, the words edged with suspicion as he sized Lucien up. “So you’d better tell me what you think she needs cutting with.” Lucien’s eyes narrow, his tone calm but edged with challenge as he steps forward, refusing to be intimidated by Hunter’s stance. Lucien’s eyes narrowed, a flicker of defiance glinting beneath his calm exterior as he stepped forward, closing the distance between himself and Hunter. He refused to be cowed by the larger man’s imposing stance. His voice, though measured, carried a subtle challenge as he spoke, “You call it a blade, but for her it’s a key—one you can’t keep hidden forever.” The words lingered in the hush of the woods, Lucien’s longing and resolve woven quietly into every syllable. Hunter squares his shoulders, his eyes locked on Lucien, tension crackling in the charged silence between them. Hunter squared his shoulders, planting himself firmly between Lucien and the cottage. His gaze was unwavering, eyes narrowed with suspicion, every muscle taut with the intent to shield what mattered most. The charged silence hung thick in the air. Without softening his tone, Hunter demanded, “If you’re so sure it’s a key, then let’s hear what doors you think it’ll open.” His voice carried a bold warning, each word clipped and gruff. “Because I won’t let you wreck her just to settle some old score.” The words lingered, protective and assertive, leaving no question as to where Hunter stood. Lucien’s jaw tightens, his gaze steady and unwavering as he steps closer, refusing to back down. Lucien’s jaw tightened, the tension clear beneath his charming façade, yet his gaze remained steady and unwavering as he stepped closer, undeterred by Hunter’s imposing figure. The woods seemed to hush around them, shadows tangled in the fading light. Hunter planted himself squarely between Lucien and Red, his stance protective, voice rough with suspicion as he demanded to know Lucien’s purpose.

Lucien didn’t flinch. Instead, a flicker of vulnerability passed through his eyes—a silent longing for connection that lingered just beneath his guarded surface. “I’m not here for vengeance, Hunter,” he said quietly, voice edged with sincerity as much as defiance. “I’m here because she deserves to choose her own path, not live in the shadows you cast.” Hunter steps closer, his stance rigid, eyes locked onto Lucien with unwavering intensity. Hunter stepped closer, his stance rigid as he planted himself squarely between Lucien and the cottage door. His eyes, sharp and unyielding, never left Lucien’s face. “You talk about shadows,” he said, voice low and gruff, “but some truths burn brighter than she can bear—so unless you want her hurt, you’ll tread carefully.” The warning hung heavy in the air, Hunter’s protective presence like a barricade, making it clear that any misstep would not go unnoticed. Lucien’s gaze hardens, voice low but unwavering, as tension crackles between them. Lucien’s gaze hardened, a flicker of something fierce and unspoken glinting beneath his carefully composed exterior. The tension between them seemed almost tangible, pressed taut by the Hunter’s hulking presence. Yet Lucien’s voice, low and unwavering, cut through the charged air. “Then maybe it’s time she learned to stand in the light, no matter how much it hurts.” Red, meanwhile, asserts her own determination to care for her grandmother, undeterred by the tension between the two men.

Red tightens her grip on the basket, eyes flicking toward the Hunter with a mix of caution and

determination, as she steps a little closer to the path. Red tightened her grip on the basket, the woven handle pressing into her palm as she took a careful step closer to the winding path. Her gaze flickered toward the Hunter, a blend of caution and quiet resolve shining in her eyes. “I’m on my way to visit my grandmother,” she explained, her voice steady despite the wariness threading through it. “She’s unwell, so I’ve brought her some food and medicine from the village.” Though she was well aware of the dangers lurking in the woods—her mother’s warnings echoing in her mind—Red drew herself up a little taller, determination settling over her features. “I promised her I’d come,” she added softly, a note of compassion underscoring her words, “and I don’t intend to let her down.” Hunter lowers his axe, studying Red’s determined face before glancing warily at the shadowed trees. Hunter lowered his axe, his gaze lingering on the determined set of Red’s jaw before flicking warily to the shadowed trees crowding the path. He studied her, weighing her resolve against the dangers he knew lurked beyond the familiar brambles. “You’re brave to come through these woods alone,” he remarked, voice edged with both respect and caution. The forest was restless these days, and Hunter had seen too many signs that not all who wandered beneath its canopy had good intentions. His eyes swept the gloom, protective instinct sharpening. “But you’d do well to stay alert—strange things have been stirring lately.” Red tightens her grip on the basket, meeting the Hunter’s eyes with determined resolve, though a hint of nervousness flickers in her posture. Red tightened her grip on the basket, the woven handle pressing into her palms as she met the Hunter’s gaze. Determined resolve burned behind her eyes, though a flicker of nervousness betrayed her caution. She took a steady breath, shoulders squared, and spoke with a quiet firmness that belied the tremor in her heart. “I understand,” she said, voice clear but gentle. “I’ll keep my wits about me—Mother taught me well. But my Grandmother is counting on me, and I can’t turn back now.” She swallowed, her compassion for her ailing grandmother lending courage to her words, as she stepped forward, ready to face whatever the forest held. HunterRed looks up at the Hunter, her grip tightening on the basket as she scans the shadowy trees for movement. Red stepped forward, her grip tightening around the basket as she searched the shadowy trees, unease flickering across her face. She met the Hunter’s wary gaze, her voice steady despite the tension in her posture. “If you know a safer path,” she said, the words edged with both caution and hope, “I’d appreciate your guidance—my grandmother’s cottage isn’t far, but I’d rather not risk a wrong turn.” Red looks the Hunter in the eye, weighing his trustworthiness as she tightens her grip on the basket and gestures down the shadowy path. Red steadied herself, glancing up at the Hunter with cautious resolve. Her fingers tightened around the basket as she gestured toward the shadowy path ahead, the woods pressing in on either side. “I know the way well enough,” she said, her voice firm despite the uncertainty that lingered in the air. But as she studied his face, searching for any hint of malice or deceit, compassion nudged aside her wariness. “If you’re willing to walk with me,” she continued, quietly acknowledging the unspoken dangers, “perhaps we’ll both feel safer from whatever’s been lurking here.” Hunter shoulders his axe and steps beside Red, scanning the underbrush as they move forward together. Hunter shifted his axe to one shoulder, stepping purposefully beside Red as she explained her errand for Grandmother. His gaze swept the tangled underbrush, ever alert for movements or muffled sounds that didn’t belong. “Very well, Red,” he murmured, voice low and edged with caution. “Let’s keep our eyes open and our voices low—for these woods listen as much as they hide.” The warning lingered between them as they pressed deeper into the shadowy forest, baskets and axes held close, every step deliberate and wary. Despite the undercurrent of mistrust, Red invites both Hunter and Lucien to accompany her, reasoning that their combined presence may offer greater safety given the recent dangers in the woods.

Lucien holds his hands out in front of him, palms open, taking a careful step forward but waiting for Hunter's response before moving closer. Lucien took a cautious step forward, his hands raised in plain sight, palms open to the late afternoon light that filtered through the trees. A gentle, almost disarming smile curved his lips as he met Hunter's wary gaze. "Hey, Hunter," he offered, voice warm, his posture promising harmless intent. "Let me give you a hand with those supplies—looks like you've got your arms full." He gave a subtle lift of his sleeves, showing there was nothing hidden, nothing threatening. "See? Nothing up my sleeves." And though the gesture was light, even playful, there was a hopeful edge beneath it—a quiet longing to be trusted, to be let in, if only just a little closer. Hunter shifts his weight, keeping his eyes locked on Lucien, the supplies clutched close to his chest. Hunter shifted his weight, boots scraping against the porch boards as he kept his gaze fixed on Lucien. The bundle of supplies pressed tightly to his chest, he made no move to relax his grip. Lucien approached with his hands open, palms visible in an unspoken promise of harmless intent. But Hunter didn't budge. His voice was steady, edged with a wary boldness. "That's real generous of you, Lucien," he said, eyes narrowing just a touch, "but folks don't usually offer help around here without wanting something in return—so what's your angle?" Lucien keeps his palms open, stepping back to give Hunter space and showing he's not making any sudden moves. Lucien took a careful step back, his palms open and visible, making a show of giving Hunter as much space as he needed. There was an easy charm in his voice, but something guarded in his eyes. "Fair question," he admitted, glancing between the supplies and the wary faces before him. "I'm just trying to pull my weight since I'm new here, and figured it was better to earn trust than sit on my hands." The offer hung in the air, his posture radiating a blend of caution and a quiet, earnest longing to be welcomed—if only for a little while. Hunter shifts the supplies to one arm, keeping a careful eye on Lucien as he gestures for him to follow, but doesn't hand anything over. Hunter shifted the bundle of supplies to one arm, his gaze steady and unflinching as he watched Lucien's open-handed offer. He didn't give up any of the packages, not ready for that level of trust. Instead, he jerked his chin toward the cottage and gestured for Lucien to follow, the movement firm but guarded. Trust isn't earned in a day, Hunter thought, and he wasn't about to let a newcomer near their stores on a whim. "Walk with me while I finish up," he said, keeping his voice even but unmistakably firm. "Let's see how much help you're really here to give." As he led the way, Hunter's eyes didn't stray far from Lucien, measuring the stranger's intent with every step. Hunter agrees to walk with Red, keeping a vigilant eye on Lucien, who attempts to prove his good intentions by volunteering to help with supplies.

Hunter falls into step beside Lucien, arms crossed and eyes narrowed, watching Lucien closely with every step. Hunter fell into step beside Lucien, arms crossed tightly over his chest, his gaze never wavering from the stranger's every movement. The set of his jaw was firm, suspicion etched plainly across his features as they walked. "I'll walk you to the door, Lucien," he said, voice low but resolute. "No offense, but I like to be sure about things." The words hung in the air, a clear warning that trust was not given lightly in these woods. Lucien forces a polite smile, subtly shifting his weight as he heads toward the door, eyes flicking to Hunter's wary expression. Lucien forced a polite smile, the gesture flickering across his face as he subtly shifted his weight, preparing to head toward the door. He caught the edge of Hunter's wary gaze—sharp, unyielding, unwilling to let him slip from notice. Sensing the tension, Lucien let his voice drift out with practiced ease, a hint of reassurance woven through the words. "Of course, Hunter—whatever makes you comfortable." He kept his expression smooth, though beneath it a flicker of vulnerability lingered, the longing for genuine connection surfacing just long enough to be quickly masked. Hunter narrows their eyes, lingering just a step behind Lucien, watching every subtle gesture. Hunter narrowed their

eyes, falling a deliberate step behind Lucien as they approached the cottage's weather-beaten door. Every subtle movement was scrutinized, Hunter's gaze never wavering. There was something off about Lucien's haste, and Hunter wasn't about to ignore it. With a protective edge sharpening their voice, Hunter remarked, "You seem awfully eager to get moving—anything in particular got you in a rush?" The question hung in the air, heavy with suspicion as Hunter watched for the faintest flicker of a tell. Lucien offers a small, practiced smile, but his fingers fidget with the strap of his bag, betraying a flicker of unease. Lucien offered a small, practiced smile, but his fingers betrayed him, fidgeting restlessly with the worn strap of his bag. Under Hunter's watchful gaze, he tried to project ease, though a flicker of unease lingered behind his eyes. "Just trying to respect your time, that's all—no hidden motives here," he assured, the words light and casual, even as his posture remained guarded. Hunter narrows their eyes, pausing mid-step and fixing Lucien with a pointed stare. Hunter paused mid-step, boots crunching to a halt on the gravel path. With narrowed eyes, he fixed Lucien in a stare sharp enough to cut through fog. "Funny," he drawled, voice low and edged, "because every time I look away, you look like you're sizing up the exits." His gaze lingered, unwavering, making it clear he wasn't about to let Lucien out of his sight—not until he was certain of the stranger's intentions. Lucien offers a tight smile, subtly shifting their weight toward the hallway, hands tucked into their pockets as if seeking comfort. Lucien offered a tight, practiced smile, the kind that never quite reached his eyes. He shifted subtly, angling his body toward the hallway as if already halfway gone, hands burrowed deep in his pockets. The scrutiny from Hunter lingered, heavy and unrelenting, and Lucien's composure wavered just enough for a hint of vulnerability to show. "If I seem restless," he murmured, voice soft but steady, "it's only because your scrutiny could make anyone a little uneasy." Hunter narrows his eyes, slowing his pace to keep Lucien directly in front of him as they approach the door. Hunter narrowed his eyes, his steps deliberately slowing as he positioned himself just behind Lucien, refusing to let him slip from his sight. Every movement Lucien made was scrutinized, Hunter's suspicion sharpening with each uncertain glance the stranger cast toward the cottage. He kept his voice low but firm, a protective edge threading through his words as they approached the door. "Maybe," he muttered, never quite taking his eyes off Lucien, "but I've learned that uneasy people usually have something to hide." Lucien offers a tight smile, hands tucked in his pockets, eyes flicking briefly to the door before meeting Hunter's gaze. Lucien offered a tight, measured smile, his hands remaining tucked deep in his pockets. His gaze flicked, just for a heartbeat, toward the door before he met Hunter's eyes again. There was an edge of vulnerability beneath his charm, as if he'd grown too used to keeping his distance. "Or maybe," he said quietly, letting the words hang in the charged air, "some people just don't like being treated like suspects, Hunter." Hunter steps closer, blocking Lucien's path just enough to make the invitation a challenge rather than a request, eyes never leaving Lucien's face. Hunter edged forward, positioning himself squarely in Lucien's way—close enough that the invitation to proceed felt more like a challenge. His gaze never wavered, dark eyes tracking every twitch of Lucien's nervous fingers. "Then prove me wrong," he said, voice low and resolute. "Walk slow, stay in sight, and let's see if that nervous energy of yours settles down." The protective set of his shoulders made it clear: Lucien wouldn't be taking a single step toward the cottage door without Hunter at his side. Lucien forces a measured, deliberate stride, glancing at Hunter with a strained half-smile as they walk, hands visible and posture tense. Lucien forced himself into a measured, deliberate stride, every movement calculated as though he were following invisible lines drawn by Hunter's suspicion. His hands remained in plain sight, shoulders tight beneath his coat. He flickered a strained half-smile at Hunter, trying to soften the air between them, but the tension only seemed to thicken. "Fine," he conceded, voice low and even. "If it puts your mind at ease, I'll match your pace—no sudden moves, just the door ahead." However, the dynamic remains

wary, with Hunter openly questioning Lucien's motives and demanding transparency as they all approach the cottage together, the uneasy alliance marked by unresolved questions and a fragile sense of trust.

As the cottage door creaked open, the tension between them lingered in the cool evening air, each step inside shadowed by uncertainty. Though Hunter's suspicions had been temporarily quieted, Red could not ignore the questions that simmered beneath the surface. Later, as dusk deepened and the woods beckoned with their silent mysteries, Red found herself drawn outside, compelled to seek answers beyond the cottage walls. It was then, beneath the tangled canopy, that she encountered another figure—one whose presence promised to unravel even deeper secrets than those harbored by Lucien.

Chapter 2: Red Meets the Mysterious Stranger in the Woods

Red stepped lightly along the winding forest trail, her basket balanced on one arm, boots brushing aside dew-laden ferns.

She paused abruptly as a twig snapped nearby, her hand tightening around the basket's handle.

Lucien emerged from the shadow of an ancient oak, dusting leaf litter from his jacket and offering a cautious, quiet greeting.

Lucien keeps his hands visible, voice low but urgent, eyes scanning the dim treeline as he steps fully into the open, careful not to make any sudden moves. Lucien stepped quietly from the shadowed trees, his presence sudden but oddly gentle in the hush of dusk. "Evening," he offered, voice soft enough not to frighten, though the way Red's eyes widened told him he had startled her nonetheless. He raised his hands in a gesture of apology, the delicate play of moonlight catching on his uncertain smile. "Sorry to startle you—I didn't mean to intrude." There was a tension behind his words, a flicker of vulnerability in the way he glanced over his shoulder at the silent woods. He hesitated, drawing a breath as if weighing the risk of honesty. "There's something you ought to know," Lucien continued, his tone low and urgent, "and I couldn't risk being overheard." Unlike a casual encounter, Lucien's demeanor was urgent and conspiratorial—he hinted at secrets and dangers, speaking in hushed tones about risks and loyalties.

Red, though cautious and guided by her mother's warnings, found herself drawn into Lucien's veiled conversation.

Lucien offers a gentle smile, his tone warm but tinged with vulnerability, and his eyes flicker between Red's face and the basket, as if hoping for reassurance or an invitation. Lucien offered a gentle smile, his warmth edged with something quietly vulnerable, as he paused a few paces from Red. His gaze lingered on her face, then flickered to the basket nestled against her arm—a silent hopefulness in his expression, as if searching for reassurance or, perhaps, an unspoken invitation. "Excuse me," he said, voice soft but earnest, "I couldn't help but notice you seem to know your way through these woods." The words carried a subtle longing, and Lucien shifted his weight, almost apologetic. "I've been wandering a while, searching for a cottage nearby—though, truth be told, I suppose I'm also searching for a friendly face." His eyes returned to the basket, curiosity

mingling with his wish to belong. “That looks quite special—are you heading there yourself? If it’s not too much trouble, perhaps you could point me in the right direction?” Red tightens her grip on the basket, her eyes studying Lucien with cautious curiosity. Red tightened her grip on the basket, knuckles whitening as she studied Lucien with a blend of caution and curiosity. “I am,” she said, her voice steady but wary. “But it’s not far—just beyond the old birch grove.” She hesitated, glancing at the narrow path ahead before meeting his gaze again. “I can show you the way, if you’d like,” she offered, the words edged with the warning her mother had always pressed upon her. “Though I don’t usually walk with strangers.” As they walked, Lucien confessed that their meeting was no mere coincidence: he was on the run from a group called the Circle, and his search for connection was entangled with betrayals and moral crossroads.

Red offers a small, polite smile, her posture subtly shifting as she keeps her hands folded in her lap, signaling her unwillingness to divulge more. Red offered Lucien a small, polite smile, her fingers remaining folded neatly in her lap—a subtle signal of boundaries held firm. She felt the weight of her mother’s warnings pressing gently at the back of her mind, reminding her to tread carefully. “I appreciate your interest, Lucien,” she said, her tone measured and kind, “but I’d rather not talk about it. My mother always said some things are better kept to oneself.” Her posture stayed reserved, not unfriendly, but undeniably guarded, as if a thin veil existed between her heart and the stranger beside her. Lucien leans forward slightly, his tone gentle but probing, eyes searching Red’s face for any sign of hesitation. Lucien leaned forward, the flickering sunlight catching in his eyes as he watched Red with careful intensity. His voice softened, carrying a gentle warmth that hinted at something deeper, perhaps a longing for connection he rarely confessed. “Of course, Red,” he murmured, his words rolling out smoothly, but there was an undercurrent of curiosity beneath his charm. His gaze lingered on her, searching for the smallest sign of hesitation. “Though sometimes sharing a little can lighten the burden—are you certain there’s nothing you wish to tell me?” Red glances away, her fingers tracing patterns in the dirt, signaling her resolve to remain silent. Red’s gaze drifted to the forest floor, her fingers absently tracing uncertain patterns in the dirt. Memories of her mother’s stern words echoed in her mind—never trust a stranger, never give away more than you must. Though Lucien’s tone was gentle, curiosity bright in his eyes, Red kept her voice measured and polite as she replied, “I’m sure, Lucien; it’s just safer this way.” Even as she spoke, her posture remained guarded, her resolve clear in the way she avoided his gaze. Red, initially guarded, pressed Lucien for the truth, challenging him about the risks and consequences of associating with him.

Their dialogue shifted from polite wariness to open negotiation about trust, loyalty, and the possibility of exile from their respective communities.

By the end of the encounter, Red understood that agreeing to walk with Lucien meant risking her standing with the Circle, and potentially her family, while refusing meant abandoning a chance at a deeper, though dangerous, connection.

Lucien stands back, hands visible and relaxed, making no move to approach, his tone gentle and respectful as he addresses Red across the small gap between them. Lucien lingered at the edge of the clearing, careful to keep his hands visible and his posture open, projecting a gentle deference. He could sense the wariness in the young woman’s eyes—a wariness that was more than justified in these uncertain times. His voice, when he spoke, was soft and unhurried, meant to reassure rather than intrude. He offered a faint, apologetic smile. “Pardon me, miss. I can see you’re wary, and rightly so these days.” He made no move to come closer, his respect for her boundaries clear in the cautious distance he maintained. “I mean no harm, truly. If our paths happen to align, perhaps

we could walk together for a bit?” There was a note of longing beneath the surface—an unspoken hope for connection—but he left the choice to her, adding quietly, “But if you’d rather keep your distance, I understand.” RedShe slowed her pace just enough to keep Lucien in her peripheral vision, one hand resting near the hidden knife at her belt. Red slowed her steps, careful to keep Lucien just at the edge of her vision. Her fingers hovered close to the hidden knife beneath her belt, a comfort against the uncertainty of the woods—and the stranger trailing her path. When Lucien called out, voice pitched with friendly insistence, “I mean no harm,” Red’s gaze flicked back over her shoulder, eyes narrowed in suspicion. She didn’t bother to mask the caution in her voice as she answered, “People who mean no harm don’t usually announce it.” Her stance remained guarded, every muscle attuned to flight or fight as she pressed, “What do you want, really?” Lucien slows his pace, maintaining a respectful distance, his hands visible and open at his sides. Lucien slowed his pace at the edge of the trail, careful to keep a respectful distance behind Red. His hands remained visible and open at his sides, a deliberate gesture of harmlessness. He watched her wary posture and offered a crooked smile that didn’t quite reach his eyes. “Fair point, Red,” he called gently through the hush of the woods, voice pitched low to avoid startling her. “I’m just passing through, and conversation beats silence.” The yearning in his tone was barely masked by practiced charm; he hesitated, sensing her caution. “But if you’d rather be left alone, I’ll respect that.” The words hung in the cool air, Lucien’s longing for connection veiled beneath the surface, even as he waited for her answer. The result was a tense, pivotal choice—Red, now aware of the stakes, must decide whether to join Lucien in defiance or part ways, with both futures carrying heavy costs.

Red slows their stride just enough to glance back over their shoulder, eyes narrowed, voice low but steady. Red hesitated, her steps slowing just enough to let Lucien nearly catch up, though she kept a careful distance between them. Glancing back over her shoulder, she narrowed her eyes, searching his face for any flicker of hidden intent. Her voice was low but steady as she spoke, the weight of her mother’s warnings echoing in her mind. She wanted him to know she wasn’t naïve. “I get what you’re saying, Lucien,” she said, her tone measured. “But you have to know this isn’t an easy yes for me.” She paused, the basket heavy in her grip, her gaze unwavering. “What exactly are you asking me to risk here? Because from where I’m standing, it feels like there’s more you’re not telling me.” Lucien steps closer, lowering his tone, the tension tangible as he waits for Red’s response. Lucien stepped closer, the space between them charged with a tension that made the shadows seem to press in more tightly. His gaze flickered, searching Red’s face as if weighing how much to reveal. When he finally spoke, his voice was low, edged with something vulnerable despite his usual charm. “You’re right, Red—I haven’t laid it all out.” He hesitated, letting the words settle between them before continuing, quieter still. “But if you walk with me on this, we both stand to lose more than just our skins; we’re gambling with loyalties that can’t be undone.” He waited, the silence stretching, watching for any sign of trust—or doubt—in her eyes. Red slows his stride, watching Lucien carefully, his jaw tight with uncertainty. Red slowed his stride, putting a careful distance between himself and Lucien. His jaw tightened with uncertainty as he watched the stranger from the corner of his eye. He weighed the offer in silence, the forest pressing in with its quiet expectation. Then, keeping several paces ahead, Red glanced back over his shoulder and spoke, his voice low but steady. “So if I say yes, Lucien, I need to know who exactly we’re betraying—and whether it’s worth burning every bridge left to us.” The words hung between them, edged with caution and resolve, as Red waited for the answer that would decide his next step. LucienHe meets Red’s eyes, searching for resolve, his hands clenched tight at his sides. Lucien met her gaze, searching her face as though he might find his own resolve reflected there. His hands clenched tightly at his sides, betraying a tension he otherwise kept masked behind a charming

smile. For a moment, he seemed to weigh his words, then his voice came low and careful, almost vulnerable. “If we take this path,” he said, his eyes not leaving hers, “we’re turning our backs on the Circle. And once it’s done, there’s no crawling back—are you ready for that kind of exile?” Red slows his pace, glancing sidelong at Lucien, searching his face for any hint of reassurance or regret. Red slowed her pace, letting Lucien draw almost level before she drifted a few steps ahead once more, keeping the careful distance her mother’s warnings had carved into her instincts. She risked a sidelong glance at him, searching his face for any flicker of reassurance—or regret—but found only the unreadable calm he wore so easily. The weight of his offer pressed down on her, tightening her jaw. She considered, quietly, what refusing would mean for both of them. If I say no, she thought, do we become enemies—or just ghosts to each other? The unspoken question lingered between them, heavy as the basket on her arm and twice as difficult to set down. LucienHe stops, shoulders tense, waiting for Red’s answer in the silence between them. Lucien halted, shoulders taut as if bracing himself against the weight of the moment, the hush of the woods settling around them. His gaze found Red’s back, and something in his expression wavered—softening, a fleeting regret shadowing his features. “If you say no, Red...” His voice was gentle, edged with something almost wistful. “I’ll let you walk away. But you’ll always wonder—what might’ve been, if you’d chosen me over them.” The words hung in the air, vulnerable and unguarded, as if he’d exposed a secret longing he could no longer keep hidden. —————

As the conversation fades into uneasy silence, Red finds herself turning over Lucien’s words long after they part ways for the evening. The forest’s shadows grow deeper, and with every step back toward her camp, she senses the old world slipping away, replaced by questions she can’t yet answer. Before dawn’s light breaks through the trees, a new summons arrives—her mother’s message, urgent and unignorable, pulling Red back toward the responsibilities she thought she’d left behind.

Chapter 1: Red Receives a Mission from Her Mother

Red’s mother stands beside the wood-burning stove, slicing a loaf of bread with deliberate care.

She wraps the warm slices and a jar of broth in cloth, placing them into a wicker basket as Red watches.

As she ties the basket shut, she gestures for Red to listen, her voice firm but gentle: ‘Stay on the path.

Red’s MotherShe finishes tying the basket and places her hands gently on Red’s shoulders, meeting her eyes with a look of loving concern. Red’s mother finished tying the twine around the basket, her movements careful and practiced. She set it down and turned to her daughter, placing both hands gently on Red’s small shoulders. Her gaze was steady, full of both warmth and worry as she met Red’s eyes. “Before you go,” she began, her voice firmer than usual but still gentle, “I want you to listen carefully.” She paused, making sure Red was truly paying attention. “Stay on the path—no matter what you see or hear in the woods.” The words hung between them, heavy with meaning. “Do you understand?” she pressed softly, her thumb brushing Red’s sleeve in a comforting gesture. “Promise me you’ll remember what I said.” Red clutches the basket tighter and looks up into her mother’s worried eyes, sensing the seriousness behind her gentle words. Red’s fingers tightened around the woven handle of the basket, its weight suddenly more significant as her mother’s gaze lingered on her. The air in the little cottage seemed to hush as her mother,

careful hands tying the basket shut, paused and gestured for Red's full attention. There was a gentleness in her voice, but beneath it ran a current of worry that Red couldn't ignore. She met her mother's eyes, heart thumping with the gravity of the moment, and mustered a brave nod. "I promise, Mother—I'll stay right on the path, I won't let anything distract me." The words felt both like a shield and a vow, echoing all the cautions she'd grown up hearing, and she hoped they would be enough to ease the worry she saw in her mother's face. Don't talk to anyone you don't know.

Red's MotherShe kneels down, tucking the edge of Red's hood under her chin, her eyes full of worry and care. Red's mother knelt before her, fingers deftly tucking the edge of Red's hood snug beneath her chin. Her eyes lingered on her daughter's face, brimming with worry that she tried to hide behind a gentle firmness. "Remember what I told you," she murmured, smoothing a stray lock of hair back into place. "Don't talk to anyone you don't know on your way to Grandma's house." The warning was gentle but unwavering, her voice colored by a love sharpened by caution. "There are people out there who aren't as kind as they seem." Red tightens her grip on the basket and flashes a reassuring smile, eager but slightly distracted by the thought of the woods ahead. Red tightened her grip on the basket, the woven handle pressing reassuringly into her palm as she looked up at her mother. The familiar warning—don't talk to anyone you don't know—hung in the air between them, heavy with concern. Red offered a quick, reassuring smile, her eyes bright with eagerness but flickering, just for a moment, with the uncertainty of what lay ahead in the woods. "I know, Mama—I'll go straight there and won't stop for anyone, I promise." The words came out steady, shaped by both her determination and the care she felt for her mother's peace of mind. With one last glance at the little cottage, she stepped onto the path, the promise echoing quietly in her heart as the trees closed in around her. ' Red nods, pulling her red cloak tighter, her hands brushing against the rough weave.

She lifts the basket, its weight pressing into her palms, and steps toward the door.

Her mother rests a hand on Red's shoulder, scanning her face for understanding before releasing her, intent on ensuring both her own mother's health and Red's safe passage.

Red steps outside, boots crunching on damp earth, her senses filled with the scent of pine and distant woodsmoke, determined to fulfill her mother's instructions and reach her grandmother's cottage.

Unbeknownst to Red, a shadow moves swiftly beneath the trees, taking advantage of her delay. As she begins her journey through the woods, another path converges on her grandmother's cottage—one trodden by someone with very different intentions.

Chapter 4: Lucien Reaches Grandmother's House First

Lucien, cloak damp and hair plastered to his forehead, knocks briskly on the cottage door, glancing over his shoulder at the winding path.

Grandmother, wrapped in a faded shawl, opens the door, her voice gentle but wary.

Grandmother pulls her shawl tighter around her shoulders, peering through the doorway with a soft, searching gaze, her hands trembling just slightly as she steps aside to let the visitor enter.

Grandmother tugged her faded shawl tighter around her thin shoulders as she peered through the doorway, her eyes warm and searching despite the lines of fatigue etched into her face. Her hands trembled just enough to reveal her frailty as she stepped aside, voice gentle yet edged with a quiet wariness. “Oh, my dear, is that you? The night’s chill finds its way in so easily these days.” She gestured softly for the visitor to enter, a welcoming smile flickering at her lips. “Come in, come in—but mind your shoes.” A hint of surprise lingered in her tone as she added, “I wasn’t expecting anyone at this hour.” Lucien bows his head and offers a basket of wild herbs he gathered, explaining he met Red on the road and came ahead to ensure Grandmother was safe.

Lucien bows his head respectfully and sets the basket of fragrant herbs on the table, his eyes scanning the cottage for any sign of distress. Lucien inclined his head in a gesture of respect, the brim of his hat shadowing his eyes as he set the basket of fragrant wild herbs on the worn table. His gaze flickered around the cottage, quietly searching for any sign of trouble. “Forgive my sudden visit,” he said, his tone gentle, almost apologetic. “On my way here, I crossed paths with Red—she’s just behind me, as eager as ever to see you.” He hesitated, the faintest trace of worry softening his charm. “The woods felt uneasy today, and I thought it best to hurry ahead, just to be sure all was well.” His hand lingered on the basket, fingers brushing the leaves as if willing them to impart comfort. “I gathered these for you along the path. I hope they bring you some peace.” He paused, meeting Grandmother’s eyes with a vulnerability he rarely revealed. “Your safety means a great deal to me. I couldn’t rest until I knew you were unharmed.” Grandmother waves him inside, gestures to the kettle steaming on the stove, and questions him about his journey, her fingers tightening on her cane as she appraises his intentions.

Grandmother waves him inside, eyes sharp despite her gentle smile, her fingers drumming softly against her cane as she watches his every move. Grandmother’s hand lifted in a gentle wave, beckoning Lucien inside as the wind tugged at his coat. Despite the frailty in her frame, her eyes remained sharp, studying him with a warmth that made the small cottage feel safe. Her fingers tapped a quiet rhythm on the handle of her cane, an unconscious gesture as she nodded toward the kettle whistling softly atop the stove. “Don’t let the chill follow you in,” she said, her smile kind but edged with exhaustion. “The kettle’s just about ready—come, sit. You must be tired from your travels.” She paused, her gaze never leaving his face. “What is it, I wonder, that’s brought you all the way out here today?” Lucien steps across the threshold, places the herbs by the hearth, and sits where directed, his eyes scanning the window for any sign of Red.

As Lucien settles into the warmth of the cottage, the knowledge he gleans lingers in his mind, shaping a plan as he waits for Red’s arrival. Outside, the forest path remains quiet, but Lucien knows he now holds something precious: an opportunity to draw Red away, if only he chooses his next move wisely. Soon, the peaceful hush will give way to a new encounter—one that Lucien is determined to guide in his favor.

Chapter 3: Lucien Diverts Red with a Tempting Detour

Red, adjusting the basket on her arm, eyes the winding path ahead with uncertainty.

Lucien steps lightly beside her, brushing aside a branch and revealing a bramble-covered side trail.

Sensing Red’s hesitation, Lucien reassures her, clearing the way and encouraging her gently.

Red, torn between caution and curiosity, questions the wisdom of leaving the main path, but finds herself compelled by the allure of discovery and Lucien's companionship.

She expresses her inner conflict aloud, reflecting on bravery and the unknown.

Red stands at the edge of the overgrown trail, glancing back over their shoulder before shifting their weight uncertainly. Red paused at the edge of the overgrown path, her basket balanced carefully on her arm. The narrow trail Lucien suggested was barely visible, half-swallowed by brambles and shadow. She hesitated, glancing back at the familiar route before letting her gaze settle on the stranger beside her. Was this really the best way? Doubt gnawed at her, mingling with the warnings her mother had whispered since childhood. What if there was a reason the path was hidden, shrouded from plain sight? She pressed her lips together, fingers tightening around the worn handle of the basket. She couldn't decide if her hesitation was caution or simply fear, but either way, she lingered a moment longer, her heart quickening as she weighed her next step. Red shifts their weight from foot to foot, glancing nervously down the overgrown trail. Red shifted her weight from foot to foot, feeling the damp moss press against her boots as she glanced nervously down the overgrown trail. The path twisted into the shadows, thick with brambles and secrets her mother's warnings couldn't quite reach. Yet as she hesitated, heart fluttering with uncertainty, a quiet thought pressed against her resolve: But if I turn back now, I'll never know what's waiting beyond. Red takes a tentative step toward the path, glancing over their shoulder one last time. Red hesitated at the edge of the hidden path, her basket feeling heavier than before. She took a tentative step forward, glancing over her shoulder one last time as if the safety of home might call her back. A nervous flutter danced in her chest, but beneath it stirred a quiet resolve. Every story worth telling, she thought, seemed to have a moment just like this—a threshold, a breath held before the unknown. Maybe this one was hers. Lucien responds with warmth, offering her wild strawberries and comforting her doubts with his attentiveness.

Lucien gestures warmly over his shoulder, offering a reassuring smile as he holds the vines aside, making space for his companion to follow. Lucien crouched low, his fingers moving deftly as he swept aside the tangled curtain of vines that blocked their path. He glanced over his shoulder, a reassuring smile flickering across his lips—warm, earnest, inviting. With a practiced gesture, he held the vines back, clearing the way and making space for his companion to pass. "It's all clear now," he promised, his voice gentle but confident. "Come on, I've got you. Just watch your step here." Vulnerability shimmered beneath his charm, a subtle longing for connection hidden in the way his eyes lingered, hoping she might trust him enough to follow. As they walk, Lucien shares stories of the forest's hidden wonders, speaking of the ancient Heartwood tree and the subtle magic woven through the woods.

Red's curiosity grows, and the two engage in a mutual exchange—Red offering to show Lucien where she's seen the glowing moss, deepening their trust.

Lucien crouches by the leafy patch, carefully plucks a bright wild strawberry, and holds it out to Red, his open palm inviting and gentle, a small smile softening his features. Lucien crouched by a cluster of leafy green, his fingers moving with a certain reverence as he plucked a sun-warmed wild strawberry. He looked up, meeting Red's eyes with a smile that seemed both tentative and inviting. Extending his open palm, he offered her the berry, his voice low and coaxing, "Here, Red—these are the sweetest ones. You have to try it." There was something in the gentle insistence of his gesture, a quiet longing threaded beneath his charming exterior, as if sharing this small fruit might bridge the impossible distance between them. Red hesitates with a crooked smile, eyes flicking

from Lucien's open palm to his face, fingers curling shyly before accepting the berry. Red hesitated, her smile crooked with uncertainty as she glanced from Lucien's open palm to the berry nestled there. Her fingers curled shyly against her skirt, betraying both curiosity and caution. "Are you sure?" she asked, voice soft but earnest, her gaze flicking back to his face. "You always seem to find the best spots—what if I eat it and you miss out?" Despite her words, the compassion in her eyes lingered, and after a moment, she accepted the berry, trusting him just enough to brave this small kindness. LucienHe smiles softly, holding out the tiny berry, his fingertips stained red from picking. Lucien smiled softly as he held out the tiny berry, his fingertips stained a vivid crimson from picking among the leaves. The sunlight slanted through the branches above, dappled on his cheek, but his gaze lingered on Red with quiet intent. "I don't mind at all," he said, voice low and sincere, the corners of his mouth lifting as he watched her hesitation. "Seeing you enjoy it is better than any taste for me." The offered berry seemed almost a token, more meaningful for the connection it invited than the sweetness it held. Red grins shyly, accepting the strawberry from Lucien's hand, their fingers brushing for a brief, warm moment. Red grinned shyly as she accepted the strawberry from Lucien's outstretched hand, her fingertips grazing his for a fleeting, unexpectedly warm moment. The wild fruit glistened between them, plucked from the shade where Lucien had paused to point out the secret treasures hidden among the leaves. She hesitated—her mother's cautions echoing softly in her mind—but curiosity and kindness overcame her reserve. With a playful glint in her eye, she warned him, "If you're sure about sharing, just remember: you can't blame me if I end up wanting all your secret finds." Her words blended naturally with the gentle rustle of the forest, the promise of hidden sweetness lingering in the air as she tasted the berry, and the beginning of trust taking root between them. Their connection strengthens as they listen together to the brook and share in the mysteries of the forest, each inviting the other into secrets both natural and personal.

The objective of the scene—Lucien steering Red off her usual route while building intimacy and trust—is achieved, with Red's agency and curiosity more verbally expressed, and Lucien's openness reciprocated.

Lucien slows his pace, tilting his head to catch the shimmering sound, his eyes bright with curiosity as he glances at Red. Lucien slowed his pace, letting his steps fall in time with the hush of the woods. Tilting his head, he listened, eyes bright with a curiosity that seemed to catch sunlight as it filtered through the leaves. He shot a glance at Red, a gentle smile playing at his lips, and murmured, "Do you hear that?" His voice was soft, almost secretive, as if sharing something precious. "The brook's singing—like it's calling us closer." For a moment, his gaze lingered on the dappled shadows dancing across the path, a flicker of longing passing over his expression. "It always amazes me," he admitted quietly, "how even the quietest places have their own kind of music." Red tilts her head, listening, and lets a small smile break through as she glances over at him, curiosity brightening her eyes. Red tilted her head, letting the quiet hush of the woods settle over her, sunlight flickering across her path in golden patches. As Lucien pointed out the gentle murmur of the brook nearby, curiosity kindled in her eyes. A small smile played at her lips as she glanced over at him, thoughtful. To her, the sound was more than water against stone—she heard the trees lending the brook their voices, as if nature whispered secrets just for them. Lucien slows his pace, tilting his head as if tuning in to the brook's melody, inviting Red to do the same. Lucien slowed his stride, letting his steps fall in time with the quiet gurgle of the brook beside them. He tilted his head, as if tuning in to a secret melody just beyond hearing, then glanced at Red with a conspiratorial spark in his eyes. "Maybe if we listen closely enough, we'll catch a story the water wants to tell us," he murmured, his voice barely louder than the breeze. The

dappled sunlight played across his features, illuminating a fleeting vulnerability that vanished as quickly as it appeared, leaving only the invitation lingering between them. Red slows her steps, tilting her head to better catch the layered sounds, her gaze flicking to Lucien with a quiet smile. Red slowed her steps, head tilted as she tried to untangle the melodies of water and wind in the dappled hush beneath the trees. The sunlight flickered, painting Lucien's face in shifting gold as he walked beside her. She caught his gaze, offering a quiet, curious smile. "If we're patient," Lucien murmured, his voice soft as the moss underfoot, "maybe the brook will trust us with its secrets." Red's smile lingered, her heart gentle and alert, as if she, too, was waiting for the forest to open up to them. —————

As the laughter fades and the meadow's golden light begins to wane, Red gathers the last of the herbs, feeling a quiet satisfaction at the day's unexpected bounty. With arms full and spirits lifted, she follows Lucien toward the edge of the meadow, unaware of the subtle tension growing beneath his easy smile. The path ahead seems familiar, yet as Red steps into the shadowed fringe of the woods, a sense of unease stirs—a whisper that not everything is as it seems. The shortcut, once so inviting, now leads Red closer to truths waiting to be uncovered.

Chapter 5: Red Arrives and Uncovers the Deception

Red approaches the cottage, carrying her basket, keenly aware of Lucien lingering at the doorstep with a muddled coat and anxious demeanor.

Her curiosity and suspicion sharpen as she questions Lucien about how he found the secluded path so easily.

Red stands squarely in front of the door, her gaze unwavering as she studies Lucien's face for any flicker of dishonesty. Red planted herself firmly before the cottage door, refusing to let Lucien's presence distract her from her purpose. Her eyes searched his face, alert for any sign of deception. "You said you just stumbled upon this place," she began, her voice steady but edged with concern. The familiar woods pressed in around them, reminding her of how even the villagers had nearly forgotten the winding path that led here. Red's hand tightened around the basket she carried—the promise to her mother weighing heavy. She needed to know his answer, needed to be certain. "I've lived here all my life, and hardly anyone remembers how to find the cottage. How did you get here so quickly?" She hesitated, then added, softer but resolute, "My mother trusted me with her secrets. I need to know I can trust you, too." LucienHe steps lightly over a mossy root, pausing as if weighing how much more to reveal. Lucien stepped lightly over a mossy root, pausing in the dappled shade as if deciding just how much of himself to share. For a moment, his eyes flickered—something secretive glinting behind their brightness. He looked at Red, a hint of vulnerability threading through his charm, and said quietly, "Sometimes the woods remember those who listen, Red." His gaze lingered on her, searching her face for understanding. "And your mother's secrets aren't the only ones that linger here." The words slipped out, half-confession, half invitation, carried on the hush of the forest, leaving Red uncertain whether she was being warned or welcomed deeper into something she couldn't yet name. Red steps closer, her voice low and unwavering, refusing to let him dodge her question. Red took a deliberate step closer, her eyes never leaving Lucien's face. Though her voice was quiet, there was no mistaking the resolve in it—she would not allow him to sidestep her question. "Then tell me, Lucien—what secrets do the woods whisper to you that even I don't know?" The promise she'd made to her mother pressed at her heart, mingling with a nagging suspicion that wouldn't let her rest. LucienHe glances toward

the shadowed corners of the cottage, as if expecting the woods themselves to lean in closer to their conversation. Lucien's gaze drifted toward the shadowed corners of the cottage, his posture tense as though he half expected the woods themselves to press closer, listening in. When he spoke, his voice softened, a cautious edge threading through each word. He didn't meet Red's eyes at first. "They whisper of old bargains and promises broken, Red," he murmured, the confession lingering in the hush between them. "Things that drew me here long before you ever saw me in the trees." The air seemed to tighten around his admission, the secrets of the forest hanging heavy as he finally looked at her, longing flickering just beneath his charming veneer. Red steps closer, her eyes searching Lucien's face for any sign of truth or deception, her hand unconsciously tightening around the locket at her throat. Red stepped closer, her boots crunching softly on the leaf-strewn path. She studied Lucien's face, searching for the smallest twitch that might betray him—her hand drifting to the locket at her throat, fingers curling tightly around the cool metal. Driven by the weight of her mother's warning and a growing suspicion, she drew a steady breath and fixed Lucien with a cautious gaze. "If that's true," she said, her voice low and insistent, "then what promise did you make—and to whom—that leads you to my door now?" Lucien glances away, fingers tracing the worn edge of the doorframe, as if weighing how much more to reveal. Lucien's gaze flickered away, his fingers absently tracing the worn edge of the doorframe as if the rough grain might anchor him to the present. A muscle jumped in his jaw, betraying the struggle behind his composed exterior. For a moment he seemed to weigh his words, balancing secrets and trust. Then, voice low and edged with something like regret, he finally confessed, "A promise to a woman with crimson eyes—one who begged me to watch over you when shadows gather." The admission hung between them, fragile and intimate, as if Lucien had offered not just an answer, but a glimpse into a loneliness he rarely let slip. Red narrows her eyes, stepping closer, her hand tightening around the basket's worn handle as she studies Lucien's every reaction. Red narrowed her eyes and stepped closer, her grip tightening around the basket's worn handle. She studied Lucien's every reaction, suspicion flickering beneath her calm demeanor. Driven by her promise to her mother and wary of the stranger before her, she said quietly, "My mother sent you, then—but if you truly came to watch over me, why hide in the shadows instead of standing at my side?" The words carried both a challenge and a trace of hope, her compassion wrestling with caution as she waited for his reply. Lucien glances toward the darkening woods, every muscle taut as if listening for footsteps that only he can hear. Lucien's gaze flickered toward the woods, shadow pooling beneath the trees as dusk crept in. Every muscle in his body seemed coiled, as though he were listening for footsteps only he could sense. When Red's question pressed him—sharp with suspicion and the weight of her mother's warnings—he hesitated just a moment too long. Then, with a half-smile that couldn't quite hide his vulnerability, he said quietly, "Because sometimes the shadows are safer than the light, Red—and there are things hunting you now that would see me before they ever saw you." The words hung between them, edged with something both protective and secretive, as the wind stirred the branches overhead. Red squares her shoulders, her gaze unwavering as she takes a resolute step toward Lucien, daring him to move from the edge of shadow into her trust. Red squared her shoulders, determination settling in her posture as she refused to let uncertainty sway her. Her gaze held steady on Lucien, not flinching from the shadow he lingered in. Driven by the promise she'd made to her mother and the wary suspicion stirring inside her, she took a measured step closer, her voice firm yet inviting. If danger truly pressed this near, she insisted, then Lucien ought to step into the light beside her—because, no matter what threatened, she would not allow fear to keep her from honoring the promise she'd made. Instead of a simple confession of following her out of a need for companionship, Lucien speaks in riddles about the woods remembering old secrets and bargains, hinting at a deeper, possibly supernatural

connection to the place and to Red's family.

Lucien glances down, his fingers twisting nervously at his sleeves, voice trembling with honesty as he waits for Red's reaction. Lucien hesitated at the edge of the clearing, his hand half-raised as if unsure whether to reach out or retreat. His gaze lingered on Red, searching her face for any sign of irritation. "Red," he began, his voice barely above the hush of the wind. He seemed to weigh each word before letting it slip free. "I hope you don't mind me saying this." Lucien's eyes darted away, embarrassed. "Earlier, I overheard you talking with the Hunter near the old mill. You looked like you had a plan, and he kept asking if you'd go alone." He shifted, scuffing a boot against the moss. "I didn't mean to eavesdrop, but I just... I followed your trail after. I guess I wanted to be near someone." There was a vulnerability in his posture, an openness he rarely showed. "Sometimes, it's hard not to feel like I'm just a shadow in the background," he admitted, his voice threading through the silence between them. Red steps closer, her voice gentle, and offers Lucien a reassuring smile, her hand hesitating before resting lightly on his arm. Red stepped closer, her curiosity tempered by a gentle caution, and offered Lucien a reassuring smile. Her hand hovered for a moment before coming to rest lightly on his arm. "You're not just a shadow to me," she said softly, her voice steady despite the swirl of emotions beneath. "If you heard us, then you know—I wanted someone I could trust beside me. Not just to chase after the wolf, but because I don't want to be alone in all this." Compassion flickered in her gaze as she met his eyes, hoping he understood the truth behind her words. Lucien looks down, twisting his sleeve tighter, voice trembling just a little as he glances up to gauge Red's reaction. Lucien's gaze dropped, lashes shadowing his eyes as his fingers twisted his sleeve tighter and tighter. He hesitated, words catching on the edge of his tongue, before forcing himself to look up and meet Red's eyes, searching her face for any hint of warmth or suspicion. His voice was low, almost fragile. "I heard him warn you about the danger," he admitted, the tremor in his tone betraying more than he intended. "He said you shouldn't trust anyone out here—not even me." The confession hung between them, raw and unpolished, and Lucien faltered, struggling to steady his breath. "And I realized... how much I needed you to trust me, even if I don't know how to ask for it." Red steps closer, her voice steady but gentle, reaching out to rest a reassuring hand on Lucien's arm. Red noticed the tremor in Lucien's voice and the restless way his fingers tugged at his sleeves. A flicker of sympathy softened her expression as she stepped closer, her movements careful but assured. She gently rested her hand on his arm—a silent promise of safety. "You don't have to ask, Lucien," she said, her voice steady yet kind, meeting his uncertain gaze. "Trust is something we build together, and right now, I'd rather face the woods with you than with anyone else." As Red presses, Lucien reveals he was drawn by a promise made to a mysterious woman with crimson eyes, whose request was to watch over Red as danger gathers.

Red realizes her mother may have sent Lucien, but is unsettled by his secrecy.

Red stands rigid, arms crossed tightly, her voice trembling with both anger and hurt as she faces Lucien, searching his eyes for answers. Red stood rigid, arms crossed so tightly over her chest it almost hurt. Her voice trembled, threaded through with anger and something rawer, more fragile, as she stared into Lucien's eyes, searching for an explanation. "Lucien, I deserve the truth," she said, her words barely above a whisper but edged with steel. "Why did you hide what you were really after?" The hurt in her voice lingered between them, heavy and unresolved. "All this time, I trusted you—and you let me believe it was real. Was any of it?" Her gaze didn't waver, even as her heart pounded with a mix of indignation and disappointment, demanding an answer she wasn't sure she wanted to hear. Lucien averts his gaze, guilt flickering across his face as he struggles for the right words. Lucien's gaze dropped to the forest floor, his fingers curling around the edge of

his cloak. For a moment, he seemed to shrink into himself, guilt flickering across his face like the shadows cast by the tangled branches overhead. When he finally spoke, his voice was quiet, edged with longing and regret. He confessed, “Red, it was never my intention to hurt you—I hid my purpose because I feared losing you if you saw the whole truth.” The words hovered between them, fragile as the hush that settled over the clearing, betraying the loneliness that had driven him to secrecy. Red’s voice trembles as she steps closer, her eyes searching his face for any sign of honesty. Red’s voice trembled as she stepped closer, her fingers tightening around the basket she carried. She searched Lucien’s face, hunting for any hint of honesty beneath the shadows in his eyes. “Fear isn’t an excuse for betrayal, Lucien—I need to know if anything between us was ever genuine.” The words slipped out, edged with both accusation and wounded hope, her compassion warring with the caution she’d been raised to uphold. Lucien averts his gaze, guilt tightening his jaw as he struggles to meet Red’s eyes. Lucien’s gaze slipped away from hers, the guilt tightening his jaw until it ached. He wanted—needed—to meet her eyes, but the weight of what he’d done was too much. When he finally spoke, his voice was low and uneven, edged with regret. “Red, what I felt for you was real,” he admitted, the words catching as if they pained him. “But the mission came first—I thought I could have both, and I was wrong.” Red takes a shaky breath, her hands clenched at her sides as she searches his face for any sign of remorse. Red took a shaky breath, her hands clenched tight at her sides as she tried to steady herself. Her gaze searched Lucien’s face, desperate for some flicker of remorse, some hint that she was wrong about him. “So I was just collateral damage to your mission—was I ever more to you than a means to an end?” The words tumbled out, raw and trembling, betraying the hurt she fought so hard to hide. Lucien’s voice trembles as he finally meets Red’s gaze, the weight of his confession hanging between them. Lucien’s voice trembled as he finally dared to meet Red’s gaze, the distance between them suddenly fraught with everything he’d been hiding. The confession lingered on his lips, heavy with longing and regret. “Red,” he breathed, the words almost catching in his throat, “you became everything to me, and that’s why I tried so desperately to protect you from the truth—even when it meant betraying myself.” The admission seemed to hang in the air, fragile and exposed, as if speaking it aloud had cost him something he could never reclaim. Their conversation grows more intimate and vulnerable, both confessing fears of loneliness and betrayal.

Lucien lifts his chin, eyes flickering to Red, then drops his gaze as he steps back; his boots scrape softly on the moss, the admission hanging heavy in the quiet. Lucien’s gaze lingered on Red, his usual effortless charm faltering for a moment as he traced a finger along the rough bark of a nearby tree. He let out a breath that seemed to carry years of secrets, his voice softer than the hush of the woods around them. “I know I always act like nothing can touch me,” he admitted, the words tumbling out as if he’d held them back for too long. Beneath the bravado, a tremor of vulnerability surfaced. “But the truth is—I’ve been afraid. Not of danger, not really,” he continued, eyes flickering away from hers, as if the confession itself cost him something. “But of being turned away. Of ending up alone because I wasn’t... enough.” The admission hung in the air, fragile and raw, while Lucien’s posture betrayed the longing he could no longer disguise. Red shifts closer, gaze softening, voice low but steady as they meet Lucien’s eyes. Red shifted closer, her gaze softening as she looked into Lucien’s eyes. She kept her voice low but steady, careful not to startle him as his boots scraped nervously on the moss. “I get it, Lucien,” she said quietly, her compassion threading through the words. “Sometimes I feel like if I let anyone see how much I care, they’ll just walk away, too.” Lucien glances over at Red, hope flickering in his eyes as he lets his guard down a little further. Lucien’s gaze lingered on Red, a flicker of hope softening the wariness usually set in his eyes. For a moment, he let the forest’s hush settle between them as he lifted his

chin, stepping back so his boots scraped quietly over the moss. Vulnerability edged into his voice as he admitted, almost more to himself than to her, “Maybe we’re both just waiting for someone to stay, flaws and all.” Red offers a tentative smile, meeting Lucien’s gaze with a flicker of hope in their eyes. Red offered a tentative smile, her uncertainty softened by the flicker of hope in her eyes as she met Lucien’s gaze. For a heartbeat, the hush of the woods pressed in around them, broken only by the quiet scrape of Lucien’s boots against the moss as he stepped back, chin lifted as if gathering courage. His voice was gentle, edged with vulnerability, when he admitted, “Maybe we could try staying—for each other—just to see what happens.” Lucien admits he overheard Red’s conversation with the Hunter and followed her, not just to protect her, but because he longs for trust and connection.

Red hesitates for a moment, her knuckles rapping firmly on the wooden door as she peers at the window, searching for any sign of movement inside. Red lingered on the threshold, her breath shallow as the hush inside the cottage pressed against her nerves. She raised her hand, knuckles tapping firmly against the weathered wood, each rap echoing her uncertainty. Leaning forward, she peered through the cloudy windowpane, searching for any flicker of movement—any sign of her grandmother. “Grandmother? It’s me, Red. Are you alright in there?” Her voice wavered between caution and worry, hoping the familiar words would draw out a reply from the silent shadows within. GrandmotherA shadow flickers behind the curtains as Grandmother’s voice wavers, softer and huskier than Red remembers. A faint rustle disturbed the hush within the little cottage, and a wavering shadow slipped across the curtains. Red’s knuckles barely grazed the door when her grandmother’s voice drifted out—softer, huskier than she remembered, as if the words themselves were wrapped in fatigue. “Come in, dear—I’m just resting in bed, but my voice might sound a bit strange today.” The gentle invitation, despite its frailty, was as warm as ever, welcoming Red inside even as illness pressed its weight on every syllable. Red hesitates on the threshold, her hand still gripping the doorknob as she peers anxiously into the dim room. Red paused on the threshold, her fingers tightening around the cold metal of the doorknob as she peered into the shadowed cottage. Something felt wrong—the air inside heavy, unfamiliar. Swallowing her anxiety, she knocked firmly, her voice wavering just slightly as she called out, “Grandmother, are you sure you’re alright? You sound different, and the door was locked.” The words hung in the silence, her concern sharpened by the quiet that followed. Grandmother shifts under the covers, her figure unusually still, eyes glinting in the dim light as she gestures weakly for Red to approach. Grandmother stirred beneath the patchwork quilt, her movements slow and frail, the lines of illness etched deep into her face. In the faint light that filtered through the cottage window, her eyes caught Red’s, warm and welcoming despite the shadows of fatigue. She lifted a trembling hand in invitation, her voice a gentle reassurance floating across the room. There was no need for Red to worry, she insisted softly—it was only a touch of the cold, nothing more. The door had been locked, she explained, for safety’s sake. With a wan smile, she beckoned Red closer, longing to see her granddaughter’s face more clearly in the gloom. RedShe steps inside slowly, clutching her basket tighter, scanning the shadowed corners of the room. Red stepped inside slowly, her grip tightening around the handle of her basket. Wariness prickled along her skin as she scanned the shadowed corners of the room, searching for familiar shapes in the gloom. The air felt thick with unease. Pausing at the threshold, she glanced once at the door behind her, then forced herself to call out, her voice cautious but steady. “Grandmother, why is it so dark in here?” Grandmother shifts beneath the covers, her outline oddly large and indistinct in the gloom. Grandmother shifted beneath the patchwork quilt, her silhouette swollen and strangely undefined in the dim light that filtered through the cracks around the window frame. Her voice, though weakened by illness, still

held its gentle warmth as she explained, “The shutters were rattling all morning, dear, so I kept them closed—come closer so I can hear your sweet voice.” The invitation lingered in the air as Red hesitated at the threshold, the old wooden door still trembling softly from her careful knock. RedShe scans the dim room, searching for any sign of movement beyond the bed. Red lingered just inside the threshold, her grip unconsciously tightening around the woven handle of her basket. The air in the cottage was heavy, shadows pooling in the corners and muffling any sign of movement beyond the bed. She took a cautious step forward, her eyes flickering from the dim outline beneath the quilt to the silent door behind her. Heart pounding, she forced her voice to steady as she called out, “Grandmother? If you’re unwell, should I fetch the doctor?” The question hung in the room, threaded with concern and the careful caution her mother had taught her, echoing softly off the walls as she waited for any reply. Grandmother’s hand, pale and oddly large, emerges from beneath the quilt, beckoning Red closer while her eyes glint strangely in the gloom. Red hesitated at the threshold, her fingers tightening around the basket’s worn handle. The hush of the woods pressed against the little cottage, broken only by the faintest rasp of breath from within. She rapped softly and called out, “Grandmother?”

From the shadowed bed, a hand—paler and larger than she remembered—emerged from beneath the faded quilt, fingers curling in a gentle summons. Grandmother’s eyes, glinting oddly in the dim light, fixed on her with familiar warmth. “There’s no need for a doctor, my precious,” she murmured, her voice thin but suffused with affection. “Just bring yourself nearer so I can hold your hand.” RedShe hovers just out of reach, peering warily into the dimness, her knuckles whitening around the basket handle. Red lingered at the threshold, the cool breeze tugging at the edge of her cloak as she stared into the gloom beyond the cottage door. Her knuckles blanched around the basket’s handle, but she forced her voice to steady as she called out, “Grandmother, why are your hands so large?” The question hung in the air, tremulous but insistent, her curiosity and unease mingling as she took a cautious half-step closer to the shadowed figure within. Grandmother’s hands twitch atop the blanket, their silhouette oddly misshapen in the gloom as she beckons Red even closer. Grandmother’s hands, frail and trembling atop the patchwork blanket, beckoned Red nearer. In the dim light, their shapes seemed oddly misshapen, the familiar comfort of her silhouette turned strange by illness and shadow. Yet her voice remained gentle as ever, a soft smile flickering across her lips as she soothed, “All the better to hold you with, my dear,” her words weaving warmth through the unease lingering in the small, lamplit room. Red leans in, her heart pounding, searching Grandmother’s face for any sign of reassurance. Red hesitated at the threshold, the basket trembling in her grasp. She glanced once more at the sturdy wooden door, then rapped her knuckles against it, her voice wavering as she called for her grandmother. When the familiar creak finally came, she stepped inside, her heart pounding louder with each careful footstep. Candlelight flickered across the old quilt, but something about her grandmother’s figure made Red’s breath catch. She leaned in, peering closer, searching the wrinkled face for reassurance. Yet the eyes that met hers were wide—unnaturally so, gleaming with an intensity that unsettled her. Red’s voice was barely more than a whisper as she struggled to quell her unease. “And Grandmother, why are your eyes so big and bright in this darkness?” Grandmother’s eyes glint oddly in the dim light as she fixes her gaze on Red, a thin smile curling at the edges of her mouth. Grandmother’s eyes glinted strangely in the dimness, twin sparks catching what little light seeped through the cottage window. As she fixed her gaze on Red, a thin, knowing smile curled at the edges of her mouth. “All the better to see you clearly, my sweet child,” she murmured, her voice both gentle and edged with something deeper, as if she were weighing Red’s very soul with her failing sight. Red takes another cautious step back, her eyes darting to the shadowed outline

beneath the quilt. Red's fingers tightened around the basket as she took another cautious step back, her gaze flickering uneasily to the shadowed outline beneath the quilt. The hush in the cottage pressed in around her, broken only by the soft, ragged sound of breathing from the bed. A shiver ran along her spine. With a brave but wavering voice, she tried to steady herself, eyes fixed on the figure's oddly shaped silhouette. "And Grandmother, why are your ears so pointed and sharp?" she asked, the question trembling between curiosity and alarm. Grandmother shifts restlessly beneath the covers, the sharp outline of her ears catching a sliver of dim light, making Red step back uncertainly. Grandmother shifted restlessly beneath her patchwork quilt, the sharp outline of her ears thrown into relief by a sliver of moonlight spilling through the window. Red, unsettled by the unfamiliar silhouette, paused at the foot of the bed, glancing back at the cottage door as if seeking reassurance. Sensing her granddaughter's uncertainty, Grandmother managed a gentle, wavering smile and murmured, "All the better to hear every little sound you make, darling." Her voice, though weakened by illness, carried a warmth that filled the small room, bidding Red to come closer. Red takes an involuntary step back, clutching her basket to her chest as the figure in the bed grins hungrily, shadows shifting across its face. Red took an involuntary step back, clutching her basket to her chest as the figure in the bed grinned hungrily, shadows shifting across its face. She hesitated, her gaze flickering to the cottage door—her only escape—before gathering her courage and knocking softly, her voice trembling as she called out for her grandmother. The silence pressed in, thick and uneasy. Red's breath caught, and with a cautious glance at those unnaturally sharp teeth, she whispered, barely audible, "Grandmother, why are your teeth so long and sharp?" Grandmother's form shifts in the gloom, revealing a predatory smile as she lunges forward from the bed. The gloom seemed to thicken as Grandmother's figure—frail and shrouded beneath her quilts—shifted on the bed. For a heartbeat, her gentle eyes caught the lamplight, but then her lips peeled back into a predatory smile. With a sudden, uncanny strength that belied her ailing form, she lunged forward, her voice thick with hunger and something darker. "All the better to eat you with, my dear," she murmured, the words almost affectionate—almost—before the room erupted in motion. Red, torn between her duty and her feelings, ultimately decides to face the unfolding danger with Lucien by her side.

Together, they approach the cottage, where Red's suspicion deepens upon hearing Grandmother's strange voice and strange behavior, leading into the classic confrontation with the disguised wolf.

As the confrontation with the disguised wolf subsides, Red's thoughts churn with uncertainty, unable to shake the lingering questions about Lucien's true motives. The tension between what was revealed and what remains hidden presses on her, urging her to seek clarity. Stepping away from the chaos of the cottage, Red finds herself compelled to confront Lucien directly—not about the danger they've just faced, but about the fragile trust between them and the truths that have yet to surface.

Chapter 7: Red Confronts Lucien about Trust and Truth

Red stands near the cottage porch, gripping her basket tightly as Lucien lingers nearby, his coat brushed with dew and uncertainty in his eyes.

Confronting him directly, Red demands an explanation for his careful following and the secrets she senses in his manner.

Lucien, visibly affected, confesses his actions stem from loneliness and a desire to escape the emptiness of his own life, not from harmful intent.

Rather than offering physical proof, Lucien bares his vulnerability, expressing that being with Red makes him hope for belonging.

Red steps out from the shadows, her eyes narrowed and jaw set, blocking the narrow path and waiting for his answer, every muscle tense as she watches for any sign of a lie. Red stepped out from the shadows, her stance deliberate as she blocked the narrow path, every muscle wound tight with caution. Her eyes, narrowed and searching, never left the stranger's face. "You've been behind me since sunset," she said, her voice steady but low, refusing to waver. There was no point in pretending otherwise—she had felt his presence, sensed the careful way he moved, the things he left unsaid. "So don't bother denying it. I want to know why. What is it you're after, and what are you hiding?" Her jaw was set, determination flickering beneath her curiosity. She watched him closely, searching for any hint of a lie, unwilling to let her guard down. "If you're here for the same reasons I am, then say so. If not," she warned, the edge of bravery sharpening her words, "you'd better start explaining before I decide you're a threat." Red, moved yet cautious, insists on hearing the full truth before granting trust, making clear that her continued acceptance depends on Lucien's honesty.

Lucien admits he has never known the comfort of family or a place to call home, and that his longing for connection is directed toward her.

Lucien lowers his gaze, his hands fidgeting restlessly in his lap. His voice trembles as he speaks, betraying the vulnerability he's trying to share. Lucien's gaze flickered to the forest floor, his hands twisting nervously at the hem of his coat. "I know how it must look," he said, voice hesitant, the usual poise slipping from beneath his words. The shadows of the trees pressed closer around him, almost as if they, too, were listening. "But I swear, I never meant any harm." He took a breath, the silence between them heavy and raw. "It was the quiet—the emptiness—sometimes it feels so heavy, you know?" He looked up then, searching for understanding, his eyes reflecting a vulnerability that belied his easy charm. "I just thought maybe... maybe if I understood more, it wouldn't feel so lonely." His voice trailed off, thick with longing and regret. "I'm sorry if it seems wrong. I was just trying to find something, anything, that made the silence bearable." The tension softens as Red acknowledges his confession with a nod, accepting a fragile truce while keeping her guard up.

Overhead, birds call and the distant sound of an axe hints at another presence nearby.

Red stands firm, her eyes unwavering on his, the silence between them charged with expectation and warning. Red stood firm, her boots rooted in the mossy earth, refusing to let the uncertainty in the air sway her resolve. She took a deliberate step closer, her eyes never leaving his—a silent challenge, but also a plea for honesty. The silence between them was thick with both expectation and warning, her heart pounding in her chest. “If you want me to believe you, to trust you, then I need the truth now,” she said, her voice low but unwavering. “All of it. No more games, no more half-answers.” She drew a steady breath, her gaze searching his face for any flicker of deceit or sincerity. “What you say next decides everything.”

The tension between them lingers in the hush that follows, each heartbeat a silent reckoning. As Red weighs Lucien’s words, the world beyond their fragile truce refuses to wait—life stirring restlessly at the forest’s edge, urging decisions that cannot be postponed. Determined not to let anyone else shape her future, Red feels resolve settling in her chest. The next step will be hers alone, and nothing—not secrets, not longing, not fear—will keep her from choosing her own path.

Chapter 8: Red Decides Her Own Path

Red stands at the cottage door, basket in hand, and knocks—her knuckles tapping against the weathered wood.

Lucien lingers nearby, shifting his weight on the gravel path, glancing toward Red with hesitant expectation.

Red turns, her cloak catching the breeze, and gestures for Lucien to step closer, her voice steady as she says, ‘If you’re to meet my grandmother, it will be properly, not by chance.

’ Lucien nods, brushing mud from his boots and approaching the threshold, his posture respectful.

Lucien pauses at the threshold, lowering his gaze in a gesture of respect, his hands clasped lightly in front of him as he waits for permission to proceed. Lucien paused at the edge of the clearing, his gaze sweeping across the mossy stones and the wildflowers that nodded in the hush of late afternoon. He lingered a moment, hesitant, as if weighing the invisible boundaries of this place. “I hope I’m not intruding,” he said, his voice low, almost reverent, as though he feared his words might fracture the silence. His fingers brushed against the rough bark of a nearby birch, grounding himself in the unfamiliar woods. “This place,” he continued, glancing at Red with a half-smile that flickered with something unspoken, “it deserves reverence, and I wish to honor that.” There was a subtle vulnerability in the way he held himself—shoulders drawn in, eyes watchful yet open. “I’ve come seeking answers,” Lucien admitted, letting a hint of his longing slip through his carefully measured charm, “but I will tread carefully.” Lucien lowers his gaze, hands loosely clasped before him, waiting for a sign of permission to proceed. Lucien nodded, brushing the mud from his boots before he drew closer to the threshold, careful to keep his posture respectful, as if wary of crossing some invisible boundary. Lowering his gaze, he clasped his hands loosely before him—a gesture both deferential and faintly vulnerable. “If I may,” he said quietly, his voice carrying a hint of

longing beneath its politeness, “I seek only guidance, and I promise to disturb nothing that rests within these walls.” As Red opens the door and invites Lucien in, he pauses at the entrance, expressing his wish not to intrude and his intention to honor the space.

Red steps aside, holding the door open for Lucien, then walks into the kitchen and sets the basket down with a gentle thud, glancing at Lucien with a welcoming smile. Red stepped aside, her hand lingering on the doorknob as she offered Lucien a nod of encouragement. She held the door open, watching as he crossed the threshold, her curiosity tempered by the cautious lessons her mother had so often repeated. With a gentle, reassuring smile, she led the way into the kitchen, the soft thud of her basket on the table breaking the quiet. Glancing over her shoulder at Lucien, she gestured invitingly and said, “Come on in, Lucien. Make yourself at home,” her voice warm despite the wary flutter beneath her ribs. Lucien steps cautiously into the kitchen, glancing at the basket with curious anticipation. Lucien lingered at the threshold, the worn soles of his boots barely making a sound against the kitchen floor as he stepped inside. His gaze drifted to the basket Red had just set down, curiosity flickering in his eyes—a quiet anticipation, as if he hoped for something more than just its contents. He breathed in, subtly, savoring the air. “Thanks, Red,” he said, his voice carrying a warmth that matched the room’s gentle glow. “This place always smells like cinnamon and something warm.” The words slipped out almost unconsciously, betraying a longing for comfort he rarely admitted, even to himself. Red glances at Lucien with a small, inviting smile and starts unpacking the basket. Red glanced at Lucien, a small, inviting smile playing at her lips as she stepped inside and set the basket on the worn wooden counter. She began to unpack it with careful hands, the scent of warm pastry escaping into the cozy kitchen. “It’s just an apple pie this time,” she said, her tone light and a bit shy, as if offering a peace token to a new companion. “I thought it might sweeten up our little chat.” Red reassures him, inviting him to make himself at home, but sets clear boundaries, explaining that while the past is behind them, trust must be earned anew.

Red steps aside, holding the door open for Lucien, her posture both welcoming and firm. She gestures toward the kitchen table, inviting him to sit as the warmth of the cottage envelops them. Red stepped aside, her hand resting lightly on the door as she held it open for Lucien. The gesture was both inviting and unmistakably guarded, a silent signal that forgiveness was not without its boundaries. As he entered, the warmth of the cottage—fresh bread on the air, the gentle crackle of the hearth—seemed to soften the tension between them. She gestured toward the kitchen table, her movements deliberate, signaling a new beginning.

“The past is behind us,” she said, her voice steady but gentle, echoing the compassion she’d always carried. “I believe in second chances, Lucien. But things will be different now.” Red met his gaze with a quiet bravery, making it clear that, though her home was open, her trust would be something he’d have to earn, slowly and surely. As she pulled out a chair for him, she added, “Let’s start again—formally, this time.” It was a promise and a challenge both, and as Lucien took his seat, Red knew she’d set the boundaries she needed. Lucien steps just inside the doorway, pausing with a slight bow, his gaze steady and sincere as he awaits her invitation further in. Lucien stepped just inside the doorway, pausing with a slight bow—a gesture equal parts courtesy and humility. His gaze, steady and sincere, lingered on Red’s face as he waited, reading the deliberate way she moved, the silent signals in each gesture of forgiveness and new boundaries. “Thank you, Red,” he said quietly, the words carrying the weight of someone who rarely found himself welcomed. “I understand, and I’m grateful for this chance.” There was a subtle vulnerability in his voice, a longing for connection that slipped through the charm he wore so easily. As she beckoned him

further, Lucien's posture softened, and he added, almost solemnly, "My respect for your home and your boundaries will guide every step I take from here." Lucien gratefully accepts the invitation, promising to respect Red's home and boundaries.

Together, they enter the warm, bread- and cinnamon-scented cottage for a formal introduction, signaling forgiveness and the careful establishment of new terms for their relationship.

As the cottage door closed gently behind them, Red and Lucien stepped forward into the golden lamplight, forging a new beginning on their own terms at last.