

## Red Berries, White Snow

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Snow had fallen during the night. It was the kind of snow that didn't just dust the rooftops but piled thick on the fields and clung to the branches in soft, perfect clumps. The kind of snow that just begged to be stepped in by the kids, while the adults were stepping in the last phase of preparations between Christmas Eve.

Cody and his little sisters were already outside, bundled into so many layers they moved like penguins. Their boots left deep prints in the garden behind Grandma's house, and their voices echoed across the quiet countryside. They'd been up since breakfast, making snow angels until their backs were wet, their hats crooked, their faces red from the cold, and their eyes sparkling from joy.

Now they were working on a snowman. One of his sisters rolled the middle section while the other kept asking if they could use real buttons this time, not just stones.

Cody packed the head on top and stepped back, observing the creature that was being born.

He laughed, as it was definitely not their best performance.

But then, something caught his eye.

At the edge of the garden, right where the path dipped into the woods, stood a row of bare bushes, dotted with tiny red berries. The colour looked

almost fake against all the white. Like someone had painted them on with a tiny brush.

Cody walked toward them without thinking. His sisters kept arguing about the buttons. He'd only be gone a minute.

The garden fence ended near an old bird feeder. It hung crooked from a branch. A small bird—the kind with the bright yellow belly, a *great tit*, Grandma called it very professionally—fluttered in, snatched a seed, then zipped away. Another landed for a couple of seconds, then disappeared.

Cody stood still, feeling that he was witnessing some kind of an ancient nature ritual that he didn't want to disturb. His breath puffed clouds into the air.

The only sounds were the soft *crunch* of snow under his boots and the birds' tiny flutters. Somewhere in the distance, a woodpecker knocked on a tree like it was trying to wake someone up.

He looked around, then made a couple of steps in the direction of a forest that felt like a very well-kept secret that all this time was so close to Grandma's house, yet no one talked about it.

There were animal tracks in the snow—maybe a fox, or a deer. Or a dog? He couldn't tell. He crouched down to look closer. The prints were delicate. Definite. Whatever it was, it had walked through before the snow crusted over.

Behind him, the house was still very well in view, but the woods felt like another world. Once he crossed the invisible frontier made out of trees, he

was flushed by an avalanche of silence and stillness. Everything here moved slower. Or maybe it didn't move at all? Maybe it was just *being*, which for the forest and its inhabitants, was completely enough.

Cody stepped off the path and walked a little further in, brushing snow off the low pine branches. He touched the bark of a tall birch, cold and peeling in thin strips.

The air smelled different here—like pine needles and something sharp he couldn't name. He inhaled this air that was so different from the smog and the city smells. The cold hit the inside of his nostrils and throat.

He found a flat patch of snow between the trees and lay down, just for a moment. Not to make an angel. Just to lie. To look up.

Branches crisscrossed the sky above him. Thin lines, soft grey against a pale sky.

He breathed in, and out, slowly. Cold again, but he enjoyed it.

For the first time in days, he didn't feel like checking anything. Not a screen, not a message from his classmate, not a game. There was nothing to swipe. No sounds except what the woods gave him.

He listened to the wind moving through the trees. It didn't rush. It wasn't in a hurry.

He sat up after a while. Not because he was bored, but because he felt... full. Not like too much. Just *enough*. Like something inside had clicked back into place.

On the way back to the house, he walked slowly, watching the branches above him sway. His boots crunched on the snow, filling him with joy. He remembered the red berries that looked almost unreal on white snow, thinking they could serve as buttons for the snowman in the making. But then he decided not to take them away from nature and to leave them be.

In the garden, his sisters had given the snowman a carrot nose and stolen one of Grandma's scarves. They waved and excitedly pointed at the finished work. He waved back, but headed home.

Inside, Grandma had lit a candle in the window. The kitchen smelled like cinnamon and toast. Cody brushed the snow from his coat and left his boots by the door.

He didn't say anything. Just sat at the table, quiet and warm on the outside as on the inside.

Later that night, when he finally picked up his tablet again, he didn't open anything. Not right away.

He stared out the window at the dark shapes of the trees.

Then he put the tablet down.

Just for a little longer.