

Contents

Chapter 6: Unmasking the Wolf	1
Chapter 2: Crossing into the Forbidden Woods	3
Chapter 1: Red Receives the Urgent Letter	4
Chapter 5: Grandmother's Isolated Cabin	7
Chapter 4: The Wolf's Trap	8
Chapter 3: Encounter with the Huntsman	13
Chapter 7: The Huntsman's Final Stand	14
Chapter 8: Aftermath and Revelation	16

Chapter 6: Unmasking the Wolf

Red enters the dimly lit cabin, wiping mud from her boots on the rough mat.

She sets a small basket on a warped table and scans the room, her eyes narrowing at the hunched shape beneath a patchwork quilt on the bed.

‘Grandmother’ beckons her closer with a crooked finger, voice rasping, ‘Come nearer, child.’

Grandmother (Wolf in disguise)Grandmother pats the edge of the bed with a gnarled hand, her shadow flickering in the dim light. Her smile stretches a little too wide, revealing teeth that gleam sharper than Red remembers. “Come nearer, child. Let your dear old grandmother have a better look at you. My eyes aren’t what they used to be.” —Grandmother (Wolf in disguise)

Red hesitates at the foot of the bed, clutching her basket tighter, her eyes scanning the shadowed figure beneath the covers. Red lingered at the foot of the bed, her grip tightening around the worn handle of her basket. The lamplight flickered, casting uneasy shadows over the hunched figure beneath the quilt. When the crooked finger beckoned her closer, Red’s heart thudded in her chest. She stepped forward, cautious, her gaze never leaving the shrouded face on the pillow. “Of course, Grandmother,” she said, though her voice wavered, uncertain. Her eyes narrowed, searching for her grandmother’s familiar warmth and finding only strangeness. “But—your voice sounds so strange today.” Grandmother (Wolf in disguise)Grandmother pats the coverlet invitingly, her shadow stretching long and thin across the bed. “It’s just a touch of the cold, my sweet—come closer, so I can see your lovely face.” —Grandmother (Wolf in disguise)

Red hesitates at the foot of the bed, clutching her basket tighter, her eyes scanning the shadowy figure. Red lingered at the foot of the bed, the wicker handle biting into her palm as she tightened her grip on the basket. Her gaze flickered over the tangled quilts and settled on the shadowy shape propped against the pillows. The figure’s outline was wrong—too broad in the shoulders, too still, too hungry. When ‘Grandmother’ crooked a finger and rasped out, “Come nearer, child,” Red’s heart hammered in her chest. She took a cautious step forward, forcing her voice to stay steady as she tried to make sense of what she was seeing. “All right, Grandmother,” she murmured, her eyes

narrowing as she studied the hands protruding from beneath the blanket—hands that looked far too large, the knuckles knotted and covered with coarse, bristling hair. “But your hands—they look so big and furry under the covers.” Grandmother (Wolf in disguise)Grandmother (Wolf) stretches out a clawed hand ever so slightly, the shadow on the quilt growing longer as Red hesitates at the foot of the bed. “All the better to hold you with, my dear—now, don’t be shy, come just a little bit closer.” —Grandmother (Wolf in disguise)

RedShe takes a wary half-step forward, eyes darting between the shadows and the wolf’s disguised face. Red lingered at the foot of the bed, her fingers anxiously twisting the edge of her battered cloak. The fire’s glow flickered over the quilt, casting strange shapes across her grandmother’s shrouded form. She took a wary half-step forward, every instinct urging caution as her eyes darted between the thickening shadows and the oddly familiar lines of the face on the pillow. Swallowing, she tried to steady her voice, but it still trembled as she managed, “And your ears, Grandmother—they seem so much longer than before.” Grandmother (Wolf in disguise)Grandmother’s (the wolf’s) eyes gleam hungrily from the shadows, her lips curling into a toothy grin as she pats the bed invitingly. “All the better to hear your sweet voice with, child—now, step into the light, let your old grandmother see you properly.” —Grandmother (Wolf in disguise)

RedHer voice trembles as she clutches her basket tighter, the shadows flickering across the wolf’s grinning maw. Red’s knuckles whitened around the handle of her basket as she edged closer, the firelight casting grotesque shapes across the wolf’s snarl that masqueraded as a smile. Her resourceful mind spun through every warning her mother had ever given, but her voice betrayed her nerves, trembling as she forced herself to speak. “And Grandmother, your teeth—they look so sharp and large in your mouth,” she whispered, her eyes never leaving the glint of those unnatural fangs, searching desperately for any sign of the woman she loved. Grandmother (Wolf in disguise)Grandmother’s lips curl back in a hungry grin, sharp teeth glinting as she lunges forward, the tension snapping into sudden danger. “All the better to eat you with, my dear.” —Grandmother (Wolf in disguise)

’ Red approaches cautiously, questioning the strange appearance and voice of her ’grandmother.

’ As she hesitates and comments on the oddities—large hands, ears, and sharp, large teeth—the Wolf maintains the disguise but grows increasingly predatory.

When the ruse reaches its breaking point and the Wolf declares, ‘All the better to eat you with, my dear,’ Red realizes the truth.

The revelation triggers the physical confrontation: Red recoils, possibly drawing her hidden knife or preparing to defend herself, as the Wolf throws off the quilt and reveals its monstrous form, setting up the ensuing struggle.

The chaos inside the cottage echoes through the trees as Red scrambles to escape the wolf’s wrath, adrenaline guiding her every step. With the beast injured and furniture strewn in its wake, she seizes the moment to slip through the shattered doorway and out into the night. The once-familiar path now feels foreign, shadowed by the danger she narrowly survived. Driven by both fear and determination, Red flees beyond the cottage’s safety, venturing toward the edge of the forbidden woods—where deeper mysteries and greater challenges await her.

Chapter 2: Crossing into the Forbidden Woods

Red tightens the leather strap holding her knife at her belt and steps onto the muddy path leading into the woods.

Her boots sink into the soft earth, leaving deep impressions.

Red's Mother follows, clutching Red's arm and whispering, 'Stay out of those woods, child.

The wolf is real.

Red's MotherShe grips Red's shoulders tightly, her eyes wide with fear as she glances anxiously toward the darkening forest beyond their cottage. Red's mother gripped her shoulders with trembling hands, her fingers pressing firmly as if to anchor her daughter in place. Wide-eyed, she glanced past Red toward the shadowed tree line, her voice wavering between disbelief and dread. She confessed, barely above a whisper, that she had never put stock in the old stories—but everything changed tonight. She had seen it with her own eyes: the wolf was real, prowling somewhere among the darkening woods beyond the cottage. Fear edged her every word as she urged Red to stay strictly on the path, and reminded her, with a practical urgency, that everyone in the village must lock their doors tight tonight. There could be no taking chances, not now. ' Red's Mother, visibly more shaken than before, confesses, 'I never believed those old stories, but now—I saw it.

The wolf is real, and it's out there, lurking in the woods.

Red clenches her fists at her sides, her expression determined but tinged with worry as she stares into the distance, thinking of the girl who depends on her. Red clenched her fists at her sides, the knuckles whitening as she stared into the distance. Determination held her posture rigid, but worry threaded through her eyes, tightening her jaw. She thought of the girl who depended on her—how it was more than simple companionship or comfort that bound them. The truth settled heavy in her chest: something in that girl's life would unravel without Red there to hold it together. The responsibility pressed on her, sharp as the edge of her own knife, and she couldn't deny that it frightened her a little. But she knew, with a fierce certainty that brooked no argument, she would never turn away—not when someone was counting on her. Red clenches her fists, determination flickering in her eyes as she glances toward the closed door where Maya waits. Red clenched her fists, feeling the roughness of her calloused palms as her gaze lingered on the closed door where Maya waited, small and silent on the other side. Determination flickered in her eyes, steady as flame. If she turned away now, she knew Maya would lose the one person she trusted—a thought Red simply couldn't allow. She could never let that happen, not when someone so alone needed her. We mustn't take any chances.

Red, you must stay on the path, and everyone needs to keep their doors locked tonight.

' Red pulls away gently, adjusting her red cloak, her face set with determination.

She replies, her voice trembling with both fear and resolve, 'It's clear to me now—Grandmother needs me.

Not just for company, not just for comfort, but because something in her life would fall apart without me there to hold it together.

I can feel the weight of that responsibility, and it scares me a little... but I can't turn away from it.

I won't.

Not when she's counting on me.

' Red hesitates, then adds, 'I know that if I walk away now, Maya will lose the one person she trusts, and I can't let that happen.

' Red's Mother thrusts a small loaf of bread into Red's satchel and presses a kiss to her forehead before turning back towards the village, glancing nervously at the dark trees.

Red squares her shoulders, listens as the distant caw of a crow echoes, and steps into the shadowy forest, intent on reaching her grandmother's cabin.

The woods close in around Red, their silence broken only by the occasional snap of a twig beneath her boots. As she ventures deeper, the weight of her promise to Maya gives her resolve, even as unease prickles at the nape of her neck. Every step forward brings new uncertainties, and the shadows seem to whisper secrets she cannot yet decipher. Unbeknownst to Red, something waits for her just beyond the next bend—a message that will change the course of her journey.

Chapter 1: Red Receives the Urgent Letter

Red stands at the battered kitchen table, her fingers tracing the rough parchment of an urgent letter addressed in her grandmother's shaky script.

Red's mother moves about the room, briskly chopping roots for stew, her knife thudding against the cutting board.

The tension between them builds as the crow's cry intensifies outside, echoing warnings and memories of loss.

Red pleads with her mother to let her go, desperate to uncover the truth behind the crow and what happened to her father.

Her mother, wracked with fear and protective love, resists, revealing that the crow is not just a warning but a harbinger of the same darkness that claimed Red's father.

The conversation grows emotionally raw, both acknowledging the pain and secrets that have haunted their family.

Red expresses her need to face the threat, not just for her grandmother, but to finally confront the shadow looming over them all.

Her mother, torn between fear and love, wishes she could accompany Red but ultimately relents, understanding her daughter's resolve.

She presses a sprig of wolfsbane into Red's palm for luck and protection, and with words of love and acceptance, Red steps out into the misty morning, determined to face the woods and whatever awaits her.

Red clenches her fists, glancing nervously at the window as the crow's cries sharpen, her voice trembling with urgency. She stands tense, only a few feet from her mother, who remains unwavering in the doorway. Red's fists tightened at her sides as the crow's cry pierced the afternoon, sharper and nearer than before. She shot a nervous glance toward the window, heart pounding, urgency

trembling in her voice as she stepped closer to her mother—only a few feet separated them, but her mother stood unyielding in the doorway. “Mom, please move,” Red pleaded, her words coming out hurried and raw. “I have to go—now. Can’t you hear it? The crow won’t stop.” The relentless cawing pressed against her nerves, every instinct screaming at her to act, but her mother’s unwavering stance held her back, if only for a moment longer. Red’s MotherShe presses her palm flat against the door, eyes wide and voice trembling, glancing nervously at the window where the crow’s silhouette flickers. Red’s mother pressed her palm flat against the door, her eyes wide and voice trembling. She glanced nervously at the window, where the crow’s silhouette flickered in the dusky light and its cry rose, sharp and insistent. As Red stepped toward the threshold, her mother moved quickly, blocking her path, her body tense with protective instinct. “No, Red—you’re not going anywhere while that thing’s out there,” she said, fear threading through every word as she kept her gaze fixed on the restless shadow outside. Red clenches her fists, her eyes darting between her mother’s stern face and the shadowy window where the crow’s silhouette looms. Red’s fists curled tightly at her sides, her knuckles pale against the worn fabric of her skirt. The crow’s shrill cry sliced through the hush of their cottage, echoing from the window where its black silhouette pressed hungrily against the glass. Her mother stood firm before the door, blocking Red’s path with that familiar sternness etched deep in her face. But Red’s resolve was sharper than her knife; she shot a glance between her mother and the restless bird outside, voice taut with urgency. She didn’t care about the stupid crow, not when something far darker haunted their village. She had to find out what was really happening—no matter what waited beyond the threshold. Red’s MotherRed’s mother spreads her arms wider, her eyes darting to the window as the crow’s cry pierces the air again, voice trembling between fear and desperation. Red’s mother spread her arms wider, barring the doorway, her gaze flickering nervously to the window as another crow’s cry split the silence—closer this time, sharper. Her voice trembled, caught between fear and desperation, as she pleaded, “You don’t understand, Red—the crow is a warning, and if you step outside now, we may never get you back.” Red’s voice trembles as she grabs the doorknob, her knuckles white, while her mother reaches out, desperation etched across her face. Red’s trembling voice barely rose above the insistent shriek of the crow outside. Her fingers tightened around the cold brass of the doorknob, knuckles blanched, as her mother stepped between her and the exit, eyes pleading and desperate. “If you loved me,” Red managed, her words raw with fear and conviction, “you’d trust that I know what I’m doing.” The sentence hung in the air, taut as the tension between them, while Red’s determination burned beneath her vulnerability. Her mother’s hand hovered close, as if she could keep Red safe by sheer will, but Red’s resolve would not be undone. Red’s MotherShe presses her back against the door, hands trembling as the crow’s cry pierces the tense silence. Red’s mother pressed her back against the door, the wood trembling with her, hands clenched tight as another shrill cry from the crows shattered the heavy silence between them. She drew a shaky breath, eyes shining with worry as she kept herself between Red and the threshold. “If I didn’t love you,” she whispered, voice raw with fear and longing, “I wouldn’t be standing here, shaking—praying you’ll listen before it’s too late.” The words seemed to cling to the air, as fragile and desperate as her trembling fingers, unwilling to let Red slip past into the hungry woods beyond. Red’s fists clench at her sides as the crow’s cry pierces the air again, echoing through the tense silence between them. Red’s fists tightened at her sides as another crow’s cry sliced through the heavy silence, its echo bouncing off the cottage walls. She took a determined step toward the door, but her mother moved quickly, blocking her path, arms spread protectively. The tension between them hung thick—Red could feel it pressing against her chest, making it hard to breathe. She met her mother’s anxious gaze, her own eyes fierce. “You think locking me in will save me,” she

said, voice low but unwavering, the words trembling with the force she tried to contain. “But all it does is make the screaming louder.” Red’s MotherShe presses her back more firmly against the wood, voice trembling but resolute as the crow’s cry pierces the air again. Red’s mother pressed her back more firmly against the wood, her hands trembling as she blocked the doorway. Another crow’s cry rose shrill and urgent from the thicket outside, and she flinched, but her voice wavered only slightly as she faced Red. “You have no idea what waits beyond this door,” she said, resolute despite the fear in her eyes. “The crow doesn’t scream for nothing.” Red’s hand tightens on the doorknob, her knuckles white as the crow’s cries reach a fever pitch outside. Red’s fingers curled tighter around the doorknob, the pale strain in her knuckles betraying the storm inside her. The crow’s cries outside reached a fevered crescendo, battering at the thin wood between her and the shadow beyond. Her mother’s silhouette blocked the threshold, arms spread wide, her presence as immovable as the old oaks in the forest. But Red’s jaw set with the same determination she’d inherited from generations of survivors. The urge to act, to protect what little family she had left, burned hotter than any fear.

“Let me face it, Mom,” she said, voice trembling but resolute, her eyes never leaving the darkness beyond the door. “Because hiding in here is killing me just as surely.” Red’s MotherRed’s mother presses her back against the door, her voice trembling as the crow’s cry pierces through the silence, her eyes pleading with Red to understand. Red’s mother pressed her back against the door, barring the only exit as the crow’s cry split the silence outside. Her hands trembled against the wood, knuckles whitening, and her eyes—wide and pleading—searched Red’s face for understanding. “You think I want to lock you in?” Her voice quivered, raw with fear and desperation. “I’m trying to keep you alive, Red—there are things out there you can’t fight with stubbornness.” She flinched as the crow’s call grew sharper, her resolve wavering but unbroken, standing between Red and whatever waited in the deepening dusk. Red grips the doorknob, her knuckles white, the crow’s cry piercing through the silence between them. Red’s knuckles whitened around the doorknob as the crow’s cry shattered the heavy silence between them. Her mother’s figure remained firm, blocking the way, eyes pleading without words. Yet the fear coiling in Red’s chest was suffocating—if she stayed, she could feel herself drowning in it, helpless and shrinking. But if she went, out into the danger that waited beyond the door, at least she could fight. At least she could do something, anything, to protect herself and the family she had left. The thought steadied her trembling hands. Red’s MotherRed’s mother tightens her grip on the doorframe, her knuckles white, as the crow’s cry crescendos into a shriek that rattles the windows. Red’s mother pressed herself against the doorframe, her fingers digging so tightly into the wood that her knuckles blanched. Outside, the crow’s cry rose in a fevered pitch, its shriek clawing at the windows, threatening to shatter the thin glass. As Red stepped forward, her mother’s body blocked the way, tense and unmoving. The fear in her eyes was raw, almost desperate, and when she spoke, her voice trembled with the weight of everything she’d lost and everything she refused to lose. “You are my world, Red,” she murmured, the words thick with worry. “I won’t lose you to the darkness that calls outside.” Red’s voice cracks as she grips the doorknob, the crow’s shrieking echoing through the walls, her mother’s hands trembling as she presses back against the door, torn between confession and protection. Red’s fingers tightened around the cold doorknob, her knuckles white as the crow’s shrieks rattled the walls. Her mother pressed herself against the door, hands trembling, the fierce set of her jaw betraying how close she was to breaking. Red’s voice cracked—half plea, half demand—as she asked, “If you won’t let me go, then at least tell me what you’re so afraid of—please, Mom.” The words hung in the charged air, a desperate thread binding them together, as her mother’s gaze flickered between confession and the instinct to protect. Red’s MotherHer mother’s hand trembles

on the doorknob, eyes pleading and wet with unshed tears as the crow's cry pierces the silence again. Her mother's hand trembled on the doorknob, knuckles paling as she blocked Red's path. Above them, the crow's cry split the hush of the cottage, sharper and nearer than before. Eyes glistening with unshed tears, she looked at Red—not just with worry, but with a pleading that clung to every breath. “The crow isn't just warning us,” her voice broke softly, thick with fear and memory. “It's calling for what took your father, Red.” Red's hand tightens on the doorknob, her knuckles white, as the crow's cry crescendos outside. Red's grip on the doorknob tightened, her knuckles pale against the faded wood as the crow's cry outside rose to a fever pitch. Her mother stood firm in front of her, barring the way with a trembling arm. Red's eyes flashed, fierce and resolute. Running had never solved anything, hadn't brought her brother back, and the ache of that absence pressed against her ribs. If she was ever going to see him again, she thought, she needed to know what had taken him—because hiding from the thing in the woods had done nothing but leave a hole in their home. Red's MotherRed's mother grips the doorframe, her knuckles white, voice trembling as the crow's cry pierces the growing dusk. Red's mother stood rigid in the doorway, her fingers digging into the splintered wood until her knuckles blanched. The cry of the crow outside echoed, sharp and insistent, as dusk pressed against the windows. Red stepped forward, but her mother shifted, blocking her path and fixing her with a gaze heavy with dread. Her voice trembled as she spoke, the words scraping out between clenched teeth: “If you walk out that door, you'll meet the same shadow that swallowed him whole.” —————

The door creaked shut behind Red, sealing her resolve as she stepped into the chilling twilight. With every hurried footfall through the tangled underbrush, her mother's fears echoed in her mind, but the urgency of Grandmother's plea pressed her onward. Shadows pooled beneath the ancient trees, and the path ahead grew narrower, marked only by faint traces of passage. As Red ventured deeper into the woods, the world behind her faded, and a new silence settled—one broken only by the memory of loss, and the distant hope of reaching Grandmother's isolated cabin in time.

Chapter 5: Grandmother's Isolated Cabin

Red advances carefully along the muddy path, gripping her knife with white-knuckled determination.

She pauses at a snapped branch, crouching to examine muddy paw prints pressed deep into the earth, her gaze darting toward the looming silhouette of the cabin ahead.

As she edges closer, the wind carries the faint, unnatural sound of raspy breathing from inside, causing her to flatten against the mossy bark of a nearby tree.

Inside the cabin, The Wolf, disguised in Grandmother's shawl, paces before the hearth, pausing to sniff the air and rearrange a teacup on the table to mimic human habits.

Red scans the curtained window, searching for signs of her grandmother, then circles to the back door, her objective clear: to enter quietly and confront the threat before it can harm her family.

The Wolf, sensing movement outside, stiffens and moves to the door, claws flexing beneath woven sleeves, intent on luring Red inside.

Both hunter and hunted maneuver in tense silence, each driven by the need to protect or to prey.

Red's heart pounds as she steps over the threshold, every creak of the floorboards amplifying the tension between her and the shadowy figure in the bed. The unsettling quiet hangs heavy, poised to shatter as Red inches closer, her suspicions sharpening with every detail out of place. Across the room, the Wolf's anticipation builds, its plan unfolding with each deliberate movement. In this charged moment, the cabin becomes a stage for the true danger lurking beneath the disguise, drawing both Red and the Wolf inexorably toward the trap that has been set.

Chapter 4: The Wolf's Trap

Red, tense and wary, calls for her grandmother as she enters the old cabin.

A voice answers from the shadows, beckoning her closer.

Red pushes aside tangled branches, her voice trembling as she calls out. She pauses, listening intently, but the only response is the rustle of leaves and distant birdsong. Red pushed aside the tangled branches, her call trembling as it left her lips. "Grandmother? Grandmother, are you there?" The words hung in the stillness, swallowed by the hush of the forest. She hesitated, every muscle taut, eyes scanning the dark underbrush for a flicker of movement. "It's me, Red! Please answer me!" she called again, her voice edged with urgency and fear. Only the restless rustle of leaves and the distant song of birds replied, and Red's hand tightened around the hilt of her knife as she pressed on, determined not to let the silence defeat her. GrandmotherHer voice is faint and wavering, drifting from the shadowed corner of the cottage, but there's an unusual edge to it. From the shadowed corner of the cottage, her grandmother's voice slipped into the room—faint and wavering, yet edged with a tension that belied her usual gentleness. She scanned the tangled underbrush beyond the window, her eyes narrowed, searching for any sign of the familiar red cloak. "Red, dear, is that you?" she called, her words trembling like brittle leaves in the wind. Fear lingered in her tone, but it was laced with a brave insistence as she beckoned, "Come closer so I can see you." Red hesitates at the threshold, clutching her basket tighter as she peers anxiously into the dim room. Red hesitated at the threshold, her grip tightening around the wicker handle of her basket as she tried to steady her breath. Shadows pooled in the corners of the dim room, swallowing familiar shapes and making every cabinet and chair seem strange. She scanned the underbrush outside one last time, eyes narrowed for any lurking danger, before forcing herself to call out. "Grandmother, your voice sounds strange—are you feeling alright?" The words trembled at the edges, betraying her worry even as she squared her shoulders, ready for whatever answer might come. Grandmother shifts beneath the covers, her silhouette barely visible in the dimness as she gestures Red closer with a trembling hand. Grandmother shifted beneath the thin covers, her frail outline barely discernible against the gloom that filled the little cabin. With a trembling hand, she beckoned Red closer, her voice soft but threaded with longing. "Oh, my sweet girl," she murmured, her words catching in the hush, "come into the light so I can get a good look at you—my eyes aren't what they used to be." Despite the fear that lingered in the corners of her gaze, there was warmth in her smile, a resilience that flickered like a candle flame against the shadows. Red hesitates at the threshold, clutching her basket tighter as she peers into the dimly lit room, her heart pounding. Red lingered at the threshold, her fingers tightening around the worn handle of her basket as she peered into the dimly lit room. The familiar scent of pine drifted in from the underbrush outside, but unease prickled at her skin. Heart pounding, she scanned the shadowed corners, searching for the comforting shape of her grandmother. Eyes narrowed, she called out softly, voice edged with concern, "Something doesn't feel right—Grandmother, why are

you hiding in the shadows?” Grandmother shifts deeper into the shadows, her silhouette barely visible, her tone both coaxing and uneasy. Grandmother shifted deeper into the shadows, her frail silhouette barely discernible against the dim cabin walls. Her voice, though trembling with unease, reached out with resilient tenderness as she coaxed, “Don’t be frightened, child—just come a little closer so I can explain.” She scanned the tangled underbrush beyond the cracked window, her narrowed eyes searching for any sign of movement, both fearful and brave in her isolation. Red hesitates at the edge of the shadows, gripping her basket tightly as her eyes dart around the dim room. Red hovered at the edge of the shadows, her grip tightening around the worn handle of her basket. The dimness pressed in, thick and uncertain, and her heart hammered as she scanned the tangled underbrush for any sign of movement. Eyes narrowed, she forced her voice to remain steady, though fear prickled beneath her skin. “Grandmother, I’m scared—please step into the light so I know it’s really you.” The plea slipped out, barely louder than a whisper, but resolute all the same. Grandmother’s silhouette shifts slightly in the gloom, one gnarled hand stretching toward Red from beneath the covers. Grandmother’s silhouette shifted slightly in the gloom, the faded patchwork quilt rising and falling with each shallow breath. One gnarled hand, trembling but determined, slipped from beneath the covers and stretched toward Red, beckoning her closer. Her voice, though thin and quavering, carried the old, familiar warmth—soft but edged with a resilience born of years spent weathering the dangers of the forest. “Red, darling, there’s nothing to fear—just reach out your hand so I can hold it.” Even as her eyes darted anxiously over Red’s shoulder, scanning the dark underbrush beyond the window, she summoned every ounce of courage to offer comfort, her frail fingers open in silent invitation. Red hesitantly reaches forward, her trembling fingers brushing against the figure in the shadows, her heart pounding in her chest. Red hesitated at the edge of the thicket, her breath shallow as she scanned the tangled underbrush for any sign of movement. “Grandmother?” she called softly, her voice barely louder than the rustling leaves. Steeling herself, Red crept forward, her knife gripped tightly in one hand. In the gloom, a hunched figure materialized, half-swallowed by shadows.

Her heart hammered against her ribs as she knelt and reached out, fingers trembling. When she brushed the figure’s hand, a chill seeped through her skin—a coldness that made her flinch. Red swallowed, concern tightening her throat. “Grandmother, your hand feels so cold—are you sure you’re alright?” The words slipped out, urgent and low, as she peered closer, searching the familiar face for reassurance that seemed increasingly elusive. Grandmother stretches out her arms, beckoning Red nearer, her shadow flickering strangely in the dim light. Red’s voice trembled as she called out for her grandmother, peering anxiously into the gloom of the cabin. The old woman sat hunched in her bed, her frail arms stretching out, beckoning Red nearer as her shadow flickered strangely against the warped wooden walls. Despite the fear lingering in her eyes, she managed a gentle, reassuring smile.

“It’s just a draft in this old house,” Grandmother murmured, her voice soft yet resilient. She opened her arms wider, her hands trembling ever so slightly. “Come closer, my precious Red. Let me wrap you in my arms and warm you up.” The invitation was edged with a loving urgency, as if she could shield Red from every danger lurking in the woods beyond. Red hesitates, her heart pounding as she tries to pull back, eyes searching her grandmother’s shadowed face for reassurance. Red hesitated, her heart pounding as she tried to pull back, but her grandmother’s grip only tightened, fingers digging into her arm with a strength that took her by surprise. She scanned the tangled underbrush, eyes narrowed in the fading light, but there was no sign of movement—no threat she could see. Unease prickled at her skin. Red’s gaze flickered to her grandmother’s shadowed face, searching for reassurance, but found only darkness. “Grandmother, your grip is so strong—I’ve

never felt you hold me like this before,” she breathed, voice barely more than a whisper, uncertainty threading through her words as she tried to make sense of the sudden change. Grandmother pulls Red even closer, her shadow looming larger in the dim light. Red hesitated at the threshold, her voice trembling as she called out for her grandmother, eyes scanning the tangled underbrush beyond the window. In the hush that followed, Grandmother reached out with shaking hands, drawing Red closer until their shadows merged in the dim light. Her frail arms held on a little tighter, as if warding off the darkness that pressed against the cabin walls. “Sometimes, when we are afraid, we hold on a little tighter,” she whispered, her voice thin but resilient, her gaze shining with both fear and unwavering love. “Don’t you trust your own grandmother?” Red tries to pull back, her heart pounding as she peers anxiously into the shadowy face before her. Red tried to pull back, her heart pounding as she peered anxiously into the shadowy face before her. The arms around her tightened, almost painfully. She scanned the underbrush, eyes narrowed, searching for any sign of movement, and called out, her voice trembling despite her determination, “Grandmother, your embrace is almost hurting me—please, let go if something’s wrong!” Grandmother’s voice trembles, her hold tightening as shadows flicker across her face. Grandmother’s voice trembled as she reached for Red, her frail hand tightening around her granddaughter’s wrist. Flickering shadows danced across her lined face, deepening the worry etched into every wrinkle. She scanned the dense underbrush beyond the cabin window, eyes narrowed in fear, yet a stubborn bravery shone through. “Red, why would you say such a thing—I’m only trying to keep you safe, my sweet child,” she whispered, her words laced with both love and a desperate need to protect, even as the lurking menace of the woods pressed closer. Red tries to pull away, her heart pounding as she stares into the shadows, searching for a familiar face. Red’s fingers tightened around the handle of her knife as she tried to pull away, her heart hammering in her chest. She peered into the murky shadows beneath the tangled underbrush, desperate for any sign of her grandmother’s familiar silhouette. With her breath quickening, she called out, voice trembling despite her determination, “Grandmother, your eyes—they look so different, and your voice keeps changing; please, tell me what’s happening!” The words echoed softly, swallowed by the cold hush of the woods, but Red refused to back down, searching for comfort in the shifting gloom. Grandmother’s shadow looms larger as she pulls Red closer, her eyes glinting strangely in the dim light. Grandmother’s shadow stretched across the rough floorboards, growing taller and more distorted as she drew Red closer into her trembling arms. Her eyes, usually so gentle, glinted with an odd intensity in the dim cabin light, betraying both fear and a fierce determination. Red’s anxious gaze swept the tangled underbrush beyond the window, searching for any sign of danger, but Grandmother’s frail hand tightened around hers. She whispered softly, her voice quivering yet resolute, “You mustn’t question so much—just stay close to me and everything will be alright.” Even as her body trembled, Grandmother’s words wrapped around Red like a protective shawl, weaving comfort through the uncertainty that hung thick in the air. Red steps hesitantly forward, her heart pounding as she peers anxiously into the shadows where her grandmother sits. Red hesitated at the edge of the clearing, her grip tightening around the handle of her knife as the hush of the woods pressed in around her. Every instinct screamed caution, but her concern for her grandmother was stronger than any fear. She scanned the tangled underbrush, eyes narrowed, searching for any movement in the gloom. Heart pounding, she stepped forward, voice trembling with urgency as she pleaded into the shadows, “Grandmother, I’m begging you—please just let me see your face in the light!” Grandmother’s silhouette shifts in the dimness, her features still obscured by the shadows as she beckons Red forward with a trembling hand. Grandmother’s silhouette shifted in the gloom, her frail hand emerging from beneath the patchwork quilt to beckon Red nearer. Shadows clung to her features, hiding the familiar warmth of her eyes, but her voice, though thin and wavering, carried the old

strength Red remembered. “Don’t be afraid, Red,” she murmured, coaxing her granddaughter forward. “Just a little closer, and you’ll see everything as it truly is.” The words floated in the hush of the cabin, gentle but edged with a trembling urgency that Red could not ignore. Red hesitates on the threshold, clutching her basket tightly, her breath quickening as she peers into the darkness, desperate for reassurance. Red hesitated on the threshold, fingers white-knuckled around the handle of her basket. The woods pressed in with a hush that thudded in her ears, and her breath came faster as she peered into the shifting blackness beneath the tangled underbrush. Every instinct screamed for caution, but love and worry pressed her forward. She narrowed her eyes, searching for any sign of her grandmother, the old familiar silhouette, a whisper, anything. But the darkness offered nothing but silence. Her voice trembled as she called out, desperation cracking through her fear: “No—please, Grandmother, I can’t move any closer until you show me your face—I’m too frightened!” Grandmother’s shadowy form leans forward, the dim light glinting off eyes that seem almost unfamiliar. Grandmother’s shadowy form leaned forward, the dim light flickering across her features, lending her eyes a strange, almost unfamiliar glint. She scanned the tangled underbrush beyond the warped glass, her voice trembling but coaxing, heavy with both longing and an undercurrent of fear. “Red, my darling,” she called, each word laced with a fragile hope, “if you truly love me, just one more step—then all your fears will fade away.” The words hung in the air, gentle and desperate, even as her frail hands gripped the armrest, knuckles white with the effort to appear brave. Red stands frozen at the edge of the dim lamplight, her hands trembling as she hugs her basket tightly to her chest, eyes darting between the shadows and the figure in the bed. Red stood frozen at the edge of the dim lamplight, her hands trembling as she hugged the basket tightly to her chest. Shadows pressed in on all sides, swallowing the edges of the little room, but her gaze kept darting between the underbrush outside and the figure huddled beneath the bedcovers. Fear twisted in her chest, hot and urgent, yet she forced her voice to stay steady as she called out. “Grandmother, please—I can’t take another step until you promise me you’re really you!” The words tore from her, equal parts plea and demand, her determination holding her upright even as her legs threatened to buckle. Red, suspicious but desperate, questions the voice’s authenticity, noting oddities in the voice and appearance.

Despite her unease, she is gradually drawn into a tense exchange with ‘Grandmother,’ who remains mostly hidden in the gloom.

The Wolf, cloaked in Grandmother’s gown, sits hunched in the dim light, its eyes glinting beneath the lace bonnet, voice trembling as it beckons Red nearer with a thin, clawed hand hidden beneath the covers. The Wolf settled deeper into the hollow of the bed, lace bonnet perched askew atop its angular skull, the borrowed gown draping awkwardly over jutting shoulders. In the gloom, its eyes flickered—a cold, predatory glint masked beneath the softness of Grandmother’s familiar silhouette. One thin, clawed hand curled beneath the quilt, beckoning Red forward with a tremor that rasped through its voice. “Come closer, child,” it urged, the words barely more than a whisper, shivering with feigned frailty. “The shadows grow long and my old eyes do not see you well.” Its gaze lingered hungrily as Red hesitated at the threshold, and the Wolf’s lips curled into a careful imitation of concern. “Have you brought what I asked for?” Red edges closer, clutching her basket tightly, peering through the dim light at the figure in the bed, her brow furrowing with concern and a hint of doubt. Red entered the dim cottage, clutching the basket at her side. The scent of moss and age pressed in around her, but she forced a smile as she set the bundle on the bedside table. “I brought you bread and honey, Grandmother,” she said, her voice steady, though her eyes never stopped scanning the room—always alert, always wary. But as she listened, a note of unease crept in; her grandmother’s reply was hoarse, rasping in a way Red had never

heard before. Her brow furrowed with concern. “Your voice sounds so rough—are you feeling unwell?” she asked, instinctively drawing a little closer, protective and ready, her hand never far from the knife at her belt. The Wolf pats the bed with a trembling, claw-tipped hand concealed beneath the covers, eyes glinting hungrily in the dim light. From the gloom, the Wolf emerged, its form contorting and settling until it wore the familiar, frail shape of Grandmother. It perched on the bed, shadows flickering across its borrowed face, one trembling, claw-tipped hand hidden beneath the coverlet. Eyes glinting with a predatory hunger, it patted the mattress beside it, voice rasping with false affection. “Ah, my sweet,” it crooned, each word heavy with cunning, “age weaves thorns in my throat—come nearer so I may see your gentle face and taste your kindness.” The words, so soft and inviting, barely concealed the supernatural malice that lingered beneath the surface, coiling in the hush of the dimly lit room. Red edged forward, clutching her basket tighter, her gaze searching the shadowed contours of the Wolf’s altered face. Red edged forward, the wicker handle biting into her fingers as she clutched her basket tighter. Her breath caught, eyes narrowing as she searched the unfamiliar, shadowed angles of the Wolf’s face—a face now stretched and shifted, grotesquely mimicking Grandmother’s features. The candlelight flickered across those foreign contours, illuminating eyes that gleamed with an unnatural luster. Heart pounding, Red forced her voice steady, masking her fear with a veneer of curiosity. “Grandmother, what big eyes you have—they gleam so strangely in the candlelight.” The Wolf leans forward from the bed, shadows deepening around its face, lips curling in an attempt at a gentle smile. From the gloom, the Wolf emerged, its form rippling and stretching until the features of Grandmother settled over the monstrous frame. Shadows pooled in the hollows of its eyes as it leaned forward from the bed, lips twisting in a mockery of tenderness. “All the better to see your beautiful smile, my dear—step closer and let me look upon you,” it purred, voice smooth with feigned affection, the invitation curling through the darkness like a lure. Red hesitates, clutching her basket tighter, her gaze lingering on the unnatural shape beneath the covers. Red hesitated at the threshold, her grip tightening around the worn handle of her basket. She could feel her heart thudding, a frantic bird caged inside her chest, as her gaze lingered on the unsettling silhouette beneath the patchwork covers. Something was wrong—she could sense it, the air thick with the scent of unfamiliar musk and something older, wilder. Still, she forced herself forward, voice steady despite the tremor in her hands. “Grandmother, your ears...” she ventured, eyes narrowing as she studied the unnatural length and sharp point protruding from beneath the lacy cap. “They seem so long and pointed tonight; did you change your cap?” Her words were careful, but her mind raced, knife at the ready beneath her cloak, every sense straining for another clue. The Wolf pats the bed covers with a clawed hand hidden beneath a lace blanket, its eyes never leaving Red. From the gloom at the far side of the cottage, the Wolf crept forward, shadows clinging to its silhouette as it shifted and shrank, molding itself into the frail likeness of Grandmother. Settling into the bed, it drew the lace coverlet high, concealing the cruel curve of its claws. Its yellow eyes, glimmering with unnatural hunger, never strayed from Red’s hesitant figure by the door. Patting the bedclothes in invitation, the Wolf let its voice quaver with a familiar affection, saying, “Oh, child, the winds have teased my cap and made my ears stretch so—come, sit by my side and warm yourself.” Red hesitates at the edge of the bed, clutching her basket tightly, eyes fixed on the Wolf’s mouth as unease flickers across her face. Red hesitated at the edge of the bed, her fingers tightening around the wicker handle of her basket. The shadows pressed in as the Wolf shifted, its hunched form stretching and warping until it wore the familiar shape of Grandmother. But Red’s eyes didn’t stray from the mouth—those teeth, unnaturally gleaming, sharp as silver needles in the low light. Unease prickled beneath her skin, but she forced herself to speak, voice barely above a whisper: “Grandmother, what sharp teeth you have—they glisten like silver needles in the dark.” The Wolf

lunges from the bed, jaws wide, the ruse finally dropped as the candle flickers wildly in Red's trembling hands. From the gloom, the Wolf emerged, its monstrous shape rippling and twisting until the hunched shadow resolved itself into a grotesque imitation of Grandmother. The candle in Red's trembling hands sputtered as the creature's ruse dropped, and it lunged from the bed, jaws yawning wide, every inch a predator now unmasked. Its eyes glinted with malicious delight as it advanced, voice dropping to a guttural whisper that twisted around Red's terror: "All the better to eat you with, my dear." Red resists stepping fully into the light or within reach, repeatedly asking her grandmother to reveal herself.

The voice persists, alternating between reassurance and subtle manipulation, until finally The Wolf, unable to maintain the pretense, drops the charade and reveals itself with the infamous line, 'All the better to eat you with, my dear.'

' The chapter ends with The Wolf about to strike, Red's suspicions confirmed too late, setting up the imminent confrontation.

As the echo of the wolf's threat faded into the tense silence of the woods, Red's trembling grip tightened around the whistle, her heart pounding with both terror and relief. Though the beast had fled into the shadows, the lingering sense of danger pressed in around her, urging her onward. Staggering back onto the main trail, shaken but determined, Red barely had time to catch her breath before the snap of a distant branch signaled the approach of someone—or something—new.

Chapter 3: Encounter with the Huntsman

Red paused on the muddy trail, her boots sinking slightly into the moss as she scanned the shifting fog.

The Huntsman stepped out from behind a leaning pine, his cloak damp and flecked with mud, one hand gripping his silver-bladed axe.

He pressed a cold, palm-sized whistle into Red's hand, its surface glinting in the pale light filtering through the canopy.

Leaning close, his voice rough and urgent, the Huntsman stressed the gravity of the situation: 'If you so much as hear a branch snap or see a shadow move where it shouldn't, you blow this horn.'

The HuntsmanHe presses a small, carved horn into your trembling hands, his eyes fierce and unwavering, scanning the darkening forest as if expecting danger at any moment. The Huntsman pressed the carved horn into her trembling hands, his grip firm and reassuring despite the tension in his jaw. His gaze swept the encroaching shadows, every muscle taut as he leaned close enough for her to smell the tang of rain and leather on his coat. "Listen," he rumbled, the words low and rough, "this isn't a child's game. The wolf—what's out here—it's nothing like you've ever known." His eyes flickered over her face, searching for understanding. "If you so much as hear a branch snap, or see a shadow move where it shouldn't, you blow that horn. Do you understand?" She nodded, the weight of the horn heavy in her palm. He paused, voice softer but no less fierce. "It's not just for you, girl. It's for both of us. I'll come running—no matter what. But you must promise me something." His gaze held hers, unwavering. "Don't try to face it alone. Blow the horn. Trust me." It's not just for you—it's for both of us.

The Huntsman runs his thumb along the edge of a silvered blade, watching its reflection flicker in the dying light. His gaze lingers in the gloom beyond the trees, as if expecting the forest itself to answer. The Huntsman ran his thumb along the edge of his silvered blade, watching the reflection flicker in the dying light. He kept his eyes on the forest gloom, wary, as if waiting for something to emerge from the shadows. He knew what the old wives whispered about screams—they might shatter the stillness of these woods for a heartbeat, but silver was different. Silver cut through silence and memory alike, sharper and colder than any cry. It sang long after voices faltered; a warning, a promise, a judgment all in one. The gleam alone was enough to send shadows fleeing and hearts pounding, and he doubted any plea had ever traveled so far, or so true, as the glint of silver in the dark. I'll come running, no matter what.

But you must promise me: don't try to face it alone.

Blow the horn.

Trust me.

' He explained that silver's sound was more than a warning, that it cut through silence and memory alike—a promise and a judgment against the darkness.

Red tucked the whistle into her satchel, the Huntsman's words weighing heavily on her resolve.

Determined to reach her grandmother and heed his warning, she nodded.

The Huntsman faded back into the mist, boots crunching over wet stones, continuing his patrol, ready to respond if Red called.

Red moved forward, the weight of the whistle anchoring her courage as she headed deeper into the woods.

Behind her, the forest seemed to close in, shadows shifting with every uncertain step. Though the path ahead twisted into gloom, Red pressed on, unaware that the Huntsman lingered not far behind, his vigilance sharpening with every distant sound. As Red vanished deeper into the trees, the woods themselves seemed to hold their breath, setting the stage for a confrontation that neither traveler could yet foresee.

Chapter 7: The Huntsman's Final Stand

Red stands just outside the bedroom doorway, gripping her knife tightly as The Wolf, still successfully mimicking Grandmother's voice, attempts to lure her closer.

Red, suspicious, verbally probes the Wolf with classic questions about its appearance but does not yet fully expose the deception.

The Wolf lies curled in Grandmother's bed, voice trembling with feigned frailty, beckoning Red to draw nearer to the shadowed bedside. Curled beneath the faded quilts, the Wolf pressed itself deeper into the hollow of Grandmother's bed, shrouded in gloom and the lingering scent of fear. Its voice, thin and wavering with practiced frailty, slipped from the shadows—aching and sweet as poisoned honey. "Come in, dear child," it beckoned, every syllable trembling as though with exhaustion. "I'm feeling ever so weak today, and I would dearly love to see your sweet face up

close.” The invitation hung in the air, gentle yet insistent, luring Red toward the bedside where the darkness seemed to ripple—ready to swallow innocence whole. Red hesitates at the doorway, clutching her basket tighter and peering uncertainly toward the shadowed bed. Red lingered at the doorway, knuckles whitening around the handle of her woven basket. The familiar creak of the floorboards seemed louder than usual in the hush. She peered into the gloom where the bed lay swathed in shadow, unease prickling along her spine. Something was wrong—she could feel it. “Grandmother, your voice sounds a little strange—are you sure you’re all right?” she called, her words edged with careful concern even as she fought the urge to step back rather than forward. The Wolf shifts under the covers, pulling the quilt higher to obscure its face. The Wolf shifted beneath the patchwork quilt, its monstrous form nearly hidden by the layers of faded fabric. In a voice that trembled with the frailty of age—so convincingly human that even the wary would be soothed—it called out from the shadowed bedroom, “It’s just a touch of the cold, my dear.” The words floated on the air, inviting, coaxing. With a deft, lingering motion, it tugged the quilt higher, disguising the contours of its snout and gleaming eyes. “Come closer so I can see you better,” it urged, weaving feigned weakness into every syllable, “these old eyes aren’t what they used to be.” The Wolf’s gaze followed Red’s cautious steps, hunger simmering beneath the mask of grandmotherly affection. Red hesitates at the foot of the bed, peering uncertainly at the shadowy figure beneath the covers. Red lingered at the foot of the bed, her knuckles white around the handle of her knife, gaze flickering between the familiar patchwork quilt and the shadowed lump beneath it. Something was wrong—she could feel it in the hush of the room, the way the air seemed heavier, colder. Yet the voice that called her was unmistakably Grandmother’s, thin and wavering, beckoning her closer. Red took a cautious step forward, her eyes narrowing as she tried to make sense of the figure’s silhouette. “But Grandmother,” she murmured, her tone edged with suspicion and concern, “what big eyes you have.” The Wolf pats the empty space on the bed invitingly, his gaze fixed hungrily on Red. Perched atop the rumpled quilts, the Wolf—draped in Grandmother’s nightgown, her scent still clinging to his supernatural skin—patted the empty space beside him with a slow, deliberate hand. His eyes, unnatural and unblinking, glittered in the half-light as he fixed Red with a gaze that promised nothing but hunger. The voice that slipped from his throat was honeyed and familiar, yet edged with something cold: “All the better to see you with, my child—now, won’t you come a bit nearer so I can give you a proper hug?” The invitation hung in the air, gentle as a lullaby and twice as dangerous, each word spun to ensnare. The Huntsman remains hidden, crossbow ready, awaiting Red’s signal.

The tense verbal exchange continues, heightening Red’s caution.

Instead of immediately revealing the Wolf’s monstrous form and launching into combat, Red delays, seeking further confirmation and trying to buy time for the Huntsman to prepare.

The confrontation escalates only after Red’s suspicions are confirmed by the Wolf’s increasingly predatory responses.

As the dust settles and the wolf’s lifeless body lies pinned beneath the shattered wardrobe, a heavy silence fills the room, broken only by the ragged breaths of Red and the huntsman. In the wake of their desperate struggle, the reality of what they’ve done begins to sink in. But even as relief threatens to wash over them, the lingering shadows in the corners of the cottage hint that their ordeal is far from over. With the immediate danger vanquished, Red and the huntsman must now face the aftermath—unraveling the secrets left in the wolf’s wake and confronting truths neither

of them expected to find.

Chapter 8: Aftermath and Revelation

Red pushes open the warped cabin door, knife gripped in her hand, scanning the gloom for movement.

The Huntsman follows, crossbow loaded and silver whistle at his lips, boots crunching on scattered pine needles.

Grandmother, wrapped in a threadbare shawl, huddles near the fireplace, her hands trembling as she points to claw marks gouged into the wall.

Red kneels beside her, inspecting the marks and glancing at the blood-spotted rug.

The Huntsman circles the room, checking windows for forced entry and listening for distant howls.

Grandmother, voice quivering, recounts how the Wolf took her shape and whispered secrets in a guttural, inhuman voice;

Grandmother clutches her shawl tighter around her shoulders, her hands trembling as she stares into the distance, haunted by the memory. Grandmother's hands trembled as she pulled the blanket tighter around her thin shoulders. The cold seemed to linger, settling deep into her bones—a chill she could not shake, no matter how many layers she wore. Her voice was little more than a whisper as she recounted the nightmare: the Wolf had come, wearing her very face. But those eyes—dark, cunning—were not hers. The creature's speech, too, had been wrong: twisted, deep and rough, like gravel scraping over stone. Grandmother remembered how he leaned in, so close she could feel his breath, and whispered things—horrible secrets, things no living soul should ever know. Each word had crawled beneath her skin, heavy and cold, and she had been so afraid, so helpless, forced to listen as her own mouth was used to utter monstrous things she could never have imagined. she describes the Wolf's eyes as flickering candle flames, its breath sour and heavy.

Grandmother leans closer, voice trembling, as she recounts her chilling encounter with the Wolf. Grandmother leaned closer, her thin hands trembling slightly as she gathered the memory. Her voice, though fragile, carried a certain resilience as she spoke of the Wolf. She recalled the moment it approached, how its eyes burned in the darkness—restless, flickering like candle flames, never settling, always searching for something unseen. The sour weight of its breath still lingered in her mind, heavy enough that she could almost taste it, each exhale chilling the small room further. Grandmother's gaze flickered with fear and quiet courage as she warned, "Beware, child. A creature like that brings menace with every glance, every breath." Red listens intently, her jaw set, and asks pointed questions about the Wolf's transformation.

Red narrows her eyes, leaning forward, her voice sharp and unwavering as she studies the Wolf's reaction. Red leaned forward, her gaze unflinching and sharp as she studied the Wolf's shifting expression. She set her jaw, determined not to let him evade her questions. "You expect me to believe you just changed overnight?" Her voice was clear and unwavering, cutting through the dim light between them. No one simply woke up a different creature—she knew that from experience, from stories whispered by her grandmother and the truths her mother never spoke. Red's fingers tightened around the hilt of her knife, her posture protective yet resolute. "There must be a reason. Tell me exactly how it happened," she pressed, leaving no room for half-truths or evasions. "Every

detail, Wolf. And don't leave anything out." Her compassion flickered beneath her determination, but she wouldn't let it soften her resolve. "Why did you do it?" The Huntsman, brow furrowed, explains the Wolf's origins—a curse bound to ancient soil, feeding on fear and family.

The Huntsman leans on his axe, gaze distant, voice heavy with sorrow. He gestures to the earth, as if feeling the pulse of something buried deep and old. "You ask about the Wolf—why it prowls these lands, why its eyes burn with hunger older than memory. Listen well. The beast was not always flesh and fang. Long ago, in the shadow of these ancient woods, a curse was sown into the soil itself—twisted by grief, watered with blood. The Wolf is its harvest. It rises, again and again, drawn to the trembling hearts of families, feasting on their fear. The more we dread, the stronger it grows. Every torn cradle, every midnight wail—that is the meal it craves. And so long as terror roots itself in our homes, the Wolf will never truly die." —The Huntsman

He presses the silver whistle into Red's palm, instructing her to keep it close.

The Huntsman curls her fingers around the cool metal, his gaze steady but shadowed by worry. He doesn't let go until he's sure she feels the weight of his words—and the gravity of what might come. The Huntsman's fingers curled around the cool silver, his grip firm, knuckles pale against the metal's gleam. He pressed the whistle into Red's palm, holding it there until she could feel the weight—not just of the object, but of everything unspoken between them. His gaze, steady yet shadowed with worry, lingered on her face. "This isn't just a whistle," he told her, voice low and grave as the forest at midnight. "It's your call for help, should the darkness ever close in." He waited until she met his eyes, making sure she understood the seriousness behind every word. "If you find yourself lost, if the woods turn against you—blow it. I will come." Only then did he release her hand, nodding once, a silent promise in the gesture. "Keep it close, always," he said, the last words rough but resolute. "Promise me." Red curls her fingers tightly around the whistle, her eyes meeting the Huntsman's with a flicker of fear and trust mingling in their depths. Red curled her fingers tightly around the whistle, feeling the cool press of silver against her palm. Her eyes, shadowed by both fear and resolve, met the Huntsman's gaze. She swallowed, the weight of his trust settling over her like a cloak, and managed a steady nod. "I promise," she said quietly, voice edged with determination as she tucked the whistle safely into her pocket. "I'll keep it with me—no matter what." Red, her resolve clear, stands and slices through the remaining rope binding Grandmother's wrist, helping her to her feet.

The three scan the room, preparing to secure the cabin and plan their next move, united by the urgent need to end the Wolf's reign.

Red scans the dim corners of the room, her jaw clenched with determination. She gestures sharply toward the back of the cabin, then grabs a heavy iron poker from the hearth, her eyes flicking to Grandmother and The Huntsman to ensure they're ready to act. Red scanned the dim corners of the room, her jaw set with the same determination that had carried her through a lifetime of hardship. Shadows flickered across the cabin walls, but she didn't flinch. With a sharp gesture toward the back of the cabin, she fixed the Huntsman with a steady look. "We don't have much time," she told him, voice low and urgent. "Check the back door and make sure it's barred."

Her hand closed around the heavy iron poker resting by the hearth. She glanced to her grandmother, drawing her close with a protective arm. "Stay near me," she murmured, her gaze darting to the windows. "We'll cover these." The weight of responsibility pressed against her chest, but she refused to let it show. They needed to hold this cabin, to plan their next move before the Wolf found them. For a moment, all three stood united—determined, alert, and bound by necessity—

ready to face whatever came through the door. The Huntsman moves swiftly to the back door, inspecting the lock and shoving a heavy chair against it, eyes scanning for any sign of weakness. The Huntsman moved swiftly to the back door, his boots thudding against the worn floorboards. With practiced hands, he checked the lock, testing it for any give, then dragged a heavy chair into place, wedging it firmly beneath the handle. His sharp eyes swept the frame for cracks or weak points. Satisfied, he straightened, his voice low and resolute as he addressed the others. They could hear the certainty in his words: once the door was secure, they'd regroup by the hearth and devise a trap—something decisive, something final—that would bring an end to the wolf's terror at last. Grandmother moves briskly to a worn cupboard, collecting jars and kitchen knives, her hands steady despite the fear in her eyes. Grandmother moved briskly to the worn cupboard, her feet light but her movements purposeful, despite the tremor of fear flickering in her eyes. Her hands, aged yet steady, reached for jars of dried herbs and the few kitchen knives that remained—each item chosen with the precision of someone who knew what survival demanded. As she collected them, her voice threaded through the silence, resilient and gentle: they would need every trick she had left, she quietly explained, if they were to outwit the beast haunting the woods tonight.

Together, in the flickering firelight, Red, Grandmother, and the Huntsman steeled themselves against the darkness, forging an unbreakable bond—one that would hold strong, even as the woods whispered of old curses and the Wolf's shadow faded into memory.