

# Contents

<b>Chapter 1: Red Receives a Mission from Her Mother</b>	<b>1</b>
<b>Chapter 2: Red Encounters the Wolf on the Forest Path</b>	<b>3</b>
<b>Chapter 3: Wolf Races Ahead to Grandmother's Cottage</b>	<b>8</b>
<b>Chapter 4: Red Arrives and Uncovers the Wolf's Ruse</b>	<b>9</b>
<b>Chapter 5: Grandmother Escapes and Confronts the Wolf</b>	<b>18</b>
<b>Chapter 6: Red Makes a Decision and Faces Her Admirer</b>	<b>20</b>
<b>Chapter 7: Red Chooses Her Path Forward</b>	<b>23</b>

## Chapter 1: Red Receives a Mission from Her Mother

Red's mother, noticing the rising sun, hurriedly urges Red to deliver a basket of warm bread and elderberry cordial to Grandmother, emphasizing the importance of staying on the path and not speaking to strangers.

When Red asks about the northern path, her mother, though wary, allows her to take it as long as she promises to keep to the trail and avoid shaded areas.

Red's MotherShe presses the basket into Red's hands, her eyes lingering with worry as she points firmly toward the shadowed line of trees. "Red, look—the sun's already rising. You must hurry now, and take this basket straight to your grandmother's cottage. Don't dawdle or wander off the path, do you hear me? The forest can be dangerous, and your grandmother is counting on you. Remember, go quickly and come back before nightfall." —Red's Mother

Red tightens her grip on the basket and glances anxiously toward the shadowy line of trees. Red tightened her grip on the basket, its woven handle digging into her palm as she glanced anxiously toward the shadowy line of trees. The pale morning sky offered little comfort, and her mother's steady gaze—full of both worry and hope—pressed upon her. Red nodded, swallowing her unease, and gestured toward the forest's edge. "I understand, Mother," she said, her voice steady despite the flutter in her chest. "I'll go straight there and promise not to stray from the path." Red reassures her mother multiple times, vowing not to stray, to go directly to Grandmother's cottage, and to return promptly.

Red adjusts her red cloak around her shoulders, her gaze hopeful as she looks to her mother for an answer. Red drew her crimson cloak closer around her shoulders, savoring the warmth it offered against the morning's lingering chill. She hesitated, her fingers toying with the edge of the fabric as she watched her mother prepare a basket by the hearth. The woods beyond their cottage called to her—mysterious and inviting beneath the pale sunlight. Red's voice was gentle but edged with hope as she finally spoke, "Mother, may I take the northern path today?" She lifted her gaze, searching her mother's face for any sign of approval. "I heard it's quicker, and the woods seem peaceful this morning." Red's MotherShe gently places a hand on Red's shoulder, her eyes searching Red's face for reassurance. "The northern path may be quicker, my dear, but it's also

wilder—promise me you'll keep to the trail and not stray, and you may go.” ——Red's Mother

Her mother, comforted but still concerned, reminds Red to keep her hood up and avoid any friendly strangers.

Red's MotherShe tightens her grip on Red's arm, her eyes searching Red's face for assurance. “Red, listen to me carefully. Stay on the sunlit path—don't wander into the shaded trails, no matter what. And remember, do not speak to strangers. Promise me you'll be careful.” ——Red's Mother

Red nods, squeezing her mother's hand to reassure her. Red nodded, squeezing her mother's hand in a silent gesture of reassurance. The worry etched on her mother's face was impossible to ignore, every line deepening as she repeated her warning to avoid the shaded trails and not to speak to strangers. Red met her gaze, steady and warm, and promised quietly, “I'll stay on the bright path and won't talk to anyone I don't know.” The words left her lips with practiced ease—yet beneath her composure, a flicker of longing stirred, a hope for something beyond the familiar routes and rules. With her mother's instructions firmly in mind, Red sets off toward the forest, determined to be responsible and careful.

Red takes the basket carefully, her eyes bright with determination and affection. She gives her mother a quick hug, then steps out the door, the sounds of the village morning swirling around her as she heads toward the edge of the forest. Red accepted the basket with careful hands, her fingers curling around the worn handle as if to anchor herself for the journey ahead. Determination flickered in her bright eyes, mingling with a softer glimmer—one reserved for thoughts of the secret admirer whose notes she sometimes found tucked beneath her window. She leaned in to give her mother a quick, reassuring hug, catching the familiar scent of flour and lavender. As she pulled away, Red offered a gentle promise, her voice steady despite the flutter of nerves in her chest: her mother needn't worry—she wouldn't stray from the path. She'd march straight to Grandmother's cottage, deliver the treats, and come right back, just as she always had.

Stepping outside, Red let the door close quietly behind her, the busy hum of the village morning rushing to meet her ears—the bleating of goats, the distant crow of a rooster, the laughter of children tumbling past. She glanced once over her shoulder, saw her mother watching from the doorway, and offered a final, confident nod. You can count on me, she wanted her mother to know, even as the pull of the wild woods and her own restless heart urged her onward, toward the shadowed edge of the forest. Red's MotherShe smooths Red's hair fondly, tucks a loose strand behind her ear, and presses the basket into her hands with a gentle squeeze. “That's my good girl—remember, keep your hood up and don't talk to strangers, no matter how friendly they may seem.” ——Red's Mother

---

With her mother's warnings still echoing in her mind, Red stepped into the cool shade of the forest, the basket swinging lightly from her arm. The path ahead twisted between ancient trees, sunlight flickering through the leaves as she took her first tentative steps away from home. Although her thoughts lingered on the village and the secret admirer she'd left behind, each footfall drew her deeper into the woods, where unfamiliar shadows danced, and the world seemed to hush in anticipation of what lay ahead.

## Chapter 2: Red Encounters the Wolf on the Forest Path

Red steps carefully around a mud puddle, clutching her woven basket of bread and herbs meant for her grandmother.

She pauses to adjust her red cloak, brushing a twig from her hem.

Suddenly, The Wolf emerges from a thicket, his fur spiked with dew, tail twitching.

Rather than circling Red from a distance, The Wolf greets her in a more companionable manner: 'Good morning, Red.

Out bright and early, I see.

The Wolf steps from the shadows, a polite smile on his lips, but his eyes linger a moment too long, keenly watching Red's reaction. The Wolf emerged from the dappling shadows, his steps deliberate, a polite smile curling at the edge of his lips. Yet his gaze, amber-bright and unblinking, lingered just a heartbeat too long on Red, as if searching for something in her face he could never quite find. "Ah, good morning, Red," he said, voice smooth as river stones. "Out bright and early, I see." He glanced around, feigning casualness, though every line of his body leaned toward her. "You know," he added softly, almost conspiratorially, "the woods seem quieter with you passing through." His tail flicked, betraying his restless hope. "Mind if I walk with you a while?" Red glances at the Wolf with a careful smile, gripping her basket a little tighter as she steps forward along the winding trail. Red glanced at the Wolf, offering him a careful smile that didn't quite ease the tension in her shoulders. Her fingers curled a little tighter around the handle of her basket as she stepped forward along the winding trail. "Good morning, Wolf—I suppose I don't mind, as long as you keep to the path beside me," she said, her voice even but edged with a caution she couldn't quite hide. The Wolf matches Red's pace, his gaze steady but unreadable, as the two move deeper into the shaded woods. The Wolf matched Red's stride, his paws gliding noiselessly across the mossy ground, eyes locked on her with an unreadable intensity. The filtered sunlight dappled his fur as he leaned just a fraction closer, voice low and persuasive—a velvet promise in the air between them. "Of course, Red; I wouldn't dare stray from your side—or the path—without your permission." There was a subtle ache beneath his charm, a flicker of longing that lingered as they ventured deeper into the shaded woods, the world narrowing to the space they shared. Red glances sideways at the Wolf, her grip tightening subtly on her basket as she maintains a measured pace. Red glanced sideways at the Wolf, her grip tightening, almost imperceptibly, around the wicker handle of her basket as she kept her pace steady and deliberate. She weighed his presence, uncertain yet unwilling to show vulnerability. "That's wise of you, Wolf," she said, her voice measured, betraying only the faintest trace of anxiety. "The woods can be unforgiving to those who wander where they shouldn't." The Wolf glances sideways at Red, a subtle, knowing smile curling at the edges of his mouth as they walk deeper into the dappled shade. The Wolf glanced sideways at Red as they wandered deeper into the dappled shade, a subtle, knowing smile curling at the edges of his mouth. There was a glimmer in his eyes—equal parts mischief and something softer, more vulnerable—when he let his words float between them, gentle and coaxing. "Ah, but sometimes the most interesting things are found just beyond where we're meant to look, wouldn't you agree?" His tone was light, almost conspiratorial, inviting Red to step a little closer to the line between caution and curiosity. Red glances sideways at the Wolf, her grip tightening slightly on her basket as she keeps a steady pace along the path. Red's grip tightened slightly on her basket as she kept a steady pace along the winding forest path, refusing to let the Wolf's presence slow her stride. Glancing sideways at him,

she felt the familiar prickle of caution running down her spine. “Perhaps,” she said quietly, her tone calm but edged with resolve, “but I’ve learned that curiosity in these woods often comes at a price, and I’d rather not pay it today.” The words hung in the cool morning air, a gentle but firm reminder that she was not so easily lured from her chosen course. The woods seem quieter with you passing through.

The Wolf steps closer, nostrils flaring as if tasting something sweet and dangerous. His eyes glint with mischief, but there’s a darkness curling at the edge of his smile. The trees seem to lean in, listening, as the wind carries his words between them. The Wolf stepped closer, nostrils flaring as though he could taste something both sweet and dangerous hanging in the air. Mischief glinted in his eyes, yet a shadow of something darker curled at the edge of his smile. Around them, the trees seemed to lean in, as if eavesdropping, while the restless wind carried his words through the branches. “You feel it too, don’t you?” he murmured, his voice a low, teasing caress edged with an unspoken longing. “The way the shadows stretch, the way every path seems to close behind us.” His gaze lingered on Red, searching for understanding. “There’s a hunger in the air, Red—and it isn’t just mine.” Red steps closer, her fingers brushing the rough bark at her side, eyes never leaving his. Red stepped closer, her fingers brushing the rough bark at her side, the texture grounding her as she studied him. The woods seemed hungrier than usual today, or perhaps it was just the way his words curled between them—half a tease, half a warning. Her heart thudded, defiant and uncertain. “Maybe I’m the one the woods want tonight,” she replied, her voice low, threaded with challenge and a hint of trembling vulnerability. Yet she didn’t look away, her gaze holding his, steady and searching. “But you,” she added, a small, sly smile touching her lips, “seem eager to take their place.” The WolfHe steps closer, the leaves beneath his feet whispering secrets, his gaze fixed hungrily on her. The Wolf stepped closer, the leaves beneath his paws whispering secrets with each careful movement. His gaze, fixed hungrily on Red, shimmered with a mix of mischief and something far more vulnerable. The woods seemed hungrier than usual today, shadows pressing in, and his voice slipped through the space between them—teasing, edged with longing. “Careful, Red—sometimes the woods and I are one and the same, and neither lets go easily.” The words curled around her like a warning and an invitation, his presence blurring the line between danger and desire. Red steps closer, her cloak brushing the Wolf’s arm, eyes glinting with something like challenge beneath the hood. Red stepped closer, her crimson cloak trailing through the brambles and brushing against the Wolf’s arm. Beneath the shadow of her hood, her eyes glinted with a challenge that belied her gentle reputation. The woods pressed in around them, darker and hungrier than she remembered, and his words—half a tease, half a confession—hung in the chill air. She tilted her head, her curiosity warring with caution, and murmured, “Then maybe I should stop wondering who’s hunting who, and start worrying about who’ll be left when the hunger fades.” The words slipped out, threaded with both defiance and a quiet yearning, as if she was daring the forest itself to choose sides. Mind if I walk with you a while?

’ Red, more open than before, allows him to walk beside her as long as he keeps to the path.

Red tugs her hood a little tighter and shifts her basket to the other hand, eyes fixed ahead but acutely aware of The Wolf’s presence at the edge of the trail. Red tugged her hood a little tighter around her face, the woven fabric brushing her cheeks, and shifted her basket to her other hand. Her gaze stayed fixed on the winding path ahead, but she couldn’t ignore the prickling awareness of The Wolf’s presence hovering at the edge of the trail. She kept her voice steady, determined not to betray any unease. There was no need for anyone to make a fuss about her journey, she thought, not today. “I won’t be long,” she said, her words brisk but polite, meant for both herself

and her silent observer. “Just taking the usual path through the woods.” The familiar reassurance tasted faintly of defiance on her tongue, as if spoken to ward off not just The Wolf, but the doubts curling quietly inside her. The Wolf circles slowly, eyes glinting with curiosity as he blocks a patch of moonlight ahead. The Wolf moved with languid grace, circling her so that his shadow slipped over the narrow track, eyes glinting with sly curiosity as he blocked the thin spill of moonlight ahead. His voice, silk wrapped around a barb, curled into the hush between the trees. “The usual path, you say?” he mused, as if savoring the phrase. “Funny, not many choose it after dusk.” The words hung in the cool air, both a challenge and an invitation, his gaze never leaving her face as he tried to read whatever secrets she might be hiding. Red keeps her gaze steady, clutching her basket a little tighter as she edges forward on the path. Red kept her gaze steady, knuckles whitening around the handle of her basket as she edged forward along the narrow path. She hesitated only a moment, then let her voice drift into the hush between the trees, careful not to betray the swirl of uncertainty in her chest. “Well, I suppose I like the quiet when the woods are empty,” she said, her tone calm, as if the stillness of the forest were a shield she could wrap around herself. The Wolf’s gaze lingers on Red, eyes flickering with a hint of curiosity and challenge. The Wolf’s gaze lingered on Red, his eyes flickering with a curious challenge that belied the easy charm in his voice. He stepped forward, paws silent on the moss, and let his words curl through the crisp air between them. “Quiet can be deceiving—sometimes it’s when the woods are most alive.” His tone, low and almost conspiratorial, seemed to suggest secrets lurking beneath the hush, as if inviting her to look beyond what she thought she knew. Red tightens her grip on her basket, keeping her gaze level with The Wolf’s, refusing to show the flicker of unease in her chest. Red tightened her grip on her basket, the woven handle pressing into her palm as she met The Wolf’s gaze without flinching. Shadows stretched long and uncertain between the trees, but she refused to let her unease surface. “Maybe,” she admitted, her voice steady despite the prickle of nerves beneath her skin, “but I’ve found the shadows don’t bother me as much as they used to.” The words hung in the hush of the forest, a quiet defiance woven into each syllable as she kept her chin high, unwilling to let him see how her heart beat a little faster in his presence. The Wolf tilts his head, eyes glinting as he steps just slightly closer, testing Red’s composure. The Wolf tilted his head, a sly glint flickering in his amber eyes as he edged just a little closer to Red, every movement a subtle test of her poise. His voice was low and velvet smooth, curling around her like mist. “Is that so?” he murmured, the words carrying both challenge and invitation. “Then perhaps you’ve learned to listen for what’s hidden in those shadows.” The hint of longing in his tone lingered, his gaze never straying from her face, searching for any crack in her resolve that might let him in. Red meets the Wolf’s gaze evenly, her grip tightening imperceptibly on the strap of her basket. Red met the Wolf’s gaze evenly, her fingers tightening imperceptibly around the worn strap of her basket. For a heartbeat, the cool hush of the forest pressed in, filled with secrets and shadows. But she refused to let him see any trace of uncertainty in her posture. “Maybe I’ve just learned,” she said, her voice steady, compassion mingling with defiance, “not everything in the dark is worth fearing.” She held his eyes a moment longer, letting her words settle between them like a promise—one born of countless nights beneath her grandmother’s trembling lamp, and of dreams she hadn’t yet dared to confess. The Wolf steps slightly closer, his eyes glinting with curiosity and a hint of menace, watching her reaction intently. The Wolf edged closer, the forest light catching in his eyes, sharpening them into slivers of gold. There was a flicker of curiosity there—dangerous, yes, but almost playful, as if he were testing the boundaries of her courage. He studied Red’s resolve, letting the silence stretch before his voice slid in, velvet-smooth and edged with something darker. “But sometimes what you don’t fear is exactly what finds you, Red.” The words lingered in the cool morning air, a warning and an invitation all at once, as he watched her for any tremor she might let slip. Red meets

The Wolf's gaze, her grip tightening imperceptibly on the basket at her side as she forces a small, steady smile. Red met the Wolf's gaze, her fingers tightening ever so slightly around the handle of her basket. She forced a small, steady smile, determined not to let any uncertainty show on her face. "Then I'll just have to keep moving, won't I?" she replied, her tone unwavering. Though her heart thudded with a mix of apprehension and defiance, she refused to let him see anything but quiet resolve. Their banter is layered with caution and curiosity, both testing boundaries but never quite crossing them.

The Wolf subtly suggests alternative routes, hinting at the dangers and the allure of the unknown, but Red remains steadfast, citing her Grandmother's advice and her own growing confidence in the woods.

The Wolf glances meaningfully at the thick tangle of trees, his tail flicking with easy confidence, but his watchful gaze never leaves Red's face, gauging her response. The Wolf's tail flicked with an easy confidence as he glanced meaningfully at the tangle of trees, his sharp gaze never straying far from Red's face. "You won't find many footprints on this path, Red," he remarked, the hint of a conspiratorial smile tugging at his mouth. His ears angled toward a shadowed trail off the main road, and he lowered his voice, as if sharing a secret meant only for her. "The main road's busy—full of eyes, and not all of them friendly." He took a careful step closer, his tone both persuasive and oddly vulnerable. "Let me guide you through the woods; we'll be at Grandmother's before the sun climbs too high." Red tightens her grip on her basket, eyes narrowing as she glances warily at the darkened trail. Red tightened her grip on her basket, her knuckles whitening as the handle bit into her palm. Wariness flickered across her face while she eyed the darkened trail he indicated, the shadows pooling beneath tangled branches. Her gaze darted to the Wolf, lingering on the subtle flick of his ears toward the shortcut he offered. "And how do I know your shortcut doesn't end where I disappear, Wolf?" she asked, her voice steady but edged with suspicion, betraying the battle between her curiosity and the caution instilled by years of whispered warnings. The Wolf's gaze holds hers, unwavering, his tail flicking in silent emphasis as the forest hushes around them. The Wolf's gaze locked with hers, unwavering, as his tail flicked with silent emphasis, stirring the hush that had fallen over the forest. He leaned a little closer, shadows shifting across his sleek fur, and let a sly, almost tender smile shape his words. "If I wanted you gone, Red, I wouldn't bother with conversation or courtesy." The intention lingered in the air between them, edged with something darker than threat—a vulnerable honesty, hidden beneath his charm. His ears twitched toward the shadowed trail, inviting yet dangerous, as if to remind her that his motives ran deeper than they seemed. Red tightens her grip on her basket, eyes narrowing as she peers into the shadowed trail, weighing her trust against her instincts. Red's fingers curled tighter around the woven handle of her basket as she studied the wolf's silhouette, half-hidden where the trees pressed close and the light grew uncertain. A quicker way, he'd said—safer, too—his ears flicking toward a narrow trail winding deeper into the woods. She hesitated, torn between her longing for adventure and the familiar weight of caution. Words from a wolf, Red mused silently, could be as unpredictable as wild berries: some sweet, others deadly, and seldom easy to distinguish. Her heart thudded in her chest, conflicted and curious, even as her strong-willed nature urged her to trust her own instincts over promises whispered from the shadows. The Wolf lowers his head in a gesture of cautious invitation, eyes flickering between Red and the winding, shadowed trail. The Wolf dipped his head, a subtle invitation shimmering in his gaze as he glanced between Red and the twisting, shadowed trail. His voice dropped to something softer, almost tentative, as he flicked his ears toward the path. He promised, "Let me earn your trust, step by step, as we walk." There was a fragile hope beneath his words, a willingness to let her decide. "If the berries prove

bitter,” he added, an edge of vulnerability shadowing his charm, “you can turn back at any time.” RedShe steps cautiously onto the narrow trail beside the Wolf, every sense alert to the rustle of leaves and the promise—or threat—of his company. Red paused at the edge of the shadowed trail, her gaze flickering to the Wolf as his ears twitched toward the gloom. Every instinct urged caution; she scanned the darkness, searching for the glint of hidden teeth, for any hint of threat beneath his offer. The basket on her arm felt suddenly heavier, its weight anchoring her to the familiar path. Still, curiosity and compassion warred within her. With a single, resolute nod, she tightened her grip on the handle—a silent signal of trust, or at least a willingness to see where this new, quicker way might lead. The Wolf tries to persuade her with charm and warnings about the shifting dangers of the forest, but Red insists on following the path she knows, demonstrating trust in her Grandmother’s wisdom and her own judgment.

Their conversation reflects a deeper mutual respect and wariness, with Red showing more agency and the Wolf more vulnerability.

In the end, Red thanks The Wolf for his concern but chooses to stay on her route, and The Wolf walks with her for a time, trying to earn her trust step by step, before letting her continue on her own.

Red smiles politely at the Wolf, her basket held firmly in her hands, and continues walking along the familiar trail, confidence clear in her step. Red smiled politely at the Wolf, her fingers tightening just slightly around the handle of her basket as she continued along the familiar trail. Confidence radiated from her steady stride, a quiet assurance born from years of repetition. “Thank you for your concern,” she said, her voice gentle but firm. “But Grandmother trusts this path. She’s walked it for years and always told me it’s the safest way to her cottage.” As the words left her lips, Red felt the weight of tradition and her grandmother’s wisdom bolstering her resolve, even as curiosity flickered in her eyes, wondering if there might be more to the world than this well-trodden route. The Wolf tilts his head, his eyes narrowing thoughtfully as he steps a bit closer to Red, his tone gentle but insistent. The Wolf tilted his head, eyes narrowing in thoughtful calculation as he took a careful step closer to Red. There was a gentleness in his voice, persuasive yet edged with a quiet insistence, as he spoke—almost as if he longed for her to understand something deeper about the world, or perhaps about himself. “Ah, but the woods change with time, little one—are you certain Grandmother’s advice still holds true today?” His words lingered in the air, both a challenge and a plea, betraying a vulnerability beneath his charming exterior. Red straightens her basket on her arm and continues walking, glancing at the Wolf with polite firmness. Red adjusted the weight of her basket, letting the handle settle more comfortably against the crook of her arm as she strode forward. Though the Wolf’s presence lingered at her side, she didn’t falter, her voice steady but gentle as she replied. She glanced at him with polite firmness, making it clear she appreciated his concern—yet not inviting any further interference. “I appreciate your warning,” she said, her gaze returning to the familiar shadows between the trees, “but Grandmother knows these woods better than anyone, and I trust her guidance completely.” Even as uncertainty tugged at the edges of her thoughts, Red pressed on, faith in her grandmother’s wisdom guiding each step. The WolfRed lifts her chin with quiet confidence, gripping her basket a little tighter as she resumes walking forward. Red lifted her chin with a quiet confidence, her grip tightening around the handle of her basket as she stepped forward along the dappled forest path. Though the Wolf’s presence lingered close, almost humming with persuasive energy, she refused to falter. “Grandmother trusts this path,” she said, her voice steady but gentle, “and she always says the best way to stay safe is to follow the one she showed me.” The words seemed to steady her steps, even as she felt the Wolf’s

gaze—hungry for something more than just a meal—watching every move she made. The WolfRed smiles politely and steps forward with renewed determination, her basket held firmly in her hands. Red smiled politely, a flicker of resolve lighting her eyes as she stepped forward, her basket gripped with renewed determination. The Wolf’s gaze lingered on her, searching for a crack in the façade. Yet she kept her chin high, voice gentle but unwavering. “I promised Grandmother I’d do exactly as she told me,” she said, her words steady despite the tremor of uncertainty beneath, “so I must keep to her path, no matter what.” The encounter leaves both of them thoughtful: Red more alert, and The Wolf resolved to prove his sincerity through actions rather than just words.

---

As the forest closes in behind them and Red continues along the familiar path, the Wolf lingers just long enough to watch her disappear among the shadows. A new plan stirs within him, urging him forward with a sense of urgency and anticipation. Without another glance back, he slips quietly through the underbrush, intent on reaching Grandmother’s cottage before Red does.

## Chapter 3: Wolf Races Ahead to Grandmother’s Cottage

Red steps carefully over wet leaves, clutching a woven basket filled with fresh bread and herbs.

The Wolf, fur bristling with moisture, darts ahead on the trail, nose twitching as he sniffs for signs of Grandmother’s cottage.

He glances back, tail flicking, and calls out, ‘You’ll never outrun me, Red.

The WolfHe bares his teeth in a sly grin, stepping into the moonlight, his eyes glinting with anticipation as he begins to stalk forward, each pawfall deliberate and menacing. The Wolf bared his teeth in a sly, knowing grin, stepping boldly into the moonlight. His eyes glinted with anticipation as he began to stalk forward, each pawfall careful and menacing on the forest floor. With a glance back, his tail flicking in silent challenge, he called out over his shoulder—voice smooth and low, threaded with both playful threat and longing, “Run as fast as you like, little Red—every path through these woods ends with me at your heels.” Are you sure you know the way?

The Wolf tilts his head, a sly grin curling at the edge of his mouth, eyes glinting with a mix of mischief and confidence as he gestures down a shadowy trail. The Wolf tilted his head, a sly grin curling at the edge of his mouth. His eyes glinted with a mischievous confidence as he gestured down the shadowy, winding trail. “These woods twist and turn, little one,” he said, his voice smooth and coaxing, “but I’ve walked these paths more times than I can count.” There was a hint of vulnerability beneath his charm, as if he genuinely hoped she might trust him. “Stick by my side and you won’t get lost,” he promised, the offer hanging between them like a secret. Then, with a teasing arch of his brow, he added, “Or... would you rather try your luck alone?” ‘ Red narrows her eyes, quickening her pace and retorting, ‘I know these woods better than you think.

Red narrows her eyes, quickens her pace, and glances back with a daring smirk, her tone edged with challenge as she pushes through the underbrush. Red narrowed her eyes, determination flickering in their depths as she pushed through the tangled underbrush. She quickened her pace, glancing back over her shoulder with a daring smirk tugging at her lips. “I know these woods better than you think,” she called out, her voice edged with challenge and a touch of pride. “Every twisted root, every hidden path—they’re like old friends to me.” Without waiting for a response, she pressed on, her steps sure and steady. “So unless you want to get lost,” she added, letting her words hang



in the air behind her, “you’d better keep up.” ’ Branches snap as the Wolf leaps over a fallen log, his motivation clear: to reach Grandmother’s home before Red and prove his helpfulness.

Red, determined to care for her grandmother and wary of the Wolf’s intentions, presses onward.

The pair’s footsteps echo over the damp earth, each vying to arrive first, their rivalry propelling them deeper into the shadowed forest.

---

As the forest thins and the cottage roof comes into view, tension lingers in the air—Red closes the distance, unaware of the deception awaiting her inside. Meanwhile, the Wolf settles into his disguise, every detail calculated, listening for the telltale crunch of Red’s footsteps approaching the door. With fate guiding both toward a pivotal encounter, the stage is set for Red’s arrival and the unraveling of the Wolf’s carefully constructed ruse.

## Chapter 4: Red Arrives and Uncovers the Wolf’s Ruse

Red steps onto the mossy porch and knocks thrice on the warped wooden door.

The Wolf, disguised in Grandmother’s shawl, sits rigidly by the hearth, sniffing the air.

As Red enters, she places her basket on the table and begins to unpack, all while scrutinizing the Wolf.

She probes ‘Grandmother’ with a series of increasingly detailed questions about her favorite tea, special cup, and lullaby—each time catching the Wolf in a contradiction.

As suspicions mount, Red grows bolder, challenging the Wolf about his twitching tail, sharp teeth, and wild eyes.

Red narrows her eyes, leaning in closer to the bed, her gaze fixed on the Wolf’s gloved paws and shadowed face, waiting intently for an answer. Red paused at the edge of her grandmother’s bed, brow furrowing as she took in the swollen shape of her hands clasped on the worn quilt. Something about them seemed different today—bulky, almost unfamiliar. Her gaze shifted up to her grandmother’s face, searching for reassurance, but the voice that answered her greeting sounded scratchy, rougher than usual. Red hesitated, brushing a stray lock of hair behind her ear, and tried to lighten the moment. “Tell me, Grandmother,” she ventured gently, wanting to draw out something familiar, “what’s your favorite tea? You always ask for it when I visit.” The question lingered in the air, mingling with her concern and a wistful longing for the comfort of routine. The Wolf fidgets, tugging the lace of Grandmother’s nightcap lower over his eyes and avoiding Red’s piercing gaze. The Wolf leaned closer, the light catching in his golden eyes as he tried to mask a tremor in his voice. “Ah, my dear,” he began, hesitating just enough to betray a flicker of uncertainty. His gaze darted from Red’s face to the steaming cup between them. “It’s, um, that strong, dark tea”—he gestured with a flourish, a smile tugging nervously at his lips—“you know, the one with extra honey, yes?” The words rolled off his tongue with practiced charm, but beneath them lingered a hope that she’d remember, that she’d notice his preference and perhaps, in that small gesture, see the longing he tried so desperately to hide. Red narrows her eyes and leans in, studying the Wolf’s face intently. Red narrowed her eyes, suspicion flickering in their depths as she leaned in, scrutinizing the Wolf’s awkwardly gloved paws and the strained timbre of his voice. Something felt off—a discordant note in a familiar melody. She hesitated, her tone

gentle but edged with doubt as she ventured, “Are you sure, Grandmother? You always told me you liked chamomile with a twist of lemon, not strong tea with honey.” The words slipped out softly, cloaked in concern, but beneath them simmered a quiet defiance—her need to trust her own instincts, even here, where love and duty so often tangled. The Wolf fidgets nervously, tugging at the edge of the glove, eyes darting toward the bedroom door as Red steps even closer. The Wolf’s paw fidgeted with the edge of the glove, claws hidden yet trembling beneath the thin fabric. His eyes flicked anxiously toward the bedroom door, calculating escape, but Red’s steady approach pinned him in place. Her gaze, sharp and suspicious, lingered on his gloved paws and the strained quality of his voice. Attempting to summon his usual charm, he forced a gentle smile, though it wavered at the edges. “Oh, well, tastes do change with age, my dear,” he murmured, voice faltering between persuasion and uncertainty. He let out a soft, nervous laugh, as if hoping to dismiss her doubts. “But perhaps my memory is playing tricks on me today.” Red leans closer, her eyes narrowing, searching the Wolf’s face for a slip. Red leaned in, her curiosity sharpening into suspicion as she studied the Wolf’s gloved paws and the odd timbre of his voice. Something wasn’t right. She squinted, searching his face for any familiar warmth, any slip that might reveal the truth. “You never forget your favorite,” she ventured softly, recalling the ritual that was theirs alone—how her grandmother would insist that the tea be brewed for exactly three minutes, not a second more. Red watched for a flicker of recognition, her heart caught between hope and unease. The Wolf nervously tugs at the edge of the nightcap, glancing away to avoid Red’s penetrating gaze. The Wolf’s paw, awkwardly encased in a glove, fidgeted at the edge of the frilly nightcap. He dared not meet Red’s piercing eyes, instead letting his gaze dart to the window, where the shadows of the forest flickered and danced. “Of course, of course—three minutes, yes, that’s what I meant to say,” he murmured, forcing a lightness into his voice that didn’t quite mask the tremor beneath. His tail twitched with nervous energy as he tried to recover, adding quickly, “Perhaps my mind is just a bit muddled from all the excitement of your visit.” Red narrows her eyes, glancing pointedly at the chipped porcelain mug on the bedside table, watching the Wolf fumble for an answer. Red paused at the edge of the bed, her gaze lingering on the chipped porcelain mug resting on the bedside table—a mug her grandmother always insisted brought her sweet dreams. She narrowed her eyes, suspicion flickering beneath her concern, and let her attention drift to the Wolf’s gloved paws awkwardly clutching the blankets. His voice, oddly strained and unconvincing, only deepened her unease.

Moving a step closer, Red tilted her head, her tone gentle but probing as she said, “If that’s really you, Grandmother, you won’t mind telling me about your special cup—the one you always use for your tea. You know, the one you say brings sweet dreams.” As she spoke, she watched the Wolf’s reaction intently, searching his face for any trace of the familiar warmth she desperately hoped to find. The Wolf fidgets nervously, glancing around the room as Red narrows her eyes, clearly unconvinced. The Wolf’s gloved paws twitched on his lap as he shifted uneasily, his gaze darting from the faded curtains to the cracked teacup on the side table. Red stepped closer, suspicion sharpening her features, her eyes scanning him with a slow, deliberate squint. Trying to gather himself, the Wolf dredged up a smile that wavered at the corners. “Ah, well,” he stammered, voice straining for calm, “it’s the, uh, the blue one with the little birds—yes, that’s it, isn’t it?” He held his breath, hoping the answer would satisfy her, even as his heart hammered against his ribs. Red narrows her eyes, folding her arms and stepping even closer, her suspicion now unmistakable. Red narrowed her eyes, arms folding tightly across her chest as she stepped even closer to the bedside. The scent in the cottage—lavender and something unfamiliar—made her suspicion flicker into sharp focus. She glanced at the Wolf’s gloved paws resting awkwardly atop the blanket, then

let her gaze linger on the chipped porcelain cup on the nightstand. “Funny,” she said, her voice quiet but edged with certainty, “because your favorite cup is white with roses. And you always say blue reminds you of rainy days—not sweet dreams.” The words came out softer than she intended, but the accusation was unmistakable. The Wolf shifts nervously under the covers, clutching the blanket tighter as Red steps even closer, her gaze sharp and unwavering. The Wolf shifted beneath the covers, the blanket bunched tightly in his gloved paws. Red stepped closer, her keen gaze never leaving his face, as if she could see straight through his disguise. He forced a smile, though it trembled at the edges, and tried to sound casual, almost helpless. “Oh, my dear child,” he murmured, voice wavering with unconvincing frailty, “these old eyes must be failing me—perhaps you could fetch the cup yourself and help refresh my memory?” The words slipped out, equal parts plea and clever deflection, hoping she might overlook the roughness of his tone and the nervous flutter of his heart. Red leans in closer, her eyes narrowed, voice sweet but edged with suspicion. Red leaned in, the hem of her cloak brushing the wooden floorboards, her eyes narrowing with a mixture of doubt and a strange, lingering hope. Her voice, sweet as honey yet edged with suspicion, slipped into the hush of the dim cottage. “Perhaps I will, Grandmother,” she murmured, her gaze flickering over the gloved paws and the unfamiliar set of the jaw beneath the covers, “but only after you tell me what lullaby you always hum while waiting for your tea to steep.” The question hung in the air, delicate but pointed, as she searched the figure before her for any glimmer of the truth. The Wolf shifts uncomfortably beneath the quilt, his gloved paws twitching as Red’s eyes narrow, her suspicion deepening. The Wolf hesitated, a fleeting uncertainty glimmering in his golden eyes as he searched for the right answer—something light, something harmless. With a quick, charming smile, he let the words tumble out, feigning a casual confidence he didn’t quite feel. “Why, it’s... ah, that one about twinkling stars—yes, ‘Twinkle, Twinkle,’ isn’t it?” His voice lingered in the hush of the forest clearing, and beneath the easy persuasion in his tone, a quiet hope flickered: perhaps this simple song could draw Red a little closer, if only for a moment. Red steps back, eyes narrowing, her suspicion now unmistakable as she clutches her basket tightly. Red stepped back, her grip tightening around the wicker handle of her basket. Suspicion flickered in her narrowed eyes as she studied the gloved paws resting atop the quilt. The voice drifting from the bed—strangely unsteady, not at all like the gentle tones she remembered—made her heart thud with unease. She took a hesitant step closer, searching the shadowed face for reassurance. “Grandmother,” she began carefully, her words edged with concern, “you always hum ‘Lavender’s Blue’—not ‘Twinkle, Twinkle.’ Are you sure you’re feeling quite yourself today?” The Wolf shifts uneasily beneath the covers, his gloved paws tightening around the blanket as his eyes dart to the door. The Wolf shifted uneasily beneath the covers, his gloved paws tightening around the blanket. His eyes flickered nervously to the door as Red drew closer, suspicion etched across her young face. Struggling to maintain his composure, he offered her a weak, wavering smile. “Oh, perhaps I am a bit under the weather, dear,” he murmured, voice not quite matching the soothing cadence he aimed for. With a gentle, almost pleading tilt of his head, he added, “Would you mind coming just a little closer so I can see you better?” Red remains just out of reach, her eyes narrowed in sharp suspicion, watching the Wolf’s every move. Red lingered at the threshold, just beyond the reach of those oddly gloved paws, her gaze sharp and wary as she studied the Wolf’s every subtle twitch. A faint crease appeared between her brows as she noticed the forced cadence of his voice—something was off, and she was determined to press him further. Edging just a little closer, she kept her tone light but her words careful, almost teasing. “I’ll only do as you ask,” she said, her curiosity laced with a gentle challenge, “if you promise to finally tell me the secret ingredient you slip into your chamomile tea. I’ve noticed you never share that secret with anyone.” The Wolf shifts uncomfortably beneath the covers, his gloved paw trembling slightly as Red’s eyes narrow, her

suspicion deepening. The Wolf hesitated, his amber eyes flickering with uncertainty as he glanced at the spice jar between his paws. He cleared his throat, attempting to sound nonchalant, but the barest hint of vulnerability crept into his voice. “Er, well, I suppose it’s... a dash of cinnamon—yes, that’s your grandmother’s little trick.” He offered a sheepish smile, hoping his confession would draw Red a little closer, just as the warmth of cinnamon had once drawn him to her grandmother’s kitchen window. Red narrows her eyes even further, her hand inching toward the basket as she edges back warily from the bed. Red’s eyes narrowed, suspicion prickling at the edges of her curiosity. She inched her hand toward the basket—her lifeline, her comfort—while edging back from the bed, careful not to startle what lay beneath the covers. Something about the gloved paws and the strained, unfamiliar voice unsettled her. She peered closer, voice soft but steadily probing, “Grandmother, you always say cinnamon overpowers the chamomile—” Her gaze lingered on the hands, searching for the truth. “It’s a drop of vanilla you add, isn’t it?” Red’s words blended memory with uncertainty, her compassion warring with the growing sense that something was terribly wrong. The Wolf shifts uncomfortably beneath the covers, gloved paws tightening around the edge of the blanket as Red narrows her eyes, inching closer with suspicion growing in her voice. The Wolf shifted beneath the heavy quilt, the gloved tips of his paws curling tighter around the blanket’s edge. Red’s eyes narrowed, suspicion sharpening her gaze as she leaned in, scrutinizing every line of his borrowed face. He forced a breezy chuckle, hoping to drown out the tremor in his voice. “Ah, yes, vanilla! Silly me—these old memories do tend to slip away, don’t they, dear?” The words tumbled out with practiced charm, but beneath them was a fragile yearning for warmth, for connection, that he could never quite keep hidden. The Wolf tries to bluff, but Red confronts him, brandishing a candlestick in self-defense.

The Wolf shifts uncomfortably on the bed, trying to tuck the loose end of the shawl tighter around himself, but as he does, his bushy tail slips out from under the blanket and twitches nervously at the foot of the bed. With a warm, almost bashful smile curling the edge of his lips, the Wolf shifted ever so slightly on the patchwork quilt, his golden eyes following Red’s hesitant steps. He hesitated, letting a touch of vulnerability slip into his tone as he extended a gentle paw in her direction. “Oh, uh, come a little closer, dear,” he coaxed, trying to sound casual, though his voice trembled with hope. “My eyesight isn’t what it used to be, you know.” The words slipped out with practiced ease, but beneath them lay a current of longing—an unspoken wish that, just this once, someone might draw near without fear. Red leans forward, her eyes narrowing as she points to the furry appendage twitching near the foot of the bed. Red leaned forward, curiosity flickering in her narrowed eyes as she studied the unfamiliar silhouette beneath the covers. Her finger traced the air, coming to rest on the furry appendage twitching near the foot of the bed. Compassion warred with suspicion in her chest; she wanted so much to believe in the comfort of her grandmother’s presence. Yet, her independence nudged her to speak up, voice gentle but steady as she pointed out, “Grandmother, is that your tail poking out from under the covers?” The Wolf hastily tucks his tail back under the shawl, but his paws tremble, causing the shawl to slip further, exposing a tuft of fur. The Wolf’s ears flicked as Red’s gaze lingered on the bright strip of wool wound awkwardly about his neck. He flashed a quick, lopsided grin, angling his snout in a way he hoped might look both nonchalant and a little bit dashing. “Oh, that’s just... uh, a new scarf I knitted—fashion’s quite odd these days!” he offered, attempting a casual shrug, though his claws fidgeted with the edge of the scarf. Beneath the bluster, a nervous warmth prickled his chest, the hope that she might notice the effort—might see past the teeth and rumors to the creature desperate for her approval. Red narrows her eyes and steps closer, watching the ‘scarf’ flick with each nervous word from the Wolf. Red narrowed her eyes, suspicion flickering behind

them as she stepped deeper into the dim cottage. The nervous cadence of her grandmother's voice seemed to ripple through the room, but it was the way the scarf—draped so carefully over the old woman's shoulders—twitched and flicked with each stammered word that caught Red's attention. Compassion warred with curiosity in her chest as she drew closer, her gaze lingering on the odd movement. "Grandmother," she asked softly, struggling to keep her voice steady, "since when does your scarf twitch every time you speak?" The Wolf nervously tucks his tail back under the shawl, but his paws fumble and the covers shift, revealing a flash of fur. The Wolf leaned against the crooked window frame, a sly smile tugging at the corner of his mouth as a chilly breeze slipped through the cracks. "Ah, well, you know how drafty these old cottages can get—sometimes even scarves get a bit... animated!" he said, his tone playful but his eyes searching Red's face for a flicker of amusement or, better yet, understanding. He wrapped his own tattered scarf tighter around his neck, feigning nonchalance, though his tail betrayed him with a nervous twitch. Red narrows her eyes, leaning forward, while the Wolf hurriedly tucks his tail deeper under the shawl, clutching the covers with trembling paws. Red narrowed her eyes, suspicion flickering across her face as she leaned forward, studying her "grandmother" more intently. The Wolf, caught off guard, fumbled beneath the covers, his paws trembling as he tried to tuck his bushy tail deeper under the shawl. But in his haste, the tip slipped free, betraying him with a betraying twitch. "Grandmother, your scarf looks awfully furry," Red remarked, her voice gentle but edged with doubt, "and I swear I just saw it wag!" The Wolf nervously tucks the tail back under the shawl, but his paws grip the edge of the blanket a little too tightly, causing his claws to poke through. The Wolf's claws pricked through the wool as he clutched the blanket, tension betraying his calm facade. When his tail slipped from beneath the shawl, he hurriedly tucked it back, forcing a smile that didn't quite reach his anxious eyes. "Oh, well, dear," he said, voice low and honeyed, as if he could charm away suspicion, "perhaps it's just the light playing tricks—old eyes and all, you know!" The words tumbled out a bit too quickly, and for a heartbeat, his vulnerability flickered beneath the surface, desperate for her to believe him. Red narrows her eyes and edges back, watching as the tail twitches more violently beneath the covers. Red narrowed her eyes, edging back a step as unease prickled at her skin. From beneath the covers, the tail twitched—more violently now, as though the effort of concealment strained the creature's patience. Her gaze lingered on the shifting bulge, and she tried to steady her voice, injecting just enough innocence to mask her suspicion. "Grandmother, why do I hear a low growl every time you clear your throat?" she asked, careful to keep her tone light, though her heart thudded with apprehension. The Wolf nervously tucks his tail further under the shawl, but his ears begin to poke out from beneath the nightcap. The Wolf shifted uneasily, his tail betraying him as it slipped from beneath the edge of the shawl. He tried to tuck it back with a hasty flick, but the motion only made his ears poke out further from under the nightcap. Caught between panic and longing—for he desperately wanted Red to see only what he wished her to see—he forced a charming, tremulous smile. "Oh, that's merely my stomach rumbling, child—these days I do get awfully hungry!" he said, his voice weaving sweet concern with just a hint of vulnerability, hoping she wouldn't notice the nervous twitch of his paws beneath the covers. Red leans in, squinting, while the Wolf shifts nervously, clutching the covers tighter as his tail gives another involuntary flick. Red leaned in, her brows knitting with concern as she studied the figure propped up in the bed. Shadows played tricks in the dim room, but even in the half-light, she couldn't ignore the odd sharpness of her grandmother's ears or the gravelly timbre that threaded through her voice. "Grandmother, your voice sounds deeper than usual," she ventured, curiosity and worry mingling in her tone as she squinted closer. "And your ears look much pointier—are you feeling quite yourself?" She caught the nervous twitch of the covers, the way her grandmother's—no, the Wolf's—tail slipped from beneath the shawl, and a

prickle of unease traced down her spine. The Wolf nervously adjusts the shawl, but in doing so, his paw slips into view from beneath the covers, claws glinting in the dim light. The Wolf fussed with the faded shawl draped over his shoulders, his paws trembling just enough that one slid free from beneath the covers, claws catching a stray thread and glinting in the muted light. He caught himself, heart thudding, and forced a smile, trying to sound casual despite the nervous flutter in his voice. “Why, of course, dear—” He cleared his throat, glancing down as his tail betrayed him, slipping out from under the shawl’s edge. “It’s just a bit of a cold, and my ears... well, perhaps I’ve let them grow out a touch for warmth!” He tried to laugh, the sound brittle, hoping she wouldn’t notice the sharp edges of his disguise. Red inches closer, eyes narrowing, while the Wolf nervously tucks his tail back beneath the covers, paws trembling. Red paused in the doorway, her basket balanced on her hip, and studied her grandmother’s face in the dim light. Something was different. The smile stretched wider than she remembered, and the teeth—had they always been so sharp? Red’s curiosity tugged at her, mingling with concern. “Grandmother,” she ventured, her voice soft but steady, “your teeth look much sharper than I remember, and your smile is... rather wide.” She shifted on her feet, torn between the familiar comfort of this cottage and the prickle of unease that crept along her spine. The Wolf tries to cover his mouth with a shaky paw, but in doing so, the shawl slips further, revealing more of his fur and a glint of his claws. The Wolf’s paw trembled as he tried to stifle his own grin, pressing it hastily over his mouth. The effort only caused the shawl to slip further down his shoulders, exposing the thick silver fur beneath and the faint, nervous gleam of his claws. His tail, traitorous as ever, slid free from under the hem and twitched anxiously against the quilt. Still, he managed a disarming smile, voice lilting with forced nonchalance. “Ah, well, dearie,” he said, attempting to charm away suspicion, “dental care isn’t what it used to be—sometimes they just grow sharper with age!” The words tumbled out in a rush, his gaze flickering with a vulnerable hope that the ruse might yet hold. RedThe Wolf hesitates, a bead of sweat forming as he hurriedly tucks his tail back under the covers, but his ears twitch nervously above the shawl. Red hovered in the doorway, her arms laden with the basket, but her gaze fixed on the lump beneath the patchwork quilt. The Wolf, caught off guard, fidgeted—one paw darting hastily to tug the covers higher, but not before his tail betrayed him, slipping into view, a nervous tremor running along its length. Above the shawl, his pointed ears twitched in agitation. Red’s brow furrowed, a flicker of suspicion mingling with concern as she stepped closer. “Grandmother, your ‘scarf’ just drooled on the bedspread—are you sure you’re alright?” she asked, her voice gentle but edged with a curiosity she couldn’t quite suppress. The Wolf hurriedly tucks his tail back beneath the shawl, but his paws tremble and his yellow eyes dart nervously toward Red. The Wolf’s paw slipped on a mossy stone, sending a shiver up his spine. He flashed Red a sheepish, lopsided grin, masking his embarrassment with charm. “Oh, my—must be that dreadful cold again,” he murmured, his voice soft and persuasive, as if inviting sympathy. He glanced down at the damp earth, pretending to inspect his footing, but in truth he was acutely aware of how vulnerable he seemed. “Making everything a bit... slippery,” he added, letting a hint of vulnerability flicker in his eyes before he caught himself and straightened, eager to recapture her attention. Red steps back, her gaze fixed on the Wolf’s twitching tail and gleaming eyes, suspicion turning swiftly to alarm as the Wolf’s disguise unravels further. Red took an uneasy step backward, her eyes darting from the Wolf’s twitching tail, now half-exposed beneath the rumpled shawl, to the sharp gleam in his gaze. A chill threaded through her as suspicion hardened into alarm, the familiar comfort of her grandmother’s room warped by a predator’s presence. Unable to look away from those wild, hungry eyes fixed so intently on her, Red’s voice wavered as she tried to steady herself. “Grandmother, if that’s really you,” she murmured, forcing the words past the tightening in her chest, “then why do your eyes look so wild and hungry when you look at me?” The Wolf shifts uneasily beneath

the covers, his tail twitching faster as his gaze darts nervously toward the door. The Wolf shifted uneasily beneath the heavy covers, his tail betraying him with a nervous twitch that threatened to give everything away. He glanced anxiously toward the door, heart pounding, as he fumbled for an answer that might preserve his fragile disguise. “Oh, my sweet,” he managed, voice laced with a forced warmth, “that’s only because I’m ever so delighted to see you—it’s been far too long!” The words tumbled out, bright and eager, even as his tail slipped from under the shawl, a subtle sign of the vulnerability he tried so desperately to hide. Red stands back, her eyes narrowing, just as the Wolf’s tail thumps anxiously against the bed, tangling in the sheets. Red took a step back, suspicion flickering in her narrowed eyes as she studied the figure before her. Something was wrong—she could feel it in the pit of her stomach. Her gaze dropped to the hands folded atop the quilt, noticing how oddly large and furred they seemed. And then the so-called scarf at the bed’s edge twitched, wagging even faster, betraying a nervous energy that didn’t belong to her ailing grandmother. Compassion warred with unease as Red’s voice trembled, “Grandmother, I think you’re hiding something...” She hesitated, her heart thudding as she pieced the details together. “Your hands—they look like paws. And now your ‘scarf’ is... wagging faster.” The Wolf nervously pulls the shawl tighter, but his tail thrashes beneath it, sending the covers askew and revealing a flash of his bristling gray fur. The Wolf’s golden eyes glimmered with mischief as he lounged beneath the tangled shadows of the forest. He caught Red’s worried glance and, with a rakish tilt of his head, offered a sly smile. “Oh, precious, you mustn’t worry—” he murmured, his tone both soothing and teasing as his tail flicked through the leaves, “I’m simply embracing my wild side in my old age!” The words came out in a low, velvety rumble, as if he could charm away her fears with nothing but the warmth in his voice. Yet beneath that playful veneer, a flicker of longing betrayed how much he yearned not to frighten her, but to draw her closer. Red edges back warily, her eyes darting between the Wolf’s exposed tail and his trembling, clawed hands. Red edged back, wary, her gaze flickering between the twitching tip of the Wolf’s tail peeking out from beneath the shawl and the trembling, clawed hands clenching the coverlet. Something wasn’t right. She hesitated, the words catching in her throat before spilling out. “Grandmother,” she murmured, voice low and uncertain, “your nose keeps twitching... and your claws are poking through the blanket. Are you sure you’re not... someone else?” The Wolf tries to tuck his tail back under the shawl, but his claws scrape audibly across the bedframe, making Red flinch. The Wolf leaned closer, a sly smile flickering beneath the veneer of charm he wore so easily. He brushed a paw against his own chest, feigning nonchalance, though his eyes betrayed a hint of worry. “Oh, darling,” he murmured, the words tumbling out with practiced ease, “it’s just these new herbal remedies—side effects can be rather... unexpected!” His voice danced between playful and confessional, as if hoping she might find sympathy beneath his bravado. Unlike in the original plot, Red does not immediately pull away the shawl;

instead, she systematically exposes the Wolf’s lies until he is forced to drop the pretense verbally.

The Wolf, cornered, pleads for a chance to explain, promising honesty.

Red grips the candlestick tightly, her arms trembling but determined, eyes darting between the Wolf’s face and the door behind him. Red’s knuckles whitened around the heavy candlestick, her arms quivering but resolute as she faced the Wolf. Her gaze flicked anxiously between his sharp eyes and the door looming just behind his hulking frame. “Stay back!” she warned, her voice steady despite the fear twisting in her chest. “I don’t care what you’re planning—I’m not afraid to use this.” The words tumbled out, fierce and desperate, echoing her determination even as uncertainty warred with the compassion she could never quite banish, not even now. The Wolf

lowers his voice and steps back, his paws still raised in surrender, eyes wide with anxious sincerity. The Wolf instinctively took a step back, lowering his voice as he faced the glint of the heavy candlestick in Red's trembling hands. His paws remained lifted, not in threat, but in a gesture of surrender—anxious, earnest. His eyes, wide and vulnerable, never left hers as he pleaded, "Please, Red, I mean you no harm—I only want to explain!" Red tightens her grip on the candlestick, her eyes darting between the Wolf and the door, ready to strike or flee at the first sign of danger. Red's knuckles whitened around the candlestick as she shifted her weight, poised between fight and flight. Her heart hammered in her chest, but she kept her eyes locked on the Wolf, refusing to betray her fear. When the creature lifted his paws in a desperate plea, Red's voice trembled with both accusation and resolve. "Explain?" she demanded, her words sharp as the edge of her suspicion. "After what you did to my grandmother, you think I could trust a word from your mouth?" The Wolf lowers his gaze, his voice trembling, while Red tightens her grip on the candlestick, her breath quick and shallow. The Wolf's paws hovered in the air, surrender writ in the tremor of his limbs. He lowered his gaze, unable to meet Red's frantic eyes, his voice cracking with a vulnerability he could no longer hide. "Red, if you strike, you'll never hear the truth—and that's all I have left to offer." Across from him, Red's knuckles whitened around the candlestick, her breath quickening as she weighed the desperate plea against the fear pounding in her chest. Red's hands tremble as she tightens her grip on the candlestick, eyes darting between the Wolf's face and the door, weighing her chances of escape. Red's hands trembled as she tightened her grip around the heavy candlestick, the cool metal grounding her even as her eyes flickered between the Wolf's pleading face and the narrow door behind him. Fear tangled with resolve in her chest, and she took a shaky breath, voice low but unwavering. Truth from a monster meant nothing to her—she knew better than to trust anything with teeth and intentions she couldn't read. Still, she held her ground, knuckles white, and warned, "If you take one more step, you'll regret it." The Wolf carefully lowers himself to the floor, keeping his paws visible, his eyes pleading, while Red's grip on the candlestick tightens, her breath trembling with anger and fear. The Wolf eased himself down, his movements slow and deliberate, never letting his paws stray from Red's line of sight. There was a raw honesty in his eyes, a silent plea that trembled beneath his usual bravado. He kept perfectly still on the rough floorboards, the air between them pulsing with Red's fear and fury—she clutched the candlestick so tightly her knuckles blanched, breath hitching in her chest. "I'm not moving—see?" His voice was soft but urgent, edged with a vulnerability he rarely allowed to surface. "But if you listen, you'll learn why things happened the way they did." Red's hands tremble on the candlestick, her eyes darting between the Wolf's pleading face and the door behind him, torn between fear and the hope for answers. Red's grip tightened around the candlestick, the cool metal slick beneath her trembling fingers. Her gaze flickered from the Wolf's beseeching eyes to the door behind him, calculating escape even as her heart hammered with the urge to defend herself. Every muscle in her body was poised to either bolt or strike, yet the Wolf's posture—paws raised, voice thick with desperation—held her fast. Instinct screamed at her to run or fight, but she hesitated, torn by the hope that he might offer the answers she so desperately needed. How could he expect her to simply stand there and listen, when every fiber of her being yearned for safety? The Wolf lowers his gaze and slowly sinks to his knees, making himself as small and unthreatening as possible, his voice trembling with urgency. The Wolf's amber eyes darted to the heavy candlestick in Red's trembling hands, and a shiver of fear passed through his lean frame. He lowered his gaze, his chest rising and falling with shallow breaths, then slowly, deliberately, sank to his knees on the creaking floorboards. Making himself as small and harmless as possible, he raised his paws in surrender, the edges of his voice fraying with urgency. "Red," he pleaded, the words tumbling out raw and earnest, "your instincts are right to warn you." His gaze flicked up, searching her



face for any hint of mercy. “But if you silence me now, you’ll never know what really happened in that cottage.” Red tightens her grip, her eyes never leaving the Wolf as she edges closer to the only exit, determined but trembling. Red’s knuckles whitened around the heavy candlestick, her heart pounding beneath her cloak as she inched closer to the only escape. The Wolf watched her with wide, pleading eyes, his raised paws trembling in surrender. She refused to look away, determination burning behind her fear. “Then talk,” she warned, her voice low and steady despite the quiver in her limbs. “But know this—if I sense a single lie, this candlestick won’t miss its mark.” The Wolf lowers his head, his voice trembling, while Red grips the candlestick tighter, eyes narrowed and muscles tense. The Wolf lowered his head, the silver edge of his fur catching the flickering candlelight. His voice trembled, thin but earnest, as he gazed up at Red with wide, pleading eyes. Red gripped the heavy candlestick tighter, her knuckles whitening, every muscle in her body coiled and ready. Sensing her tension, the Wolf raised his paws in a gesture of surrender, his words spilling out almost desperately—promising her nothing but the truth, even if it cost him everything. Red, conflicted but resolute, allows him to speak under threat, demanding to know his true intentions.

Red stands her ground, eyes narrowed and voice trembling with both accusation and vulnerability, refusing to let fear dictate her next move. Red planted her feet firmly, refusing to let the tremor in her voice betray the storm inside her. Eyes narrowed, she fixed the Wolf with a look both accusing and vulnerable. “Enough,” she said, unable to keep the edge from her words. The way he lingered in the shadows, watching her, had gnawed at her for too long. Her heart thudded painfully against her ribs, each beat an echo of the uncertainty she’d tried to ignore.

“I see you,” she pressed on, her gaze unwavering, “always hiding, always following. Something isn’t right and I won’t pretend otherwise.” The truth hung between them, heavy and sharp, and she found herself desperate for answers—answers she felt she deserved. “Why do you keep trailing me?” she demanded, her voice trembling with the weight of her fears and hopes. “What is it you want from me?” Red searched his eyes for anything—kindness, malice, regret. If he meant her harm, she begged him to say it, to end this cruel guessing. But if he didn’t, if there was any gentleness left in him, she needed proof now. “My heart can’t take any more half-truths,” she whispered, her words a plea as much as a challenge, daring him to finally be honest. The Wolf steps forward slowly, lowering his gaze in a gesture of vulnerability, his voice trembling with sincerity. The Wolf stepped forward, each movement measured and hesitant, as if he feared even his shadow might startle her. He lowered his gaze, unable to meet Red’s eyes, the bravado she expected slipping away to reveal something rawer beneath. When he finally spoke, his voice trembled with the weight of sincerity he could barely contain. He admitted, not with sharp wit or cunning, but with a vulnerable honesty, that he’d never meant to frighten her. Every time he saw her, he confessed, an inexplicable feeling surged inside—a longing he could neither name nor tame. He kept hoping, he said softly, that one day she might look past the fur and fangs and see the real wolf beneath, the one yearning for connection rather than fear. The WolfRed steps closer, her eyes searching his face, her voice trembling with both fear and hope. Red stepped closer, her trembling voice threading through the hush of the forest. She searched his face, her gaze flickering with both fear and a fragile hope. “Show me that truth, Wolf,” she insisted, her words soft but unyielding. “Drop the mask. Let me see who you are—not just what you are.” The demand hung between them, bare and vulnerable, as if she were daring him to shed every shadow he’d ever worn. The Wolf lowers his gaze, his voice trembling with vulnerability, as his posture shifts from defensive to open, inviting Red to witness his true self. The Wolf’s defenses faltered as he dropped his gaze, shoulders slumping in a rare display of raw honesty. For a heartbeat, his usual sly charm evaporated, replaced by a trembling

vulnerability that colored his voice. “Red,” he whispered, the words barely audible, “I am afraid—afraid that if you see the loneliness behind these eyes, you’ll turn away.” He risked a glance at her, amber eyes pleading. “But I promise you, my only wish is to be seen and accepted, not to harm you.” The openness in his posture was an invitation—a silent hope that she might see the truth he’d kept so carefully hidden. Red steps closer, her voice trembling but resolute, searching his eyes for sincerity. Red took a hesitant step forward, the tremor in her voice betraying the storm of emotions beneath her steady gaze. She searched the Wolf’s eyes, desperate to pierce the mask he wore, determined to unearth something real. “Let me see your loneliness, Wolf,” she pleaded, her words faltering only for a heartbeat before regaining their strength. “Because I’d rather know your true heart than fear what I don’t understand.” The confession lingered between them, raw and vulnerable, as she stood her ground—compassion warring with uncertainty, and her will to understand burning brighter than her fear. The Wolf confesses his loneliness, longing for connection, and hopes that Red might see past his fearsome exterior.

Red, still wary but compassionate, asks the Wolf to prove his sincerity by revealing his true self, showing a willingness to understand rather than simply fight or flee.

The chapter ends with the Wolf expressing his vulnerability and Red listening, candlestick still in hand, her heart torn between fear and empathy.

---

As the tension in the cottage slowly settles, Red’s attention shifts from the trembling Wolf to the closed bedroom door where Grandmother is held. The Wolf’s words echo in her mind as she weighs the risks and possibilities, her resolve hardening with each passing moment. With both caution and hope guiding her, Red prepares to act, determined to reunite with Grandmother and seek clarity amidst the confusion. As she moves toward the door, the fragile trust between herself and the Wolf is put to its first true test, setting the stage for Grandmother’s escape—and a confrontation that promises to reveal even deeper truths.

## Chapter 5: Grandmother Escapes and Confronts the Wolf

Grandmother, clutching a heavy iron poker, edges from her bed and quietly unlatches the creaking window, letting in a gust of pine-laden air.

The Wolf, fur bristling and nose twitching, stalks across the threshold, his claws clicking on the floor as he sniffs for Red’s scent.

Grandmother steps into his path and brandishes the poker, blocking his advance.

‘Oh, don’t you think I see what you’re up to?

Grandmother narrows her eyes, folds her arms, and stands firmly in the doorway, blocking the path with a determined stance. Grandmother narrowed her eyes and folded her arms, planting herself squarely in the doorway, her frame frail but unyielding. She blocked the path, her stance as unwavering as the old oak trees outside. “Oh, don’t you think I see what you’re up to?” she said, her voice both sharp and protective. The lines on her face deepened as she regarded the visitor with skepticism, refusing to be swayed by any show of innocence. “You can’t just walk in here with that innocent face and expect me to believe every word,” she continued, her tone edged with the wisdom of years spent outsmarting trouble. A wry smile flickered at her lips. “I’ve seen

more tricks than you've had hot dinners." You can't just walk in here with that innocent face and expect me to believe every word.

I've seen more tricks than you've had hot dinners!

The Wolf pauses in his circling, muscles taut beneath his fur, gaze steady but wary, as if bracing for her reaction. The Wolf paused in his circling, muscles taut beneath his thick fur, his tail dipping low while his sharp gaze never wavered from her. Vulnerability flickered behind his wary charm as he flattened his ears, as though bracing for what she might do next. "You have nothing to fear from me tonight," he assured her quietly, the words rumbling low in his throat as he prowled around the edge of the table. "My business is with Red alone—no claws, no teeth, unless they're needed. I only want to talk." The admission hung between them, tinged with an unspoken plea for trust, his posture both defensive and strangely hopeful. ' she snaps, her eyes sharp.

The Wolf narrows his eyes, voice smooth but edged with menace, as he steps closer to the door, his intentions cloaked in shadow. The Wolf stepped out from the shadowed thicket, moonlight glinting off his sleek fur as he fixed his gaze on the nervous crowd gathered around Red. His voice, velvet-smooth yet edged with urgency, slipped through the hush. "Let me speak to her," he insisted, his eyes never leaving Red's. "I insist—there are matters only she and I can discuss." A flicker of vulnerability crossed his face, quickly masked by a confident tilt of his head. "It would be unwise to stand in my way." The Wolf flattens his ears and circles the table, tail low but eyes fixed on her, replying in a low rumble, 'You have nothing to fear from me tonight.

Grandmother raises the iron poker, her grip steady and unwavering, blocking his path with a stern glare that brooks no argument. Grandmother's grip on the iron poker never wavered as she leveled it squarely at the intruder's chest, her eyes narrowed with a resilience borne of years spent fending for herself in the woods. She jabbed the poker forward, forcing him to retreat toward the battered threshold, her stern glare leaving no room for argument. "Not another step, young man," she declared, her voice unwavering and sharp with protective intent. "You'll speak to no one in this house unless you can show me what sort of business you bring here." The words hung in the air, heavy and unyielding, as she refused to let any stranger cross her door on empty promises alone. My business is with Red alone—no claws, no teeth, unless they're needed.

The Wolf bows his head even further, golden eyes shining with desperation and longing, his body trembling between the urge to flee and the hope to stay. The Wolf hesitated at the edge of the clearing, the moonlight limning his fur in silver. His voice, when it came, was softer than Red had ever heard, edged with raw longing. "Please. Just a moment, Red." He lowered himself, pressing close to the earth as if to humble the very shadow he cast. "I know what I am—teeth and shadow, hunger and fear." His golden eyes flickered, vulnerable. "But see me now, lower than the roots, heart beating with only hope for you." The Wolf's breath shuddered out, his gaze never leaving her. "I don't ask for forgiveness," he admitted, voice roughened by honesty, "only a chance to prove I'm more than the stories you were told." He drew closer, impulsive and aching, as if every step toward her cost him something vital. "I can't—won't—turn away, not when every part of me aches for you." He paused, the night pressing in. "If you send me off, I'll go," he promised, the words barely more than a whisper, "but know there is nothing left for me in the dark without you." I only want to talk.

' Grandmother jabs the poker at his chest, forcing him back towards the door, saying, 'Not another step, young man.

You'll speak to no one in this house unless you can show me what sort of business you bring here.

I won't have strangers crossing my threshold on empty words.

' The Wolf, driven by his longing for Red, sinks to his haunches and flattens his paws, showing submission but refusing to leave, his voice softening as he calls, 'Please. just a moment, Red.

I know what I am—teeth and shadow, hunger and fear.

But see me now, lower than the roots, heart beating with only hope for you.

I don't ask for forgiveness, only a chance to prove I'm more than the stories you were told.

I can't—won't—turn away, not when every part of me aches for you.

If you send me off, I'll go, but know there is nothing left for me in the dark without you.

' Grandmother keeps her guard up, her motivation to protect Red dictating every measured step as she blocks the Wolf's path, but the Wolf's vulnerability gives her pause.

---

As the tension in the room ebbs, Grandmother's stern resolve softens just enough for Red to step forward, the weight of choice pressing on her chest. With the Wolf's heartfelt words lingering in the air, Red finds herself at a crossroads, compelled to look beyond fear and tradition. The moment is no longer Grandmother's to command; it has become Red's, and with a deep breath, she prepares to address the Wolf directly, ready to face the consequences of her own heart.

## Chapter 6: Red Makes a Decision and Faces Her Admirer

Red steps out of her grandmother's cottage, basket tucked under her arm, boots squelching in the damp moss.

She pauses at the edge of the path, scanning the trees for movement.

The Wolf emerges from behind a birch, his fur bristling with dew, head lowered in a show of cautious approach.

Their conversation is tense and layered, with both Red and The Wolf openly acknowledging the risks and ambiguities of trust between them.

Red challenges The Wolf's motives, refusing to easily trust or share her food, and The Wolf responds with vulnerability, expressing his desire for companionship and recognition, rather than aggression.

The Wolf leans in, nostrils flaring slightly as he inhales the air between them, his posture both imposing and oddly gentle, as if restraining some deeper instinct. The Wolf leaned in, nostrils flaring ever so slightly as he drew in the scent that hovered between them, his posture imposing yet softened by a peculiar gentleness, as if he were holding some deeper instinct at bay. "You always smell of wildflowers and bread, Red," he murmured, his voice a low, rumbling confession. It almost sounded like a secret he couldn't help but share—a fragile truth in the hush of the woods.

He let a sly, wistful smile curl the edge of his mouth, eyes glinting with a vulnerability he rarely allowed to surface. "It's funny, isn't it," he went on, his tone almost playful, "how your scent

lingers in the air—sweet and warm—makes it hard to remember what I’m supposed to be.” His confession hung between them, heavy and honest. “I should be hunting, but here I am, wanting to linger.” The words slipped out softer now, edged with longing. “You make it awfully difficult to be the big bad wolf, Red.” Red lifts her chin, eyes sharp yet uncertain, as if testing the edges of both their intentions. Red lifted her chin, her gaze sharp as if she meant to challenge him, yet there was a flicker of uncertainty in her eyes, a secret tremor beneath her strength. The scent of wildflowers and fresh bread clung to her, just as he’d said, and his low voice seemed to wrap around her like a velvet ribbon. For a moment, she hesitated, caught between caution and longing, before letting the words tumble out—soft but resolute. “And you make it awfully difficult to remember why I should ever be afraid of wolves.” The Wolf steps closer, his gaze flickering between Red’s wary expression and the pulse fluttering at her throat. The Wolf stepped closer, his movements fluid, almost graceful, though tension rippled beneath his fur. He watched Red’s wary eyes, the delicate flutter at her throat betraying both fear and fascination. “You always smell of wildflowers and bread, Red,” he murmured, his voice a low rumble that seemed to linger in the cool forest air.

He let his gaze linger, unable to hide the longing that flickered in his eyes. Perhaps she saw it too—the raw, unguarded hunger he tried to disguise. Yet, in her face, he sensed uncertainty, a question unsaid. His lips curved in a wry, almost tender smile. Maybe, he thought, she mistook the hunger in his eyes for something gentler, something that wished to keep her close rather than tear her apart. The truth trembled between them, fragile as the pulse at her throat. Red tilts her chin up, meeting his gaze without flinching, her fingers tightening around her basket. Red tilted her chin up, meeting his gaze without flinching, her fingers tightening around the woven handle of her basket. She could feel the weight of his words settle between them—“You always smell of wildflowers and bread, Red,” he’d murmured, voice rumbling low, as if confessing a secret. The faintest smile curved her lips, but something restless flickered in her eyes. Maybe, she thought, he saw the hunger that lived beneath her skin, the longing for more than the smallness of her world. Perhaps he wondered if it was a hunger they both shared—just not for blood. The exchange is more verbal and emotionally charged than physical;

Red does not immediately offer bread, instead probing The Wolf’s intentions and warning him to keep his distance.

Red stops abruptly on the forest path, clutching her basket tighter and glaring over her shoulder at the Wolf, her voice sharp with suspicion. Red halted abruptly on the narrow forest path, her heart pounding beneath her cloak. Fingers tightening around the worn handle of her basket, she glared over her shoulder, eyes searching the tangled shadows for any sign of movement. The Wolf was there again—she could feel his presence, lingering just beyond the reach of sunlight, always watching. Her voice came out sharper than she intended, edged with suspicion and a flicker of unease. “Why do you keep following me?” she demanded, gaze not wavering. “Every time I turn around, you’re there—lurking in the trees or pretending to be just passing by.” The words spilled out, anger wrestling with something softer inside her. “What do you want from me?” The Wolf steps from the shadows, keeping his distance but letting the moonlight catch his watchful gaze. The Wolf emerged from the shelter of the shadows with deliberate care, staying just far enough away to respect the tension in the air. His eyes, reflecting a sliver of moonlight, held both mischief and something gentler—something almost like longing. He inclined his head, a wry smile flickering at the edges of his mouth as he studied Red’s wary silhouette. “Curiosity, mostly,” he admitted, his tone light but edged with vulnerability, as if the confession cost him something. “Though I suppose it’s hard to believe when you feel my eyes on your back.” Red tightens her grip on her

basket and takes a cautious step back, her eyes narrowing as she studies the Wolf's posture for any sign of threat. Red tightened her grip on her basket, the woven handle digging into her palm as she edged a step backward. Her eyes, usually warm with curiosity, narrowed now with wary calculation, tracing the subtle tension in the Wolf's shoulders and the careful way he shifted his weight. She sensed something coiled beneath his polite words—something that didn't match the casual tilt of his muzzle.

"Curiosity can be dangerous in the wrong hands," she said quietly, her voice steady but edged with caution. "And yours never seem empty—so forgive me if I don't believe that's all there is." Red's words lingered in the hush between them, her compassion wrestling with suspicion as she refused to let her guard down. The Wolf steps out from behind a tree, his gaze unwavering as he slowly raises his empty palms, offering Red a thin, unsettling smile. The Wolf stepped out from behind the gnarled tree, his presence deliberate yet oddly vulnerable. His gaze didn't waver as he slowly raised both empty palms, the gesture as much a show of trust as it was a performance. A thin, unsettling smile curled at the edge of his mouth—half invitation, half warning. "Then perhaps you'd rather I walk beside you," he murmured, voice low and persuasive, "where my intentions—and my hands—are in plain sight." The words lingered between them, shadowed by longing and an undercurrent of something softer, something almost pleading. Red tightens her grip on the basket, taking a cautious step away from the Wolf, her eyes narrowed with unresolved suspicion. Red tightened her grip on the basket, the woven handle biting into her palm as she edged a cautious step away from the Wolf. Her gaze, sharp with suspicion and something softer beneath, flickered over his looming form. She struggled to read the truth in his shadowed eyes, wrestling with the uncertainty that gnawed at her. "I'd rather you keep your distance," she said, her voice steady but low, "because intentions aren't always as visible as hands, and I can't decide if I'm safer with you beside me or behind me." The words hung between them, heavy with the weight of her conflicted heart—wary, yet unwilling to turn her back completely. The Wolf steps forward into a shaft of sunlight, eyes steady and unblinking, as if daring her to look away first. The Wolf stepped forward, letting the sunlight sketch the sharp lines of his muzzle and catch in his steady, unblinking eyes. He held Red's gaze, as if daring her to be the first to look away. His voice, low and persuasive, wove itself through the hush between them. "Then tell me, Red—what would make you feel safe enough to believe my words, if not my distance?" The question lingered, edged with an unspoken longing, betraying more of his vulnerability than he perhaps intended. Red tightens her grip on her basket and takes a cautious step away from the Wolf, eyes darting between the shadows and his face. Red tightened her grip on the basket, her knuckles whitening as she edged away from the looming Wolf. Her gaze flickered anxiously between the shifting shadows and the creature's unreadable eyes. The tension in her voice barely masked her resolve as she said, "Maybe if you stopped following me altogether and let me walk these woods without wondering what you want, I'd believe you actually mean no harm." Her words hung in the cool air, both challenge and plea, the forest quiet as if holding its breath for his response. Both characters remain wary, and their fragile trust is built through dialogue and mutual challenge rather than silent sharing.

The chapter ends with a sense that their relationship is progressing through careful negotiation, with trust as an ongoing question rather than a gesture of food.

---

As the tension in the cottage slowly ebbs, Red's declaration lingers in the air, reshaping the dynamics between all three. The woodsman's earnestness and the Wolf's guarded vulnerability leave her with much to consider. With trust hanging in the balance, Red finds herself at a

crossroads—not just between two suitors, but between the life she’s known and the future she must choose for herself. As dawn breaks beyond the window, she knows her next steps will define not only her relationships, but the path she carves through the world.

## Chapter 7: Red Chooses Her Path Forward

Red steps carefully over the slick roots, clutching a woven basket filled with fresh bread.

She pauses as The Wolf emerges from behind a cluster of ferns, his fur still glistening from the drizzle.

Their encounter is tense and charged: Red, suspicious and unyielding, directly confronts The Wolf about his true intentions in following her through the woods.

The Wolf, vulnerable and earnest, admits to his curiosity and desire to be seen for who he truly is—not merely the villain of old tales.

Red keeps her gaze steady, fingers pausing mid-air over a cluster of crimson berries, her hand still lightly resting against the Wolf’s paw. Her tone is sharp, but her eyes betray a flicker of unease. Red’s fingers hovered in hesitation above a cluster of crimson berries, her hand unconsciously lingering against the Wolf’s thick paw. She kept her gaze unwavering, though a flicker of uncertainty darted through her eyes. “You know, I don’t believe in coincidences.” Her tone was edged with suspicion, sharper than she intended. The question that followed cut through the gentle hush of the undergrowth, her voice low but insistent. “So tell me—why are you really here, trailing me through the thickets?” The Wolf tilts his head, eyes glinting as his tail flicks softly through the leaves. The Wolf tilted his head, a glimmer of mischief sparking in his eyes as his tail flicked softly through the carpet of leaves. Red’s fingers brushed against his paw—light, uncertain—her gaze sharp as she examined the berries between them. At her pointed question, he allowed a smile to curl at the edges of his mouth. “Curiosity, perhaps,” he murmured, voice low and persuasive, though he could not help but let a hint of wounded charm slip through. “Though you make it sound far more sinister than a simple stroll beside an old path.” The words lingered in the air, gentle and inviting, as if he hoped she might see his longing for connection beneath the cunning exterior. Red meets his gaze, her grip tightening around the basket, a flicker of distrust sharpening her eyes. Red met his gaze, her grip tightening around the worn handle of her basket. As she examined the berries he’d gathered, her fingers brushed his paw—an accidental touch that sent a shiver of caution up her spine. A flicker of distrust sharpened her eyes as she studied him, unwilling to let her wariness show. “Curiosity doesn’t usually leave pawprints in my shadow,” she remarked, her voice steady but edged, making it clear she hadn’t missed the fact that he’d been following her. The Wolf tilts his head, watching her hand linger near his paw, eyes glinting with a guarded amusement. The Wolf tilted his head, watching as Red’s fingers brushed against his paw, her touch lingering just a moment longer than necessary. His eyes glinted with a guarded amusement, the kind that masked vulnerability beneath a veneer of charm. He let a sly smile curve his lips, voice low and persuasive as he observed the suspicion in her gaze. “And suspicion doesn’t usually taste so sweet on your tongue, Red,” he murmured, the words slipping out almost impulsively—half invitation, half confession—while his attention remained fixed on the delicate line between her hand and his paw. Red stands her ground, her gaze unwavering as she lets the berries slip from her palm, daring him to answer. Red stood her ground, refusing to flinch beneath his gaze. The berries slipped from her palm one by one, a quiet defiance in the gesture, and as her fingers brushed the edge of

his paw, she let her curiosity show. “Trust isn’t given to those who lurk in the undergrowth,” she said, voice steady, each word a challenge. Her eyes searched his for honesty—or perhaps just a hint of his true intentions. “So tell me, Wolf, what do you want from me?” The Wolf’s eyes glint beneath the dappled light, his head tilting as if weighing her every heartbeat. The Wolf’s eyes glinted beneath the dappled forest light, head cocked in a manner both playful and predatory, as if he could hear every flutter of Red’s pulse. Her fingers, trembling just slightly, brushed against the roughness of his paw while she studied the berries, feigning a composure he found deliciously fragile. When she finally asked, voice sharp and clear, why he had followed her, a sly smile curled the edge of his mouth.

“Want is a dangerous word,” he murmured, each syllable spun with velvet and warning. He let the words linger between them, gaze never wavering from her face. “Perhaps I only wish to know if you are as fearless as you pretend to be.” Their conversation is probing and emotional, with Red challenging The Wolf to prove his sincerity and the Wolf vowing to earn her trust.

The Wolf sits back on his haunches, lowering his head in an unthreatening gesture, amber eyes searching Red’s face for a flicker of understanding. Rain pattered down through the tangled branches, tracing glistening paths along the Wolf’s fur. He sat back on his haunches, lowering his head in a gesture that was almost humble, his amber eyes never leaving Red’s face. With a slow, uncertain swipe of his tongue, he licked the droplets from his nose, as if buying himself a moment.

“It isn’t easy, standing here like this,” he admitted, the vulnerability in his voice slipping past his usual charm. “Rain slicks down my fur, and I’m searching for the right words—ones you might actually believe.” His gaze flickered, not with calculation, but with something softer. “But I hope you’ll listen, just this once. I want to show you who I really am, not just the Wolf everyone’s warned you about.” Red narrows her eyes, clutching her cloak tighter around her shoulders as she takes a cautious step closer. Red narrowed her eyes, suspicion flickering beneath her lashes as she clutched her cloak tighter around her shoulders, the wool absorbing the chill of the rain-soaked air. She stepped forward, cautious but unwilling to back away, and her voice—steady, but colored by the ache of old stories—cut through the quiet. “And what makes you think I should believe a single word,” she asked, gaze fixed on the Wolf as he licked rain from his nose, “when every story ends with me running and you chasing?” The Wolf lowers his head, water dripping from his muzzle, eyes searching Red’s face for a flicker of understanding. The Wolf lowered his head, droplets of rain slipping from his muzzle to darken the earth between them. His eyes, deep and uncertain, searched Red’s face for any sign of warmth or understanding. He paused, the tip of his tongue flicking out to taste the dampness clinging to his nose, as if gathering the courage to bare something rarely spoken. “Because this time,” he said quietly, voice roughened by hope and regret, “I’m not running after you—I’m standing still, asking you to look past the stories and see me as I am.” Red steps closer, her cloak damp, searching the Wolf’s eyes for any flicker of deception. Red hesitated, her boots sinking slightly into the sodden earth as she edged closer. The hood of her crimson cloak clung damply to her hair, and rainwater dripped from its hem. She studied the Wolf, searching his yellow eyes for even the faintest shadow of a lie. Compassion warred with caution inside her; she wanted to believe he meant no harm, yet fear for her grandmother tugged at her heart. Red drew a steadying breath, her voice quiet but unwavering as she looked up at him. “If you’re truly here for something different,” she said, her words threading through the hush of rain, “then tell me—what is it you want me to see?” The Wolf lowers his head, rain dripping from his muzzle as he meets Red’s eyes, searching for a flicker of trust. The Wolf lowered his head, droplets of rain trailing down his muzzle as he met Red’s gaze—searching, imploring, almost desperate for a flicker of trust. He licked the cool rain from his nose, hesitation flickering in his golden eyes. “I



want you to see the part of me that aches for understanding,” he murmured, voice low and raw, the usual edge replaced by fragile hope. “Not the hunger or the teeth, but the heart that hopes you might trust me, if only for this moment.” The words trembled between them, tangled with the yearning he could no longer hide. Red tightens her grip on her cloak, searching The Wolf’s eyes for any flicker of deception. Red tightened her grip on her cloak, the damp wool bunched between her fingers as she studied The Wolf’s face, searching his eyes for any flicker of deception beneath the droplets of rain glistening on his fur. Her voice was steady but laced with the hesitation of someone used to relying only on herself. “And if I take that chance—just for this moment—what promise do you make to me in return?” The Wolf lowers his head, rain tracing gentle lines along his muzzle, his eyes searching Red’s face for any hint of hope. The Wolf lowered his head, rain tracing gentle, silvery lines along his muzzle. He licked moisture from his nose and let his gaze linger on Red’s face, searching her eyes for some glimmer of hope—anything that might tell him she hadn’t yet given up on him. His voice, usually edged with mischief, softened into something earnest. “I promise,” he said, the words threading through the sound of falling rain, “that for as long as you trust me, I will do everything I can to deserve it—no tricks, no teeth, just truth.” Vulnerability flickered in his expression, unguarded and raw, as if the confession itself was more dangerous than any fang. As they speak, the Wolf’s promises extend not only to Red but also to her Grandmother, who is implied to be present or listening nearby and voices her own doubts about trusting the Wolf at night.

The Wolf swears, by tooth and tail, to protect them both, day and night.

The tension softens as Red considers his words, and though still wary, she acknowledges his promise.

The Wolf steps forward, lowering his head in a gesture of solemn promise, his eyes never leaving Red and her Grandmother, as if searching for any sign of trust—or doubt—in their faces. The Wolf stepped forward, his movements graceful but uncharacteristically careful, as though mindful of every twig beneath his paws. Lowering his head in a gesture bordering on reverence, he kept his gaze fixed on Red and her Grandmother—eyes bright with something tender and unspoken, yet haunted by the fear of rejection. Voice low and earnest, he offered, “Red, Grandmother, I swear to you—should any danger find its way to your door, I will be there to stand between you and harm.” The promise lingered in the air, heavy with the weight of his longing for their trust. “My word is my bond; you have nothing to fear while I keep watch.” Even as he spoke, his gaze searched their faces, desperate for a flicker of belief—a silent plea that, this once, the Wolf might be trusted. Red meets the Wolf’s gaze, her voice steady but her eyes searching his face for sincerity. Red met the Wolf’s gaze, steadying her voice even as her eyes searched his face for any trace of sincerity. “Thank you, Wolf—but promises are easy in daylight; will you keep watch through the shadows, too?” The question lingered between them, her curiosity sharpened by the quiet vulnerability she tried to hide. The WolfGrandmother peers over her spectacles, her hands trembling slightly as she clasps Red’s shoulder. Grandmother’s hands trembled as she clasped Red’s shoulder, her knuckles white against the faded fabric of Red’s cloak. She peered over her spectacles, eyes searching the Wolf’s face for any crack in the mask of charm he wore so easily. “It’s a comfort to hear, Wolf,” she said, her voice thin but steady, “but the night is when old fears prowl—can we truly trust your word when darkness falls?” The question hung between them, heavy and uncertain, echoing the doubts that lingered with every shadow that crept across the cottage floor. The Wolf lowers his head solemnly, meeting Red and Grandmother’s eyes with unwavering intensity, as a hush settles over the little cottage. The Wolf lowered his head solemnly, the silver of his gaze unwavering as it flicked between Red and her grandmother. The hush that settled in the cottage was thick with

unspoken fears and fragile hopes. Then, with a quiet intensity that lingered in the beams of fading sunlight, he vowed, “By tooth and tail, my loyalty endures beyond the sun’s last light.” His voice was low but steady, a promise forged from something deeper than instinct. “Let the dark test me,” he added, holding their eyes with a fierce gentleness, “and you shall see where I stand.” Together, with a tentative new understanding, they continue toward the cottage, the Wolf pacing beside Red, alert to every sound in the underbrush.

---

And so, beneath the hush of rain and the watchful eyes of the woods, Red chose her path forward—not alone, but in the company of trust newly forged, where old stories faded into the promise of something braver than fear.