

“The Wolf”

By Ava Jo

After years and years, I'm still the villain in every Little Red Riding Hood story. I don't see why I get such a bad rap for just one tiny thing I did that long ago.

"You ate a little girl," you might say.

Well, that's a load of baloney. If you've read anyone's account of the story—and if you haven't, I'm not sure why you're interested in me at all—you know that Little Red got the better of me in the end, embarrassing at it is to admit. And as for those who claim wolves are wicked, I could say the same about humans. Strutting about like they own the planet, polluting our beautiful forests. It's a wonder that someone else hadn't found Little Red before I did. In all my life I haven't met a single animal who didn't detest humans. In fact, cats are probably the worst—they have a nasty temper and an impressive vocabulary to use against you while your unwitting back is turned.

If you're wondering why I'm bothering to tell any of this to a human, it's because I want you to know how I feel. How the animals in the story feel. Maybe I'm also holding out the smallest bit of hope that some of you may change just a bit. But if you don't, I won't count my time wasted. At least you might understand us a little bit more.

In any case, you're probably waiting for me to begin telling my story. Well, I really don't appreciate being rushed. But here I go, anyway. Here's how it started.

It was a cool, early spring day and delicate green shoots were beginning to break the surface of the semi-frozen soil. I was prowling around the forest, looking for something to eat. It had been days since my last meal, and the hollow ache in my stomach was making me irascible. Since I had no pack to help me hunt down larger game, I had been reduced to poking through leaf piles and peering into knotholes in search of a nice squirrel or two. In my peripheral vision, I

caught sight of a red hooded cloak. It was bobbing up and down carelessly, occasionally bending down to study a flower or some other insignificant thing. Normally, it would've been funny, but on that day the cloak barely interested me. It wasn't the real prize: I knew that under it must be a human, and I was exceedingly hungry.

The hooded cloak was a rare sight indeed, because no villagers had strayed into the forest for a long time. They'd learned their place after a few inciting incidents—which I don't feel inclined to go into now—and generally stayed far away from the treeline. This particular human appeared to be a child, from the small size of the body and huge, disproportionate head. Its age was a bit disappointing, because I always prefer to prey on the adults. Children have no part in the conflict between our species—at least, not until they grow up to be like the rest of you.

Still, I was hungry and extremely irritable from lack of rest. I'd had no decent place to sleep for the past few moons.

I approached the red cloak cautiously, for even a small human could have a trick up its sleeve. As much as I despise your kind, I'll admit that you all have a certain intelligence—although it is almost overshadowed by your so-called good morals. I don't get why you even bother with those. Doing the right thing is subjective, which I don't suppose you understand. You humans all think your personal viewpoint is the only one that matters.

Anyway, while the child was distracted by a peculiar looking flower growing sadly out of the ground next to its thick black rain boots (the plant looked squashed. I wonder why) I managed to creep up unnoticed. I was itching to make a move, but talking to your prey before you eat it is always good manners, and sometimes a scared human gives away useful information. I reached up with one of my paws and tapped it on the shoulder, trying on a smile.

The thing was awfully short. For a moment I felt a faint stab of pity, but I reminded myself that it was a human and not to be sympathized with.

“Hello there,” I said. The child spun around and when its huge, round eyes landed on me, they grew wide.

“Who are you? Are you going to eat me?” The child trembled. Its grip on the large picnic basket it happened to be holding slackened.

“Oh, no,” I said. I almost wished it weren’t a lie, but hunger always comes first at times like these. “I am a very nice wolf. I wouldn’t *dream* of eating you.”

The child’s shaking stilled. “Good,” it said. “Because I am delivering this cake and wine to my grandmother who lives on the other side of the forest, and my mother would be very angry if I didn’t come back.”

Okay, so two humans. Maybe three. I wondered if I could find them and eat them instead of the young one.

“Where exactly does your grandmother live?” I asked. “You know, between friends.”

“Less than a league from here, straight down the path.”

Well, that was more than simple enough for me. If there’s one thing I can taste, it’s a good opportunity, and this definitely qualified as one. “I bet your grandma would be very pleased if you brought her some flowers,” I suggested. “I know a patch of daisies straight right of here. It’s not far, and the petals are large and vibrant.”

The child ate up the idea like a particularly good piece of chocolate cake. “Yes!” it squeaked. “Grandmother would like that very much. Thank you, Mr. Wolf.”

“Not at all,” I said. I had to admit that this young human was unusually polite. I decided I would spare it and take the grandmother instead. “I hope I shall see you again.” I retreated a safe distance into the cover of the trees so as not to be seen, then set off at a parallel to the gravel path. Before the child arrived at the grandmother’s house, I’d already be gone.

Unfortunately, I suffered a setback when I bumped into my old pack of wolves. I’m a bit embarrassed to admit that I am an outcast even among my own kind. You would’ve thought with a personality like this—no? Why are you shaking your head? I swear I’ll never understand you humans. Anyway, I ran into—literally—the alpha female of the group. She wasted no time in delivering a swift bite to my ear, and I only barely managed not to yelp. I stumbled back and bared my gums.

“Why are you here?” I growled.

She growled. “Why are *you* here? Do you not understand that when you defended those humans, that meant banishment?”

Now, reader, you might have some questions for me after that shocking statement. Yes, it’s true. I did fight for a couple of human children a while back, but that was a unique situation. If you by some chance find yourself in a forest with me, don’t count on any special treatment.

Not a satisfactory answer? Well, then, I’ll go into it later, since you really want to know. But it’s not relevant to this part of the story.

I rolled my shoulder blades forward in an approximation of what you humans call a shrug.

“Listen, I’m kind of busy right now, so if you’d kindly let me pass…” I did my best to stroll through the ranks of wolves, pushing through gray flanks right and left. I’m actually still astonished that I managed to get more than halfway through the pack before they reacted.

One moment the wolves were coolly awaiting their alpha’s directions, the next they had received some silent signal and were swiftly closing off all exits. They formed a circle around me, ears shoved back, teeth bared. Although I was slightly bigger than most of them, with darker fur and sharper eyes, I didn’t hesitate before running for my life. There wasn’t a single exit on the ground, but I could still jump. I ran forward, watching the bewildered expression of the wolf in front of me, and leaped. The earth flew out from under me as my shadow crossed over her back.

I could feel the Alpha’s breath on my tail as I bolted toward the edge of the forest. It was convenient that my destination was outside of the trees, because I knew the pack would never follow me there. It’s against the laws of our kind to leave the safe cover of our home, no matter what the reason. Of course, I’d already broken numerous laws—the reason being there are so many it’s hard to remember them all.

I ducked between low hanging branches and navigated thick clumps of brambles, panting tiredly. The only reason the pack hadn’t caught me by this time was because of their lack of independence. Every move, every action—it all was the result of some silent signal from the Alpha. At the flick of an ear or the shuffle of a paw, she could command the mindless wolves to do anything she pleased.

It was because of one of these signals that the wolves were now pushing in from both sides, threatening to cut me off from all directions. I abandoned my plan of heading straight to

the grandmother's house. It would be impossible to stay on course with this change of strategy from the Alpha. All the same, I didn't give up. I spotted a conveniently placed thorn bush and dove through. Thistles tore at my pelt, but from the low, annoyed growl of the Alpha wolf I discerned that the pack had decided not to follow. Chasing me, evidently, wasn't worth ruffling their fur. I laid low for a while, then poked my tail out of the bush, bracing myself for a sharp pain. Nothing happened.

When a minute passed and no angry wolves had bitten me, I determined that I was safe and crawled out, shaking my fur out uncomfortably. For a moment I didn't feel like moving. The experience of running from my old pack had unsettled me. Yes, I was an outcast, but I didn't think they would have taken our quarrel so far. That was why I hadn't left the forest immediately after banishment. It appeared I'd have to rethink that decision.

I finally circled around to gain my bearings, and found myself face to face with a pack member. He was around my size. Blue eyes, bushy tail. I knew him, but we weren't friends anymore. I bared my fangs.

"I didn't come to fight," he told me.

"I'm not falling for your tricks." I took a measured step forward, drawn on by a distinct and terrible loathing. "Not after last time."

He snorted irritably. "That was necessary. Alpha commanded me to bear her message."

"I don't seem to recall a message." I shoved my ears forward to reveal a deep tear in the tissue. "Unless you call this one."

"Well, this time is different. Alpha has a proposal."

Despite my feelings for this wolf, a proposal sounded good. Great, even. "Go on."

He sighed as if unhappy about it. “She recognizes your ability and potential during the chase, and thinks you can be of use once again. She would permit you to rejoin the pack if you choose.”

“And the catch?” There’s always a catch. I know this from experience—and if there isn’t, you’re being tricked. Take my advice next time somebody offers you free candy.

“The pack is starving. You must capture a human by sunrise tomorrow, or else you will be driven out of the forest. No tricks, and no ill or scrawny prey will be tolerated.”

A human! I knew where one of those were! I think my eagerness must have shown, because he regarded me with a slightly curious gaze. Thankfully he misinterpreted, adding, “Don’t get ahead of yourself. You’ll only be promoted to Omega.”

My proud posture slumped. “Omega?”

“If you’d like I can tell Alpha what you think of her offer.”

“No, no,” I said hurriedly. “Omega’s fine.”

He turned to leave, then paused. “By the way, I hope you fail.”

My anger flared up once again. “You wish,” I spat. We turned our own ways, him heading west, me north, determination fueling my paws.

It didn’t take me long to reach the grandmother’s house. It was a small cottage complete with simple gray drapes and a brick chimney releasing a steady stream of wafting smoke. It lay at the very edge of the forest and looked exactly like a place that would house an frail old lady. I



trotted to the wooden door, glad I didn't have to completely leave the cover of the forest. It just wouldn't do to have humans chasing me with pitchforks, as much as I love being stabbed.

That was sarcasm, by the way. Just telling you in case you're too stupid to know.

I rapped on the door with a nimble paw. "Anyone home?"

"Who is it?" a feeble voice called out.

I picked a name and hoped it would suffice. "Little Red Riding Hood, Grandma. I've brought you some cake and wine."

"Oh! Please come in—but mind the door, it closes rather loudly."

How this old lady couldn't tell my voice from her granddaughter's was beyond me—perhaps her age was affecting her hearing—but I wasn't going to complain. In fact, there was a more pressing problem: how I was going to open the door without human hands. "Sorry, Grandma, but do you mind telling me exactly how to get in?"

"Hm? Oh, silly me, the door must be locked. Just slide the latch and it should swing open easily."

I did as she said, and was able to push the door open. Little Red's grandmother was lying down in her bed, looking pale and sickly. Any thoughts of delivering her to the pack were immediately squashed by her condition. It would have to be the child. I tried to tell myself it deserved its fate, but somehow I still felt bad. This wasn't good. I couldn't show signs of weakness, not in front of the pack, not even while alone. Such a thing is dangerous if you're a wolf.

The grandma squinted at me, probably trying to make out my shape. Her eyes were badly swollen and her eyelids drooped down lower than normal. How could I feel sympathy for a child

and not for this old, feeble lady? Well, that's simple. A young human, while still a human, is innocent of the crimes of its species. But this granny, she'd obviously lived a long, very human, life. She'd lived, and would die, with the misdeeds of her kind. For every single dying tree stump the villagers have left in their wake, I could list ten horrible human acts—and then some. For starters, they've sparked forest fires with their careless campfires. They've hunted everything from wild turkey to deer—solely for fun. They've cut down thousands of trees so they could have pretty houses, and then they call us the bad guys.

So yes, it was too late for old Grandma. But I've known children to turn out better. A number of years back, there'd been a few who'd split from the rest of their kind. They'd begged for the villagers to make peace with the forest. Poor things. Neither the wolf packs nor the humans wanted them, and of course a pack got them in the end. At least I'd been able to inflict a few wounds before the inevitable. And earlier today, it had been satisfying to see a few of those parting gifts still clawed into my old packmates' pelts.

Yes, those were the humans I'd fought for. And I don't regret it, despite being banished.

But this new child needed to die so I could live. There was no way I would survive outside the forest alone. I knew my actions were necessary.

Meanwhile, I was running through options in my head. I could eat the grandma, and I *was* hungry, but she wasn't looking too appetizing. Or, I could throw her in the closet. I opted for the second choice. Before she could cry out, I leaped upon her bed. I took her nightgown in my teeth and pulled it off forcefully. Thankfully, she was wearing linen pajamas underneath. I tore a piece from the dreary drapes and shoved it in her mouth. Then I nudged open the closet and

pushed her off the bed and inside. No further restraint was necessary; she was too weak to even shove open the door.

I put on her nightgown—which took a good five minutes, because I got tangled in the fabric—and hopped into the bed, somehow managing to pull the covers over myself with my paws. I tried to look like somebody’s grandma, but my paws stuck up and made lumps in the sheets. I growled in frustration.

Then the knock came.

“Who is it?” I called, adopting a high and squeaky voice.

“It’s Red, Grandma. Mother sent me.”

I suddenly noticed my hind legs were poking up from the sheets. I did my best to push them down, while trying to keep my voice sounding like a grandma’s. “Come right in, dear.”

The door swung open. There the child stood, a bundle of bright yellow flowers in its right hand, the picnic basket in its left. Its red hood had been flung back carelessly. Short brown hair fell to its shoulders in a ruffled, wavy mess, and the boots definitely looked worse for the wear. This being so, its bright blue eyes were beaming. It ran over to my bedside and gave me a curious look.

Now, you might have heard many versions of the dialogue between us. The most popular one, as I recall, is the whole, “Grandmother, what big eyes you have!” shtick. I’m sorry to burst your bubble, but nothing of that nature ever occurred, for the second the child took a good look at me, it recognized me for what I was. But it didn’t flee. It just stared at me. I wrestled with whether I should hurt it or not, wishing the grandmother were in better condition so the pack

could prey on her instead. It just looked so *innocent*. But, alas, I knew it would not stay that way for long.

“Why are you here, Mr. Wolf?” it asked. “Where’s Grandmother? Have you eaten her?”

At that moment I made a decision. The accusation the child had made was incredibly rude, and it deserved to be eaten by the pack. I pushed myself up into a more comfortable sitting position.

“I have not eaten your grandmother,” I said cheerfully. “She is sick and bony, so I threw her in the closet. But I have plans for you!” I leaped at the child, baring my fangs. It screamed, and reflexively swung the picnic basket. It hit me in the muzzle, knocking me back a step. Little Red turned and ran out the open door without so much as a backward glance. The basket lay forgotten on the wooden floor.

By this time I had recovered, and was back on my feet. I exited the house and turned my head frantically. There was no sign of Little Red—but there! Caught on a blackberry bush was a torn piece of red fabric. I rushed past the bush, into the forest. I had to find the child before it got away—or before some other animal decided it was hungry. Straying off the path was practically suicidal for humans.

At last I caught sight of a shredded red hood. I snarled, and the child turned to me, terror etched on its face. I sprung. The child froze, perhaps realizing its end was near. Then there was a crack, and I fell to the ground. Pain exploded in my leg, and from the odd angle it was twisted at it looked like my femur had been fractured. I tried to pull myself up, but only managed a crawl.

There was a shouted order, a rush of movement. A man, clad in a brown bear-skin coat, pulled Little Red to its feet. He raised his gun again, and fired. The bullet hit the ground, a mere

claw-length from my belly. I shifted, hiding the area he'd shot at and pretending to go limp. It was the oldest trick in the book—play dead. The man hesitated a moment, then fell for my display and walked away with the child in tow.

It was a long time before I deemed it safe to get up. I took one look at my leg before falling to the ground again. Blood matted my fur, and the open gunshot wound was clotted with dirt and leaves. It would probably become infected before long. I knew I shouldn't walk, but I had to move. So I pulled myself up again and put all my weight on my good three legs. My progress was painstakingly slow, but eventually I reached a river. I dunked my leg into the cool water and almost howled in pain. The liquid rushed over the wound, burning like a freezing fire in my bones. Black spots danced over my vision, and a sudden weariness overcame me. I lay down and fell unconscious.

I woke to the sounds of the night. My eyes stayed closed, but I could hear crickets chirping. Twigs cracked as small animals ventured out of their nests, and an owl hooted nearby. My nose picked out several small rodents safely sheltered in their nearby dens. I couldn't feel anything in my injured leg. It had gone numb, probably from the biting cold of the river.

I opened my eyes. At first, everything appeared blurry, but then the moonlight caught my lenses and my vision sharpened. The first thing I noticed was that the night would not last much longer. The first rays of dawn light peeked bravely out of the horizon, and the sky was a gradient of blues—from a deep midnight shade to a faded ice blue.

There was a wolf in front of me. The same one from before, in fact, though this time I didn't have the strength to muster up any hatred.

"How long have you been there?" I managed. My jaw felt like lead and my pulse throbbed in my ear.

He bared his teeth. "That doesn't matter. What matters is you failed."

I searched my mind for an excuse, misinterpretation, anything that could save me. I repeated the words of our agreement in my head. *You must capture a human by sunrise*. Then, an idea hit me.

"No, I didn't," I said. "You told me to capture a human, and I have."

"From the state of your leg, I'd argue it escaped." He circled around me and nudged my wound with his paw, sending an electric fire down my limb. I yelped, snapping my teeth at nothing in particular. It unnerved me that the prod had hurt so much even while the leg was numb.

I barely managed to get my next words out through the pain. "There's... a-another one. Left it in th-the closet. House at the... edge of the forest."

"Ah, useful at last." He smiled nastily. "There's just one problem." He waited for me to respond, but I didn't. He lashed out at my wound again, this time digging in with his claws. I heard an anguished howl, tearing apart the silence, before realizing it had come from my mouth. Once more, black spots danced before my vision. I had to fight to stay conscious.

"Pay attention!" the wolf snarled. "I'll repeat what I said. There's just one problem."

"What—is—that?" I choked.

He lowered his face down to my eye level. "I don't believe you."

With my remaining strength I stretched out and bit down hard on his ear, taking satisfaction in the way he scrambled back, whimpering. *Chicken*, I thought viciously, but I couldn't say it out loud. I was all out of fuel. I was hungry, injured, and probably going to die. I closed my eyes.

Then there was the sound of a half dozen paws on firmly packed earth, and I snapped my eyelids open again. There they were, the entire pack, led by the Alpha female.

"Enough," she commanded. "Step away." The wolf who had tortured me dipped his head and tried to scurry to the back of the pack, but the Alpha had other plans. She grabbed him by the scruff as he cowered beneath her. "Go check if this wolf's word holds true."

"But—"

"No arguing!" she snapped. "Go!"

I watched him slink away, then regarded her with a nervous stare. Her eyes were icy.

"Do you know what will happen if we find you lied?"

I couldn't respond verbally, so I brought a paw across my neck in a slashing motion.

She sighed. "As much as some of us would like to kill you, it is against our law to attack a disabled adversary."

I must have looked relieved, because she added, "However, I will not hesitate in chasing you from the forest."

I don't remember how long we waited for the wolf to return. I do remember that it was the most anxious I'd ever been in my life. Would they accept the old and wrinkled grandmother as suitable prey? I wasn't sure. But in the end it didn't matter.

“He lied,” the wolf said as he burst into the clearing, panting for breath. “Nothing’s there.”

No! Little Red and the man must have come back for the grandmother! But I couldn’t tell the Alpha this—I didn’t have the strength even to move my mouth. She took a step toward me.

“Get out,” she spat. My eyes widened. A few members of the pack looked smug. I wanted to tell her I wouldn’t be able to walk, but of course, I couldn’t. “Go!”

Whether it was the fear and adrenaline pumping through my veins, or the impending disaster forcing my muscles to work, I managed to get myself up and supported on three legs. Then, as quick as I could under the circumstances, I hobbled away. Pain, hunger and exhaustion threatened to force me down, but stopping so close to the pack would be ill-advised.

After a number of hours, I finally let myself flop to the ground under the shade of a large oak tree. The sun flared through the trees, and the last of the night was just departing. I lay at the edge of the forest, staring outward at the rolling plains and distant villages. The forest reached out invitingly behind me, but I couldn’t go back. Maybe in time I’d find a new one, but for now the grasslands were my home. Slowly, painfully, I dragged myself out of the past and into the shaky future.

So, reader. Maybe my story hasn’t changed your opinion at all. Maybe you’re rolling your eyes and shaking your head and thinking to yourself, “That wolf had it coming.” Maybe you think the whole thing is a lie.

That’s fine. That really is. As I said earlier, I don’t care what you think and never will.



But just in the off chance that you did gain a new perspective after reading this, that now when you stand at the edge of a forest you see it for the beautiful place it really is... well, thank you.