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Chapter 1: Red Receives Grandmother's Letter

Red stands at the kitchen table, fingers tracing the embossed seal on a parchment envelope she just retrieved from the doorstep.

Her mother, wiping flour from her hands, watches as Red carefully breaks the seal and unfolds the letter.

Red reads aloud Grandmother's urgent request for help, her voice steady but filled with concern.

Red Riding Hood (Red)Red lowers the letter, her brow furrowed with concern, and looks toward the path leading to Grandmother's cottage, her resolve clear in her eyes. Red's fingers trembled just slightly as she lowered the letter, her eyes scanning the familiar path that led into the dense woods and on toward Grandmother's cottage. The paper still rustled softly in her hands, bearing the words that weighed heavy on her heart: "My dearest Red, I find myself growing weaker with every passing day, and simple tasks now feel like mountains to climb. If you could come soon, it would ease my heart more than words can say." The urgency in Grandmother's handwriting was impossible to ignore. Red's brow furrowed with concern, but the determination in her gaze only sharpened. There was no time to hesitate—Grandmother needed her, and she would not waste a single moment. Grandmother's voice trembles softly as she presses her handkerchief to her lips, hoping Red will understand how much she needs her. Red sat by the window, sunlight dappling across the faded letter in her hands. As she read aloud, her voice steady but soft, Grandmother watched from the bed, her frail fingers clutching a handkerchief to trembling lips. She hadn't meant to burden her sweet grandchild with worry, but loneliness weighed heavy in the quiet cottage at the forest's edge, and the days had grown difficult. The hope in Grandmother's eyes was unmistakable—Red's visit would mean the world to her, a gentle balm for the isolation pressing in on all sides. Red Riding Hood (Red)Red hugs the letter to her chest, determination shining in her eyes as she moves quickly to prepare for the journey. Red pressed the letter to her chest, her fingers curling tightly around the parchment as she read Grandmother's trembling words once more. Determination flashed in her eyes—her mind already whirring through what she would need for the journey ahead. She glanced toward the window, where the first pale light crept into the morning sky. "Grandmother, you mean everything to me," she whispered, steady and resolute. Without hesitation, Red crossed the small room, her red cloak swirling around her ankles as she

began to gather her things. She would be on her way before the sun climbed high—nothing would keep her from answering Grandmother’s call for help. Grandmother’s voice echoes in Red’s mind, expressing her loneliness and need for Red’s presence.

Red’s MotherShe gently closes the door to keep out the draft, then turns to the old wooden cupboard, rummaging through jars until she finds the small, amber one filled with fragrant herbal ointment. She presses it into Red’s hand, her expression firm but caring. Red’s mother eased the door shut, careful to block out the lingering morning chill. She moved across the worn floorboards with purpose, opening the old cupboard and searching among the neatly labeled jars. Her hands settled on the small amber container, its lid still warm from last night’s preparations. Turning to Red, she pressed the fragrant ointment into her daughter’s palm, her gaze gentle but insistent.

“Take this salve to your Grandmother,” she said, her voice low and steady. “The mornings have been colder lately, and I know her joints must be aching more than ever. I made it fresh last night—make sure she rubs it in well.” Her thumb lingered over Red’s knuckles, a silent plea for care, before she stepped back, watching her daughter with quiet concern. Red Riding Hood (Red)Red tucks the small jar carefully into the pocket of her cloak, glancing at her mother for further instructions. Red tucked the small jar securely into the deep pocket of her cloak, the glass cool against her palm. She glanced at her mother, waiting for another word or caution. The morning breeze slipped through the open door, fluttering the hem of Red’s cloak as her mother moved to close it, then turned to rummage in the wooden cupboard for something else. Red’s voice was gentle but sure, a quiet promise woven into her determination. She would make certain Grandmother used the remedy, and if help was needed, she would stay as long as it took. Moved by her grandmother’s words, Red reassures her mother of her determination to help and her willingness to stay with Grandmother as long as needed.

Red Riding Hood (Red)Red adjusts her cloak firmly around her shoulders and lifts the basket, determination shining in her eyes as she glances back at her mother with a reassuring smile. Red adjusted her cloak, pulling the scarlet fabric securely around her shoulders before lifting the basket from the worn wooden table. Determination glimmered in her eyes as she turned to her mother, who lingered anxiously by the doorway. Red offered a reassuring smile, her voice gentle but resolute as she said she understood the woods could be dangerous. Still, Grandmother needed these treats, and Red couldn’t simply ignore her when she was ill. She promised to be careful, her bravery shining through the concern in her mother’s gaze, and with one last nod, she stepped out, the weight of her promise as steady as the basket in her hands. Red’s MotherShe gently places her hands on Red’s shoulders, her eyes filled with worry. Red’s mother placed her hands gently on her daughter’s shoulders, her fingers lingering as if she could shield Red from every danger with just a touch. Worry clouded her eyes, but her voice remained steady, practical. “I understand, dear,” she said, searching Red’s face for reassurance. “But you must stay on the path, speak to no strangers, and come straight home after.” She squeezed Red’s shoulders, her tone turning quietly urgent. “Promise me you’ll remember these things?” Red Riding Hood (Red)Red clutches her basket tighter and meets her mother’s worried eyes with a determined smile. Red tightened her grip on the wicker basket, feeling the familiar weight of bread and fresh preserves inside. She met her mother’s anxious gaze, her own lips curving into a determined smile. “I promise, Mother,” she said gently, the resolve in her voice unmistakable. “I’ll remember every word, and I won’t let anything distract me from getting to Grandmother safely.” With a swift, practiced motion, she gathered her red cloak around her shoulders, readying herself for the path ahead, her courage shining brighter than the morning sun streaming through their cottage window. Her mother moves

to close the door against the morning breeze, then rummages in a wooden cupboard for a jar of herbal salve, insisting Red bring it for Grandmother's aching joints.

Red Riding Hood (Red) Red reaches out with both hands, accepting the jar from her mother, her fingers brushing against her mother's for a lingering moment, sensing the weight of worry behind her mother's gentle smile. Red reached out with both hands, feeling the cool glass of the jar as her mother pressed it gently into her palms. For a moment, their fingers lingered together—a silent exchange of concern woven into the warmth of a mother's touch and the determined steadiness of Red's grip. She looked up, meeting her mother's anxious gaze with a reassuring smile. "I promise, Mother," she said softly, her voice threaded with conviction. "I'll stay right on the path and won't talk to any strangers. I know how important this is." As she tucked the jar safely into her satchel, Red's resolve shone through; she would carry both her promise and her mother's hopes through the shadowed woods ahead. Red's Mother She gently presses the jar into Red's hands, her eyes lingering with worry and hope as she lets go. Red's mother cradled the small jar in her palms for a moment longer, her thumb tracing its lid as if imprinting her hopes into the glass. She pressed it gently into Red's hands, her gaze soft yet edged with worry. "Take this, dearest," she murmured, her voice a low current of concern. "Keep it close, and remember—every step you take matters to both of us." She lingered for a heartbeat, her fingers reluctant to let go, then released the jar and brushed a stray curl from Red's cheek, trusting her daughter to heed the caution woven through her words. Red promises not only to deliver the salve but also to ensure Grandmother uses it and to remain vigilant on her journey.

She gathers her cloak and basket, reiterates her promise to heed her mother's warnings about the forest, and receives a final reminder and embrace as she sets out on her journey.

As Red leaves the familiar warmth of her cottage behind, the forest awaits, its shadows stretching long across the path ahead. Determined and cautious, she steps beneath the ancient trees, every sense alert for the dangers her mother warned of—unaware that she is not alone in these woods. With each careful stride, Red draws closer not only to her grandmother's cottage but also to an unexpected encounter that will shape the course of her journey.

Chapter 2: Red Meets the Mysterious Woodsman

Red, gripping a wicker basket filled with jars from the apothecary, steps carefully over a fallen log, pausing to adjust her red cloak against a sudden gust.

She scans the underbrush, alert for signs of danger as she pursues her mission to deliver medicine to her grandmother.

Elias emerges from behind a thicket, axe slung across his shoulder, and blocks her path, eyes narrowed with concern.

He glances at the basket, then the shadows between the trees.

'You shouldn't be this deep in the woods alone, Red,' he warns, voice low and direct, his motivation to protect her evident in his stance.

Red sidesteps, lifting her chin.

'My grandmother needs these remedies, Elias.

I won't let fear keep me back.

Red Riding Hood (Red)Red clenches her basket a little tighter, takes a deep breath, and steps determinedly onto the forest path, her chin held high. Red clenched her basket a little tighter, feeling the familiar weight grounding her as she stared into the shadowed depths of the forest. She drew in a steadying breath, the cool morning air filling her lungs, and lifted her chin in quiet defiance of the darkness ahead. No matter the stories whispered by firelight or how the trees seemed to huddle close, she refused to let fear root her in place. Grandma was waiting—counting on her. Red pressed forward, determination steeling her steps. She would be brave, for her grandmother and for herself. Red Riding Hood (Red)Red straightens her hood, takes a deep breath, and steps confidently onto the winding forest path. Red straightened her hood, the familiar weight of the red fabric settling against her shoulders like a silent promise. She drew in a deep breath, steadying herself at the edge of the winding forest path, where shadows clung to the tangled undergrowth and distant twigs snapped beneath unseen paws. Her heart hammered with each unexpected sound, but she refused to let fear root her in place. Instead, she pressed onward, reminding herself that true courage wasn't found in comfort or avoidance—it meant moving forward, step by determined step, even when every instinct urged her to turn back. ' Elias shifts, studying the trail ahead, then steps forward to clear a branch from her way, his actions deliberate.

'Let me walk with you,' he offers, determined to prove his reliability.

Red hesitates but nods, and the two proceed together, their footsteps muffled by the dense moss, as crows call overhead.

As Red and Elias make their way deeper into the shadowed heart of the forest, an uneasy silence settles between them, broken only by the distant rustle of unseen creatures. With every step, the woods seem to grow thicker, the air heavier, as if watching their passage. Just as a sense of uneasy trust begins to form, a new presence stirs in the undergrowth—one whose intentions are far less clear than Elias's, and whose offer will force Red to question everything she believes about the dangers lurking beneath the trees.

Chapter 3: The Wolf's Offer and Hidden Agenda

Red steps carefully along the moist trail, basket clutched tightly, her boots sinking slightly into the soft leaf litter.

Lucien, disguised as a traveler with a cloak pulled over his sharp eyes, emerges from behind a fallen log and offers to guide Red through a shortcut, his voice low and persuasive.

Lucien (The Wolf)Lucien steps from the shadow of the fallen log, his cloak hiding the outline of his frame, but a glint of sharpness remains in his eyes. He gestures toward a narrow trail winding deeper into the forest, his tone smooth and inviting—a practiced charm masking something beneath. Shadows pooled beneath the ancient trees as Lucien emerged from the brush, his human guise impeccable but for the glint of something wild in his eyes. He offered a disarming smile, every inch the charming stranger, and inclined his head in greeting. "Evening, traveler," he said, his voice as smooth as velvet and just as dark. He glanced ahead at the narrowing trail, feigning

concern. “The woods grow thick ahead, and the path you’re on—it twists more than most.” He stepped closer, lowering his voice conspiratorially, as if inviting her into a secret. “If you’re seeking your grandmother’s cottage, I know a quicker way. Less tangled, less trouble.” His eyes lingered on her, hope flickering behind the practiced ease. “May I show you?” Red Riding Hood (Red)Red hesitates, glancing down the winding trail, clutching her basket tighter as curiosity flickers in her eyes. Red hesitated at the fork, her fingers tightening around the wicker handle of her basket. The winding trail ahead beckoned with the promise of adventure, yet her mother’s warning rang clear in her memory. Still, there was something about this stranger—his easy confidence, the way he seemed to melt out of the shadows, as if he belonged to the woods more than to the village. Curiosity flickered in her eyes as she glanced up at him, her voice steady but cautious. It was kind of him to offer, she admitted, but Mama always warned her to keep to the main path. Yet as she studied the traveler’s weathered cloak and the sharp glint in his eyes, she couldn’t help but think he looked like he knew these woods better than most. Lucien (The Wolf)Lucien steps lightly over a gnarled root, his gaze flickering to Red’s basket as he gestures deeper into the thicket, smile hidden beneath his hood. Lucien stepped lightly over a gnarled root, the movement almost feline in its grace, his cloak catching briefly on a bramble before he freed it with a practiced flick. The smile that curved his lips was barely visible beneath the shadow of his hood, but his eyes—sharp and searching—lingered on the basket swinging from Red’s arm. He gestured subtly, inviting her attention deeper into the thicket, and with a voice that slipped easily between charm and warning, he remarked that her mother’s advice was wise, certainly. Yet, as he let his gaze drift to the shifting darkness beneath the trees, Lucien’s words took on an intimate urgency: not all dangers in these woods walk on four legs—sometimes, it’s the shadows themselves. He paused, the question hanging between them, and asked gently why she would journey so late, and so alone. Red Riding Hood (Red)Red hugs her basket a little closer, glancing at Lucien’s eyes beneath his hood, her voice careful but tinged with concern. Red hugged her basket a little tighter, the woven handle pressing into her palm. She glanced up, searching for Lucien’s eyes beneath the shadow of his hood, and kept her voice steady, though concern edged each word. She’d promised Grandmother she would bring bread and honey before nightfall—her grandmother hadn’t been well, and Red couldn’t bear to let her wait another day. Lucien (The Wolf)Lucien steps closer, his cloak swirling, extending an arm with a practiced gesture, inviting Red to follow while his gaze lingers a moment too long. Lucien stepped forward, his cloak swirling around him, the gesture practiced yet laced with something earnest. He extended an arm toward Red, the invitation clear in the way his hand hovered—beckoning, yet hesitant. His gaze lingered on her face, searching for some sign of trust, some spark of acceptance he always craved. “Let me guide you,” he offered smoothly, voice slipping between charm and vulnerability. “My eyes have mapped every bend here, and your kindness deserves safe passage.” The words hung between them, earnest and persuasive, as he waited for her answer, yearning to be let in. Red Riding Hood (Red)Red adjusts her basket nervously, glancing at Lucien’s cloaked figure as she steps a cautious pace closer to his side. Red adjusted her basket, the weight of it steadying her as she eyed Lucien’s cloaked figure with a mixture of caution and resolve. The late afternoon light filtered through the tangled trees, casting sharp shadows across the path, and she stepped a little closer to his side—close enough to catch the gleam in his eyes beneath the hood. “I suppose a little help wouldn’t hurt,” she said, her voice measured but firm. “As long as you promise we’ll reach Grandmother’s safely before dark.” Her gaze lingered, searching for any flicker of deceit, determined not to let her guard down even as she accepted his company. Red hesitates, recalling her mother’s warnings, and questions Lucien about his knowledge of the woods, engaging in a tense verbal exchange where she repeatedly presses for clarity and resists Lucien’s vague answers.

Red Riding Hood (Red)Red pauses mid-step, clutching her basket tighter and glancing sideways at Lucien, her eyes narrowed with suspicion. Red paused mid-step, her fingers tightening around the handle of her basket. She cast a wary glance sideways at Lucien, suspicion flickering in her narrowed eyes. The path ahead seemed to twist unnaturally, the trees pressing in as if they were eavesdropping on every whispered breath. “Lucien,” she said, her voice low but steady, “are you sure this is the right way?” Her gaze lingered on the unfamiliar shadows, a flicker of unease betraying her determination. “The trees feel different here—closer, almost like they’re watching us. How well do you really know these woods?” Lucien (The Wolf)Lucien glances over his shoulder, a faint, knowing smile tugging at his lips as he leads Red deeper along the winding path. Lucien glanced over his shoulder, a faint, knowing smile tugging at his lips as he guided Red deeper into the winding heart of the forest. Sensing her hesitation—her eyes darting anxiously along the tangled path ahead—he softened his voice, letting its persuasive warmth seep through the hush of the woods. “Every bend and shadow here is familiar to me, Red,” he assured her, glancing into the dappled gloom as if the secrets of the forest whispered just for him. “These woods reveal their secrets only to those who know how to listen.” The words lingered between them, subtle and inviting, as Lucien’s steady stride beckoned her forward, deeper into a world he understood too well. Red Riding Hood (Red)Red narrows her eyes, clutching her basket tighter as she slows her steps, her gaze flickering between Lucien and the thickening underbrush. Red slowed her pace, the familiar weight of her basket grounding her as she scanned the shadowed path ahead. Her eyes flickered warily from Lucien’s face to the tangled underbrush that seemed to close in around them. With a determined edge in her voice, she drew herself up, clutching the basket tighter. “If you know these woods so well,” she said, her words laced with suspicion, “then why does it feel like we’re being led somewhere I haven’t chosen?” Lucien (The Wolf)Lucien glances back at Red, a faint, knowing smile curling at the edge of his mouth as the canopy above thickens, muting the light. Lucien glanced back at Red, his eyes catching hers beneath the thickening canopy, where sunlight struggled to pierce the gloom. A faint, knowing smile curled at the edge of his mouth, as if he understood more than he let on. He watched her scan the path ahead, uncertainty flickering in her gaze. “You know,” he said softly, voice threaded with a peculiar warmth, “sometimes the woods don’t wait for choices.” He let the words settle between them, his posture relaxed but attentive, almost vulnerable. “They draw you where you most need to go, whether you realize it or not.” Red Riding Hood (Red)Red tightens her grip on her basket, glancing sideways at Lucien with narrowed eyes, her steps slowing as if she might turn back. Red’s fingers tightened around the handle of her basket, the woven reeds creaking softly beneath her grip. She slowed her steps, boots pressing into the damp earth as she cast a wary glance at Lucien beside her. Her eyes narrowed, sharp and searching, as she scanned the shadowed twists of the path ahead. The woods were full of secrets, and Lucien’s words hovered between them, heavier than the morning mist. She hesitated, voice low but unyielding as she spoke: “That sounds more like a warning than comfort, Lucien—what is it you think I need to find out here?” Her tone carried both challenge and curiosity, every syllable edged with the determination that had carried her this far into the heart of the forest. Lucien (The Wolf)Lucien steps forward, his eyes glinting in the dim light as the branches seem to close in tighter around them. Lucien stepped forward, the dim light catching a glint in his eyes as the branches seemed to tighten their hold around the narrow path. He watched Red hesitate, her gaze flickering uncertainly over the tangled undergrowth ahead. With a soft, almost conspiratorial smile, Lucien let his words slip into the hush between them, his voice low and persuasive. “Perhaps what you need isn’t something to find,” he murmured, “but something waiting to find you, Red.” The unspoken invitation lingered in the air, as if the woods themselves paused, listening for her answer. Red Riding Hood (Red)Red stops walking, her hand tightening around her basket as she

studies Lucien's face for any hint of the answer she fears. Red stopped in the middle of the winding path, boots sinking slightly into the damp earth. Her fingers tightened around the handle of her basket—not out of fear, but resolve. She studied Lucien's face, searching for any flicker of truth or hesitation that might give her away. The shadows of the woods pressed in, thick with secrets, and for a moment she hesitated, gaze flicking down the trail as if she could glimpse what lay ahead.

"If that's true," she said quietly, voice steady despite the uncertainty curling in her chest, "then tell me—what is it that's waiting for me, Lucien, and why does it feel like you already know?" The question hung between them, threaded with determination and a hint of accusation, as Red refused to let the silence swallow her doubts. Lucien (The Wolf) Lucien's eyes glint in the gloom as he steps further into the thickening shadows, inviting Red to follow. Lucien's eyes glinted in the deepening gloom as he slipped further into the thickening shadows, a silent invitation lingering in the way he glanced back over his shoulder. Red hesitated at the edge of the path, her gaze darting between the tangled undergrowth and Lucien's expectant silhouette. Sensing her uncertainty, Lucien's voice curled through the dusk, low and persuasive. He said he had learned to listen to the woods better than most—after all, sometimes the forest whispered secrets meant only for those willing to hear. The way he spoke, it was as if the trees themselves confided in him, and in the hush that followed, Red wondered what secrets Lucien was hoping she'd trust him with. Red Riding Hood (Red) Red pauses, her hand tightening around the basket as she locks eyes with Lucien, unwilling to move another step until he answers. Red came to a halt, her boots digging into the mossy earth as she scanned the shadow-laced path ahead. The weight of her basket shifted in her grip, and she tightened her hold, refusing to take another uncertain step. Fixing Lucien with a steady gaze, she drew in a breath, her voice low but unwavering. "Then maybe you can finally tell me what the trees are whispering now—because I'm tired of walking blind." Her words hung in the hush between them, edged with determination and the stubborn hope that he'd offer more than riddles this time. Lucien (The Wolf) Lucien's gaze lingers on Red, his eyes gleaming with something unreadable as he gestures toward a twisting trail obscured by mist. Lucien's gaze lingered on Red, his eyes gleaming with something unreadable—part invitation, part warning—as he gestured toward the twisting trail, its edges blurred by the creeping mist. His voice, smooth as velvet, wove through the hush of the forest. "The trees speak of crossroads and choices, Red—paths where trust and danger walk side by side." Red Riding Hood (Red) Red tightens her grip on her basket and narrows her eyes, slowing her steps as she scrutinizes Lucien's face for any sign of deceit. Red slowed her pace, the ancient trees looming overhead casting long, shifting shadows across the path. She tightened her grip on the basket, its familiar weight grounding her as she studied Lucien's expression, searching for any flicker of dishonesty in his eyes. Trust and danger might walk together, she reminded herself, but she wasn't about to step blindly into either. Red's voice was steady, but edged with caution as she kept her gaze fixed on him. "I still need to know which one you're leading me toward, Lucien," she said, every word deliberate—a challenge wrapped in concern, and a warning not to underestimate her resolve. Lucien (The Wolf) Lucien steps closer, his eyes glinting in the dim light, as a hush falls over the woods around them. Lucien stepped closer, his presence almost merging with the shadows that clung to the trees. The dim light caught the sharp glint in his eyes, and for a moment, Red felt the woods themselves holding their breath. He smiled—not the broad, wolfish grin she half-expected, but something gentler, touched with a hint of longing. "Isn't it curious," he murmured, voice low and persuasive, "how sometimes the safest guide is also the one you fear most?" The words hung between them, tinged with the vulnerability he tried so hard to hide, as if he were offering her not just his knowledge of the winding path ahead, but something deeper—a fragile hope for trust. Red Riding Hood (Red) Red narrows her eyes, gripping her basket tighter

and glancing at the winding trail as if ready to turn back or forge a new direction. Red narrowed her eyes, fingers tightening around the wicker handle of her basket. The winding trail ahead twisted into uncertain shadows, each bend concealing secrets she could almost sense. Her gaze flickered between Lucien and the looming woods, weighing the risk of turning back or striking out alone. “If you want my trust,” she told him, voice low but steady, “then stop speaking in riddles and show me the path ahead.” She hesitated only a moment longer, the resolve in her stance clear. “Otherwise, I’ll find my own way through these shadows.” Lucien attempts to earn her trust with poetic hints about the forest, but Red stands firm, insisting on leading and demanding transparency.

Lucien (The Wolf) Lucien steps forward, his voice low and reassuring, his presence closing the small distance between them as he gently gestures for Red to follow him onto the faint trail, his gaze holding hers just a moment longer than necessary. Lucien stepped forward, the subtle shift in his posture closing the small distance between them. His voice, low and reassuring, seemed to settle around Red like mist. With a gentle sweep of his hand, he indicated the faint trail threading through the brambles, its outline barely visible unless one knew exactly where to look. Most would pass by without ever noticing it, he explained, lingering on her gaze a moment longer than necessary. He told her how intimately he knew every bend, every whisper of earth beneath their feet—he had walked this path more times than he could count, and it was far safer than the well-trodden main road. The forest, he promised, listened here. Under his watch, she would walk untouched; nothing would trouble her so long as she stayed close. Red Riding Hood (Red) Red hesitates, studying Lucien’s expression while keeping a cautious step back, her hand lightly brushing the edge of her cloak. Red hesitated, her boots pressing softly into the leaf litter as she studied Lucien’s face, searching for any flicker of uncertainty. Instinct urged her to keep a cautious step between them, and her fingers drifted to the reassuring edge of her crimson cloak. “I appreciate your guidance, Lucien,” she said quietly, her eyes narrowing as they flicked toward the narrow animal trail he’d indicated, half-lost beneath a tangle of brambles. “But how can you be certain nothing lurks where even the brambles hide the way?” Lucien (The Wolf) Lucien steps gently into the narrow trail, brushing a thorny branch aside with practiced ease, his shoulder almost brushing Red’s as he gestures for her to follow. Lucien stepped lightly onto the narrow animal trail, his movements graceful and practiced as he brushed a thorny branch aside, careful not to let it catch on Red’s cloak. He lingered close, his shoulder nearly touching hers—a subtle invitation, gentle but unmistakable. With a glance both earnest and sly, he gestured for her to follow, his gaze lingering on the dappled shadows ahead.

He leaned in, lowering his voice with a conspiratorial warmth. The forest, he explained, held its secrets for those willing to listen. He had learned its language—the subtle rustle of leaves, the shifting play of shadow and light—and each sign spoke to him in ways most could never decipher. As long as she walked at his side, Lucien assured her, none among the woods would dare whisper harm. The promise hung in the air, threaded through Lucien’s words and the protective sweep of his arm, as if the forest itself bowed to his familiarity and care. Red Riding Hood (Red) Red glances sidelong at Lucien, her steps slowing just enough to let the space between them narrow, eyes searching his face for sincerity. Red’s steps slowed just enough for Lucien to catch up, the space between them narrowing as she glanced sidelong at him. Her gaze lingered, searching his face for any hint of insincerity. The narrow animal trail he gestured toward seemed harmless, almost inviting, but Red knew better than to trust appearances in these woods. “It’s a lovely thought,” she said quietly, her voice threaded with both caution and warmth. Still, her eyes didn’t waver from his. Secrets, she knew, had a way of turning sharp when least expected. She let her words hang between them, almost a challenge, before continuing in a low, earnest tone. “Will you

promise to warn me if the forest's language changes, even if the words are meant for you alone?" The question was both a test and a plea, her determination clear—she wouldn't be left vulnerable to what the shadows might whisper. Lucien (The Wolf) Lucien steps just close enough that the warmth of his presence brushes Red's arm, his gaze steady and reassuring. Lucien stepped just close enough that the warmth of his presence brushed against Red's arm, his eyes locking with hers—steady, intent, and somehow reassuring despite the wildness behind them. With a slight, almost conspiratorial tilt of his head, he gestured toward the narrow animal trail threading through the undergrowth. "I give you my word, Red—if the forest so much as murmurs ill intent, you'll feel my hand at your shoulder before the danger finds its name." The promise lingered between them, quietly earnest, as if he could will her trust into existence by sheer force of will. Lucien ultimately concedes, promising to warn her of any danger and agreeing to follow at a respectful distance.

Red Riding Hood (Red) Red pushes past Lucien, her jaw set, slipping her hand into her cloak pocket where the handle of a knife is hidden. She glances back over her shoulder, eyes narrowed, daring Lucien to challenge her authority as she leads the way into the dense trees. Red's jaw tightened as she brushed past Lucien, the crimson folds of her cloak swirling defiantly at her heels. Slipping her hand into the pocket where the cool handle of her knife waited, she shot him a sharp glance over her shoulder—her eyes narrowed, daring him to protest. "Fine," she said, her voice edged with resolve. "But if we're doing this, we do it my way." She paused just long enough for her words to settle in the hush of the shadowed trees. "I know these woods better than you ever could, and I don't trust what I can't see ahead." With that, she turned, her posture commanding as she stepped into the tangled green, tossing one last warning without looking back. "Stay close, but not too close." Lucien (The Wolf) Lucien offers a wry smile, his eyes sharp as he falls into step a few paces back, hands open and visible, watching Red's every move. Lucien offered Red a wry, almost teasing smile, his eyes glinting with a foxlike sharpness as he let her brush past him. He kept his hands open and visible—a gesture that hinted at vulnerability, though his gaze never strayed from her movements. She insisted on leading, her stride brisk, one hand hovering near the pocketed knife she thought he didn't notice. Falling in behind her, Lucien allowed a low chuckle to escape, his tone silk-soft but edged with knowing: "You lead, I'll follow," he murmured, the words curling around her like mist. "But remember, Red—I see more than most, even from behind." Red Riding Hood (Red) Red tightens her grip on the hidden knife and strides forward, casting a wary glance over her shoulder at Lucien. Red's fingers tightened around the hidden knife in her pocket, its familiar weight a silent reassurance. She stepped forward with determined purpose, her red cloak sweeping past Lucien's shoulder. Not bothering to mask her suspicion, Red shot him a wary glance and brushed past, voice low and sharp. "Just keep your eyes where they belong, Lucien," she said, not slowing her pace. "And save your clever tricks for someone who cares." Her chin lifted defiantly, every movement deliberate—a clear message that she had no intention of ceding control, not tonight. Their journey continues along the narrower trail, with Red maintaining control and Lucien observing her intently, motivated by his desire to gain her trust and affection while concealing his true nature.

As the tangled woods grew denser and shadows stretched longer across their path, the cottage finally appeared at the edge of the clearing—its warm light flickering in the distance. Red hesitated, weighing her options, while Lucien's pace quickened with anticipation, his gaze fixed on the welcoming glow ahead. Unbeknownst to Red, Lucien had already begun to craft a new mask for himself, preparing for the role he would play once he crossed the threshold and met her unsuspect-

ing grandmother.

Chapter 4: Lucien Deceives Grandmother

Lucien, disguised as Red, enters Grandmother's cottage and attempts to coax information from her not only about her remedies but also about Red herself.

Their conversation becomes a careful game of subtext and verbal sparring, with Grandmother cleverly dodging Lucien's probing questions about both the location of her remedies and Red's whereabouts or intentions.

Lucien grows increasingly curious and persistent, subtly admitting his interest in Red's safety and asking if she walks alone or expects to meet anyone.

Grandmother, remaining protective and wise, offers ambiguous answers, refusing to give up any details that might endanger Red.

The mood is tense but controlled, with both characters aware of the other's true nature and motivations.

Lucien's conflicted desire to protect and/or pursue Red comes to the forefront, while Grandmother's resourcefulness is displayed in her evasive responses.

The scene ends with neither gaining the upper hand, but with both acutely aware of the stakes should Red actually arrive.

Lucien (The Wolf) Lucien leans forward, voice velvet-soft but edged with urgency, his gaze flickering to the door as his ears angle to catch the faintest footstep from outside. Lucien lingered just inside the cottage's threshold, his gaze trailing over the patchwork quilts and sun-faded curtains. The flicker of the hearth cast golden patterns along the floor, inviting warmth he could almost believe in. He drew in a slow breath, feigning casual admiration. "Grandmother, your cottage is so cozy," he remarked, voice velvet-soft, but his ears pricked at an undercurrent—something sharp and unfamiliar in the air. Lucien tilted his head, catching the faint, medicinal tang that clung to the rafters. He allowed a note of curiosity to slip into his tone, masking it with concern. "Yet, I can't help but notice a certain scent," he mused, swirling a fingertip absently across the rim of a chipped teacup. "Something medicinal, perhaps?"

He took a careful step toward the shelves lined with jars and bundles of dried herbs, letting his gaze linger on the shadows between them. With a practiced smile, Lucien glanced back at the old woman, his eyes shining with feigned innocence. "Tell me, where do you keep your remedies?" he asked, as if the question were only natural for a guest admiring his host's wisdom. "I imagine they're quite precious—especially with unexpected visitors on the way." His words hung in the air, gentle and persuasive, even as his heart raced with longing and the ache of never quite belonging. Grandmother's eyes flick toward the heavy oak cabinet in the corner, fingers tightening imperceptibly around her shawl. Grandmother's eyes drifted toward the heavy oak cabinet in the shadowed corner, her fingers tightening almost imperceptibly around the edge of her shawl. She listened to Lucien's coaxing voice, low and insistent, asking after her remedy. A gentle, knowing smile touched her lips, though weariness softened its edges. "Remedies," she murmured, voice fragile but steady, "are safest where only old hands remember." Her gaze lingered on the cabinet as she added, "And some doors are best left unopened, especially when wolves and girls prowl the woods."

The words seemed to hang in the air, flecked with both warning and wisdom, as she settled back against her pillows, her resolve quietly unbroken by the illness that pressed at her bones. Lucien (The Wolf) Lucien leans forward, voice barely above a whisper, his gaze flickering nervously toward the door as the wind rattles the latch. Lucien leaned forward, the flicker of candlelight tracing the line of his jaw as he dipped his head nearer. His voice, barely more than a breath, seemed woven with both reassurance and mischief. All the while, his gaze darted, restless, toward the rattling door as the wind pressed insistently at the threshold—ever the outsider, ever uncertain of his welcome. “You know,” he murmured, coaxing, “memories tend to linger far longer than pawprints. But if a sudden chill were to slip inside tonight, wouldn’t it be wise to keep your remedy close at hand?” His ears, hidden beneath his borrowed human guise, strained for the faintest sound from beyond, every muscle poised between hope and wary longing. Grandmother’s eyes flicker toward the fireplace as her hand unconsciously tightens around her shawl, her ear attuned to the crunch of leaves just beyond the cottage door. Grandmother’s eyes flickered toward the fireplace, her fingers unconsciously tightening around her shawl. The faint crunch of leaves outside set her nerves humming, but she met Lucien’s gaze with the steady patience earned from years alone at the forest’s edge. “Sometimes the cure is hidden in plain sight, Lucien,” she murmured, her voice soft but threaded with meaning. Her chin tipped subtly toward the hearthstone, the glow of the fire dancing in her tired eyes. “Just beneath the hearthstone—though not every guest knows how to lift it without burning their fingers.” The wisdom in her words lingered in the warm air between them, a quiet challenge wrapped in gentle warning. Lucien (The Wolf) Lucien leans forward, his gaze flickering briefly to the hearth, ears pricked for the crunch of leaves outside. Lucien leaned forward, his eyes catching the flicker of firelight before darting to the shadows near the door. Every muscle was alert, ears attuned to the subtle crunch of leaves beyond the cottage’s walls. Still, his voice, when it came, was a velvet murmur, coaxing and unsure in equal measure. “Perhaps I’ve grown accustomed to the heat, Grandmother,” he began, letting a faint smile play at the corner of his mouth, as if warmth could ever truly settle in his bones. “Still, I wonder—which stone do you use to warm your remedy best when the shadows stretch long and Red’s footsteps echo near?” The question slipped out soft as a secret, his longing for acceptance hidden beneath practiced charm and easy words. Grandmother’s eyes flick to the door, her gnarled hand tightening around her shawl as she listens for the crunch of footsteps outside. Grandmother’s eyes flicked to the door, her gnarled hand tightening around the faded shawl at her shoulders as she listened for the crunch of footsteps outside. She drew a slow, deliberate breath, weighing Lucien’s coaxing question with the patience of someone who’d spent a lifetime reading intentions and omens. A clever wolf, she mused silently, might sense which stone held warmth beneath its surface, but only a wary heart—one seasoned by hardship and shadow—would know when to let it cool, especially when Red’s silhouette hovered uncertainly at her threshold. —————

As Lucien settles into his disguise, the cottage grows quiet, save for the distant sound of Red’s approach. Outside, the forest stirs with more than anticipation—Elias’s familiar stride returns to the winding path, his presence destined to collide with Red’s wary curiosity. In the hush between deception and discovery, suspicion begins to bloom, setting the stage for uneasy reunions and choices that cannot be undone.

Chapter 5: Red’s Suspicion and Elias’s Return

Red adjusts her heavy red cloak and carefully steps over a slick tree root, her basket of herbs swinging at her side as she moves purposefully toward her grandmother’s cottage.

Elias emerges from between two mossy trunks, axe slung over his shoulder, blocking her path with a wary glance.

Instead of expressing direct concern for her walking alone, Elias immediately inquires if Red has seen any unfamiliar faces in the area, hinting at unease about strangers in the forest.

Red acknowledges her urgency to deliver the apothecary's remedy to her ailing grandmother and, though proud of her ability to travel the woods alone, pragmatically accepts Elias's offer to accompany her, recognizing the danger and valuing his company.

Red Riding Hood (Red) Red clutches the basket tighter, glancing nervously down the path before forcing herself to walk steadily onward. Red Riding Hood clutched her basket so tightly her knuckles paled, eyes flickering nervously down the shadowed path ahead. But she pressed forward, shoulders squared against the chill in the air and the worry she refused to let show. She wouldn't be deterred—not now. "I must hurry," she murmured, more to herself than anyone listening, reminding herself of her purpose. The apothecary's remedy nestled safely in her basket was Grandmother's hope, and Red knew her grandmother was counting on her. That was all that mattered now; nothing—not fear, not uncertainty—would stand in her way. Red asserts her capability and requests that Elias trust her judgement if they encounter trouble.

Elias steps closer, keeping his tone casual but his eyes scanning the area, careful not to draw attention from those nearby. Elias stepped closer, his boots silent on the mossy ground. Though his voice remained casual, his eyes flickered warily over the clustering shadows at the edge of the square, always alert for danger. He kept his words low, meant for her ears alone. "Have you noticed anyone around here lately that you didn't recognize?" he asked, the question slipping out as easily as a blade drawn in the dark. "Maybe someone new in town, or just passing through?" Even as he spoke, he kept his body angled protectively between her and the open street, careful not to attract unwanted attention. Elias agrees, emphasizing the need for teamwork given the heightened dangers in the forest.

They set off together, their boots sinking into the mud as they disappear deeper into the trees, both alert to the possibility of encountering more than the usual perils.

Unspoken tensions lingered between them as the shadows deepened beneath the trees, each step drawing them closer to the truth hidden within the cottage walls. With every movement, the air grew heavier—thick with secrets, suspicion, and the sense that a reckoning was near. As they pressed on, neither could ignore the looming certainty that a confrontation awaited—and with it, the chance to finally unravel the danger threatening them all.

Chapter 6: The Confrontation and Rescue

Red steps onto the mossy path, clutching a satchel of herbal remedies, determined to reach her grandmother before nightfall.

Lucien, disguised as a traveler, emerges from behind a bramble and offers to carry her satchel, his voice smooth and persuasive.

Lucien (The Wolf) Lucien steps forward with a practiced smile, his gloved hand extended, blocking the narrow path with casual authority. His eyes, bright and attentive, linger just a moment too

long on Red as he waits for her reply. Lucien stepped into the narrow path with the effortless grace of someone well-accustomed to slipping between worlds. His gloved hand rose, palm open, barring her way with an authority that was more charming than threatening. A practiced smile softened his handsome features, but his eyes—bright, perceptive—lingered on Red a heartbeat longer than courtesy demanded. He glanced at her satchel, feigning concern, and let his voice spill out, warm and coaxing. “That satchel looks dreadfully heavy for someone traveling alone through these woods,” he remarked, as if the observation had just occurred to him. “Allow me, won’t you?” Lucien shifted his weight, inviting her trust with a subtle tilt of his head. “It would be a shame if you tired yourself before reaching grandmother’s house.” The persuasion in his eyes was gentle but insistent. “I insist—no trouble at all,” he added, extending his hand a fraction closer, as though the simple act of helping her would grant him the acceptance he craved. Red Riding Hood (Red) Red shifts the satchel higher on her shoulder, her gaze steady and wary, taking a small step back from Lucien. Red shifted the satchel higher on her shoulder, her fingers tightening protectively around the worn strap. She kept her gaze steady and wary, refusing to be intimidated by the stranger blocking her path. With a quiet resolve, she took a small step back from Lucien, putting a little more distance between them. “I’ve managed just fine on my own so far,” she said, her voice calm but firm, making it clear she didn’t need his help. “And I prefer to keep my things close, if you don’t mind.” Compassion flickered in her eyes—she didn’t wish to offend, but she would not surrender her independence so easily. Lucien (The Wolf) Lucien steps aside gracefully, his eyes lingering on Red with a reassuring, almost hypnotic smile. Lucien stepped aside with effortless grace, the soft rustle of leaves beneath his boots barely audible. His gaze lingered on Red, a reassuring, almost hypnotic smile curving his lips. “Independence suits you,” he remarked, his tone warm and inviting, yet edged with something deeper—a vulnerability that flickered behind the charm. He gestured to the tangled path ahead, brambles and shadows winding unpredictably. “Still, a little help can be a comfort on paths as wild as these.” The offer hung between them, gentle and persuasive, as if he were weaving safety into every syllable. Red Riding Hood (Red) Red tightens her grip on the satchel, her eyes narrowing slightly as she studies Lucien’s smile, weighing his charm against the whisper of unease in her chest. Red’s fingers tightened around the worn leather strap of her satchel as she regarded Lucien, who had just stepped from the shadows of the bramble and offered a courteous smile. She didn’t return it. Instead, her eyes narrowed, studying the way his charm seemed carefully measured, as if it was meant to distract her from the subtle warning that curled inside her chest. Calm but unwavering, she met his gaze. “That may be,” she replied, her voice steady, “but I’ve learned the forest is safest when I trust my own two hands—and my instincts.” Lucien (The Wolf) Lucien steps aside with a courteous bow, his eyes lingering on Red’s satchel, a subtle smile playing at his lips. Lucien stepped aside with a practiced flourish, dipping into a courteous bow that seemed almost too polished for a mere traveler. His gaze lingered—just a fraction too long—on the worn satchel slung over Red’s shoulder, and a subtle, knowing smile curved at the corners of his lips. “Ah,” he murmured, his voice smooth as velvet and edged with admiration, “wise beyond your years—yet even the keenest instincts can falter when shadows grow long.” The words hung between them, at once a compliment and a warning, his eyes never quite leaving the satchel as he straightened, masking his longing beneath that charming, enigmatic smile. Red Riding Hood (Red) Red shifts her satchel higher on her shoulder, her eyes narrowing slightly as she studies Lucien’s face, searching for any hint of deception. Red shifted her satchel higher on her shoulder, her gaze sharpening as she took in every detail of Lucien’s face, searching for the slightest flicker of deceit. She held his stare, unflinching, her voice calm but edged with certainty as she replied, “Daylight’s still holding strong, and I know these woods better than most.” The words hung between them, her confidence a quiet challenge, refusing to be swayed or intimidated by a

stranger's sudden appearance. Lucien (The Wolf) Lucien steps aside with a gracious sweep of his arm, his gaze lingering on Red with a disarming, wolfish smile. Lucien emerged from the tangled bramble with all the grace of a practiced gentleman, his human guise flawless but for the glint of something untamed in his eyes. With a sweep of his arm, he stepped aside, clearing the path, yet his presence lingered—a subtle invitation. His smile was both disarming and undeniably wolfish as his gaze held Red's just a moment longer than courtesy allowed. "Let us walk together, at least," he suggested, his voice smooth and persuasive, as if sharing the road was the most natural thing in the world. "That way, we might share the path and its stories—surely there's no harm in company, is there?" The question hovered between them, gentle but edged with longing, as if he yearned for her answer to be yes. Red Riding Hood (Red) Red shifts her satchel higher on her shoulder, watching Lucien's eyes for any flicker of disappointment or intent. Red shifted her satchel higher on her shoulder, the weight familiar but grounding. She met Lucien's gaze—steady, searching for the softest hint of disappointment, or something sharper lurking beneath his traveler's charm. Blocking her path, he offered to walk with her, his tone polite, almost inviting. Red considered, lips pursing thoughtfully before she replied, her words gentle but edged with resolve. Company could be pleasant, she admitted, but only if it didn't ask for more than was freely given. Her meaning hung in the air between them, a quiet boundary drawn with compassion and unmistakable independence. Red refuses his help, firmly asserting her independence and questioning Lucien's purpose.

Red Riding Hood (Red) Red squares her shoulders, her gaze unwavering as she shifts her satchel behind her, keeping it close and secure. Red squared her shoulders, determination settling into the set of her jaw as she shifted her satchel behind her, keeping it close and secure. She narrowed her eyes at the stranger, refusing to flinch beneath his gaze. "I don't need your help," she said steadily, her voice carrying just enough edge to warn off interference. Instead, she fixed him with a sharp look, her curiosity outweighing any hint of fear. "What brings you out here, lurking in the shadows?" she pressed, her tone cool but probing. "People don't wander this path without a reason." Lucien (The Wolf) Lucien's lips curve into a thin, unsettling smile as he steps just close enough for his shadow to stretch toward her boots. Lucien's lips curved into a thin, unsettling smile as he stepped just close enough for his shadow to stretch toward her boots, a silent trespass into her guarded space. He tipped his head, eyes glinting with a sly vulnerability that belied the confidence in his stance. "Curiosity, perhaps," he offered, his tone smooth as velvet and just as hard to grasp. Then, almost wistful, he let his gaze linger on her determined face. "Or maybe," he added, voice dropping softer, "I simply enjoy the company of those who think themselves safest alone." Red Riding Hood (Red) Red squares her shoulders, her gaze unwavering and her grip on the satchel firm, ready to defend herself if necessary. Red Riding Hood squared her shoulders, her grip tightening around the satchel as she met his gaze, unwavering. The forest pressed in around them, shadows flickering like doubts. She refused to step aside or soften her stance. "If you're just curious," she said, her voice edged with determination, "then you won't mind telling me exactly what you're after." Her eyes narrowed, scanning his face for any hint of deception. Compassion warred with caution, but resolve won out—she would not let anyone threaten herself or those she loved. Lucien (The Wolf) Lucien tilts his head, a faint smile playing at the corner of his mouth, eyes glinting as he steps just close enough to test her resolve. Lucien tilted his head, a faint smile flickering at the edge of his mouth as his eyes caught the last sliver of sunlight through the trees. He took a measured step closer, testing the line Red had drawn between them. "Let's call it a mutual interest in what you carry, Red," he murmured, voice low enough to blend with the hush of the forest. There was no edge of threat in his tone, only a careful persuasion, as if he yearned to be understood. "But rest assured—I never threaten unless provoked." The glint in his gaze lingered,

equal parts promise and warning, as he waited to see whether she would flinch or stand her ground. Red Riding Hood (Red)Red squares her shoulders, her gaze unwavering as she shifts her weight, ready to move if Lucien edges closer. Red squared her shoulders, the crimson cloak settling around her with quiet defiance. Her gaze never wavered as she shifted her weight, muscles poised and alert in case Lucien dared to draw any closer. “You’d best keep your distance,” she warned, her voice level but edged with steel. “And answer plainly, because I’m not one to provoke easily—but I don’t trust anyone who claims to have ‘mutual interests’ in my belongings.” The words rang out between them, her suspicion clear and uncompromising as she stood firm on the shadowed path. Lucien (The Wolf)Lucien steps closer, the faint curl of a smile flickering at the edge of his mouth, eyes fixed unwaveringly on her satchel. Lucien stepped forward, the faintest suggestion of a smile haunting his lips as his gaze lingered—unapologetically—on the satchel Red clutched so tightly. He seemed at once disarming and dangerous, charming shadows curling around his words as he spoke. “Trust is a luxury out here, Red—and my interests rarely walk away unmet.” The words slipped from him with a persuasive ease, his tone warm yet edged, as if he were inviting her to share a secret even as he schemed to pry it loose himself. Red Riding Hood (Red)Red lifts her chin defiantly, her fingers edging closer to the hidden knife at her belt. Red’s chin lifted in silent defiance, her eyes narrowing as she regarded the stranger on the path. One hand drifted, almost imperceptibly, toward the hidden knife at her belt—a warning as clear as any words. “If your interests concern my satchel,” she said, her voice edged with cool resolve, “you’d better explain yourself now, before I decide you’re more threat than curiosity.” The weight of her stare made it clear she was ready to act if his answer displeased her. Lucien (The Wolf)Lucien steps closer, his gaze sharpening, a faint smile curling at the edges of his mouth. Lucien stepped closer, the forest shadows flickering across his sharp features as his gaze narrowed in on Red. A faint, knowing smile tugged at the corners of his mouth—a smile that suggested secrets and the weight of choices yet to be made. “Suppose I told you,” he murmured, his voice low and persuasive, “that what you’re carrying in that satchel could save a life—or end one. It all depends on whose hands you trust it with.” His words lingered in the stillness between them, threaded with both warning and invitation, as if he stood on the edge of confession, yearning for her understanding but unwilling to reveal the full truth. Red Riding Hood (Red)Red stands her ground, chin lifted defiantly, her grip on the satchel unyielding as she fixes Lucien with a cold, unwavering stare. Red’s grip on the satchel tightened, her knuckles whitening as she planted her feet firmly on the leaf-strewn path. She lifted her chin, meeting Lucien’s gaze with a cold, unwavering stare that betrayed neither fear nor hesitation. “Then you won’t be getting your hands on it,” she said, each word clipped and resolute. Her eyes narrowed, challenging him openly. “So say what you mean, or step aside.” The forest seemed to hold its breath, shadows gathering around her determined figure, but Red stood her ground, refusing to yield an inch. Lucien (The Wolf)Lucien’s gaze sharpens, his stance shifting subtly as if ready to block her way, a faint, unsettling smile curving his lips. Lucien’s gaze sharpened, catching the last rays of dusk and reflecting something wild beneath his calm exterior. He shifted almost imperceptibly, angling his body just enough to block Red’s way. The corners of his mouth lifted into a faint, unsettling smile as he regarded her, voice low and persuasive. “Isn’t it wiser to know who walks beside you, Red,” he murmured, letting the words linger in the thickening air, “before you decide which path to defend so fiercely?” Red Riding Hood (Red)Red squares her shoulders, eyes never leaving Lucien as she angles her body protectively between him and her satchel. Red squared her shoulders, a quiet resolve hardening in her posture as she stepped subtly between Lucien and her satchel. Her eyes never wavered from his, narrowed and unflinching, as if she could pierce straight through any deception. The forest shadows played across her determined face, lending an edge to her words. “I know exactly which path I’m on—and I don’t need to know

you to know I won't let you steer me off it." The statement hung in the air, firm and clear, as Red stood her ground, refusing both his help and any attempt at distraction from her purpose. Their conversation deepens, moving beyond simple suspicion to a nuanced exchange about trust, loneliness, and the risk of opening oneself to others.

Lucien (The Wolf) Lucien leans lightly against the doorframe, his eyes glinting with a conspiratorial warmth, as he waits for Red's reply, hoping to sense a sliver of shared wonder or loneliness. Lucien lingered in the doorway, his frame relaxed but intent, the setting sun catching a sly, golden glint in his eyes. He let his gaze drift beyond Red, out toward the shadowed tangle of trees, as if confiding in both her and the woods themselves. "You know," he began, his voice layered with a gentle intrigue, "the forest keeps so many secrets—sometimes I wonder if the trees themselves whisper to those willing to listen." He edged just a fraction nearer, warmth flickering in his expression as if inviting her into some private conspiracy. "Have you ever felt the hush just before dusk," he continued, lowering his tone to a reverent murmur, "as if the woods are holding their breath for a special guest?" Lucien's words hung between them, heavy with invitation and longing, as he watched Red for any sign that she, too, might sense the forest's silent yearning. Red Riding Hood (Red) Red glances toward the latch on the cottage door, her fingers resting protectively on the handle as she studies Lucien's face for any flicker of intent. Red Riding Hood kept her fingers curled protectively around the cottage door handle, not letting Lucien's easy smile distract her from his subtle movements. She watched him closely, her gaze flickering between his eyes and the latch, judging whether his approach held any hidden intent. "I hear things sometimes," she said quietly, her voice steady despite the uncertainty she felt—soft footsteps in the night, a stray voice she couldn't quite place. But she never let her guard down, not until she was certain who had truly come calling. The door stayed firmly shut, her resolve as unyielding as the wood beneath her hand. Lucien (The Wolf) Lucien leans in, his eyes glinting with a mix of earnestness and mystery, fingertips grazing the doorframe as if seeking silent permission to cross its threshold. Lucien leaned in, the faintest glimmer of something vulnerable flickering in his eyes. His fingertips hovered just above the doorframe, grazing the wood as though testing the boundaries—seeking silent permission to step inside. "Ah," he murmured, voice low and coaxing, "but isn't it lonely, locking the world away?" The question hung between them, threaded with both earnestness and the sly promise of secrets. He smiled, half-mischievous, half-melancholic, and continued, "Never knowing whether the next knock might bring a friend—or a story that could change everything." With each word, he drew imperceptibly closer to the cottage, his presence weaving allure and melancholy into the dusky air. Red Riding Hood (Red) Red leans forward just enough to peer through the slightly parted curtains, eyes flickering with interest but her hand still firmly on the latch. Red leaned forward, careful not to open the door, just enough to peer through the narrow gap in the curtains. Her eyes flickered with curiosity as she kept her hand steady on the latch, unwilling to yield even an inch of safety. Lucien's voice drifted closer, honeyed and persistent, as he spun tales of wandering souls and vanished wayfarers. But Red, clever and unmoved, let her gaze linger on his shadow outside. "Stories," she mused aloud, her tone both thoughtful and wary, "can slip through cracks and keyholes—even when the door stays closed." Lucien (The Wolf) Lucien leans closer, voice low and inviting, fingertips just brushing the edge of the cottage's worn threshold as if tracing the outline of possibility. Lucien leaned in, his presence a subtle intrusion just beyond the fragile border of the cottage's worn threshold. His voice dropped, silken and persuasive, as his fingertips traced invisible patterns along the wood, as if coaxing the door to remember how it felt to be open. "Then allow me to offer a tale," he murmured into the hush that had settled between them, "right here in the space we share—a tale of a traveler who found warmth not in the

open road, but in the soft glow behind a guarded door.” The words hung delicately in the air, each syllable a gentle invitation, his gaze lingering on her as if he could conjure acceptance from the very timbers of her shelter. Red Riding Hood (Red)Red leans forward just a little, eyes narrowing as she studies Lucien’s expression, fingers still wrapped tightly around the latch. Red leaned forward just enough to make her intent clear, the edge of her red cloak brushing the doorframe as she studied Lucien’s expression with narrowed eyes. Her fingers remained tight around the latch—unyielding, yet steady. “And did that traveler find the warmth he’d been searching for,” she asked quietly, her voice threading through the hush between them, “or did he lose himself in the shadows outside—always wishing for one more step inside?” The question hung in the air, sharper than any warning, as she waited—measuring not just his answer, but the secrets he tried to slip past her guarded threshold. Lucien (The Wolf)Lucien lets his voice drop to a gentle murmur, his gaze lingering on the space beneath the door, as if coaxing the invisible line between safety and risk to dissolve. Lucien let his voice fall to a gentle murmur, the syllables curling through the hush of evening as he allowed his gaze to linger on the slender spill of light beneath the door. He hovered on the threshold, neither fully outside nor in, heart thrumming with a restless cocktail of hope and longing. The wood beneath his feet creaked softly—a sound easily mistaken for the wind, yet charged with his own anticipation. In that liminal space, where shadows stretched and the world seemed to hold its breath, Lucien found himself believing—if only for a fragile moment—that the softest light often flickered just beyond the bravest doubts. Each word he offered was part story, part confession, spun in hopes that the invisible line between safety and risk might dissolve, drawing him closer to warmth and welcome he had only ever tasted in dreams. Red Riding Hood (Red)Red fingers the latch with a restless thumb, her eyes searching Lucien’s face for any hint of truth or deception. Red’s thumb hovered restlessly over the latch, her gaze never leaving Lucien’s face as he spun his tale—each word spun with honeyed ease, each step bringing him a little closer to her grandmother’s cottage. She listened, weighing the cadence of his voice, the gleam in his eye that might have been sincerity—or cunning.

“But sometimes,” Lucien mused, his tone conspiratorial, “when you let the door stay closed, you wonder what you’re missing—that flicker might be a warning as much as a welcome.”

Red felt the weight of his meaning settle in the hush between them, the familiar wariness she carried on woodland paths now flickering in the shadowed porch. Her grip tightened, the metal cool beneath her fingers, as she considered whether to open the door—or keep it firmly shut. Lucien (The Wolf)Lucien lowers his voice to a velvet hush, leaning subtly forward, eyes glinting with earnest curiosity as he studies Red’s expression for any sign of yielding. Lucien lowered his voice to a velvet hush, letting each syllable linger in the dusk between them. He leaned subtly forward, as though the evening air itself had pulled him closer, his eyes glinting with an earnest curiosity that belied the practiced charm in his tone. “Perhaps,” he murmured, studying Red’s face for any flicker of trust, “but if the traveler never risks a step closer, he may never learn whether the glow is danger—or the kind of warmth that melts even the deepest frost.” The words slipped out soft as a caress, inviting and uncertain all at once, as Lucien edged nearer to the cottage, drawn by hope, longing, and the tantalizing promise of acceptance. Red Riding Hood (Red)Red tilts her head, eyes narrowing thoughtfully as her hand hovers near the latch, uncertain whether to hold fast or inch it open. Red’s fingers paused just above the latch, her body tense with the weight of the moment. She tilted her head, eyes narrowing in thought as Lucien’s silken words threaded through the night air, trying to wrap her in their spell. But Red, ever sharp, was not so easily ensnared. Her gaze flicked from Lucien’s practiced smile to the uncertain glow spilling through the window. “So how does he know which glow to trust,” she asked quietly, her voice

edged with curiosity and caution, “when so many wanderers have been burned by the wrong fires?” The question hung between them, a subtle challenge and a test, as she considered whether to hold fast or let the door open just a crack more. Lucien (The Wolf) Lucien leans slightly forward, voice lowering to a conspiratorial hush, his gaze searching Red’s eyes for a sign the door might unlock even a fraction. Lucien leaned in, the subtle shift of his body drawing him just a breath closer to the threshold, his voice dipping into a hushed, inviting cadence as if sharing a secret meant only for her. He didn’t simply listen for the familiar crackle of the cottage’s hearth—his attention lingered on the silences, the pauses pregnant with possibility. In those quiet spaces, his gaze searched Red’s eyes, hungry for a sign that the door might open, even just a fraction. Sometimes, Lucien believed, the truest warmth wasn’t found in spoken words, but in the gentle invitation of shared silence—a promise offered in the stillness between them. Red Riding Hood (Red) Red leans closer to the window, her voice soft but cautious, fingers tracing idle circles on the cold glass as she studies Lucien’s silhouette. Red leaned in, her breath clouding a faint patch on the window, fingers absentmindedly tracing circles against the cold glass. She studied Lucien’s silhouette as he lingered just beyond the lamplight, his voice weaving tales meant to charm. But Red’s own words slipped out in a cautious murmur, thoughtful and edged with curiosity. “And if the silence is thick with shadows,” she mused, watching him carefully, “how does he know he’s not mistaking the dark for an open door?” The question lingered between them, her gaze steady, refusing to let his stories draw her in without scrutiny. Lucien (The Wolf) Lucien tilts his head, letting the moonlight catch his gaze, leaning just a touch nearer to the threshold as if drawn by her guarded glow. Lucien tilted his head, letting the moonlight catch the glint in his eyes—a deliberate gesture, as if hoping she might notice the vulnerability lingering beneath his practiced charm. He leaned just a touch nearer to the threshold, drawn by the guarded glow of her presence, and began weaving his tale. “He looks for the faintest spark,” Lucien murmured, his voice lowering as the night deepened around them. “A kindness reflected in someone’s eyes, or the way their voice softens when the night grows long.” The words seemed to hover in the air, both confession and invitation, as he edged closer, hoping she might see past the mask and glimpse the longing that truly pulled him toward her door. Red Riding Hood (Red) Red’s fingers hover near the latch, her gaze flickering between Lucien’s eyes and the darkening woods beyond, uncertainty mingling with quiet curiosity. Red’s fingers hovered uncertainly near the latch, her attention torn between the crescent of Lucien’s smile and the deepening shadows gathering beneath the trees. She could feel the weight of his nearness, the subtle way he allowed each word to curl into the evening air as if it might alter the very fabric of the dusk. “Maybe,” he ventured, his eyes never leaving hers, “the traveler waits for that softness to last, to see if the spark can survive the chill of a closed door before he ever steps inside.”

The words lingered between them, as fragile and potent as the moment itself—Red, poised on the threshold, her curiosity wrestling with caution, and Lucien inching closer, cloaked in his stories of lost souls and unspoken invitations. Lucien (The Wolf) Lucien leans forward just enough for the candlelight to catch in his eyes, his voice lowering as if sharing a secret meant for Red alone. Lucien leaned forward, letting the candlelight catch the subtle gold flecks in his eyes. His voice dropped to a conspiratorial hush, so soft it seemed meant for Red alone. “He does, but sometimes the cold outside sharpens his senses,” he murmured, the words curling in the space between them. There was a wistfulness there, something raw beneath the practiced charm. “It teaches him to recognize the difference between a fleeting ember and the steady glow that might finally invite him in.” As he spoke, he edged closer to the cottage, his gaze never leaving her, as if searching her face for a hint of warmth that might beckon him from the chill. Red Riding Hood (Red) Red’s hand hesitates on the door handle, her gaze flickering from Lucien’s face to the fading light outside, uncertainty

mingling with the curiosity in her eyes. Red's fingers hovered just above the door handle, the chill of evening pressing against the cottage walls while Lucien's voice wound its way through the dusk. She caught his lingering glance—the way his eyes traced the fading light outside, searching for something that lingered just beyond reach. He spoke softly, almost as if confiding in the shadows, “Sometimes, he wonders if the steady glow is just his own longing reflected.”

She felt the weight of his words, the subtle ache behind them, and her curiosity deepened. Red listened, sensing the warmth Lucien sought not in the lantern's flame, but in the cadence of her reply. Before she could speak, he edged closer, pausing at the threshold as if waiting for some sign, some reassurance. Red's grip tightened, determination flickering in her gaze; she understood, then, that there were truths revealed only in the act of reaching for the latch, and in the careful way one listened for the promise of welcome within another's voice. Lucien (The Wolf) Lucien rests a gentle hand against the weathered wood of the door, fingertips tracing the grain as if feeling for a pulse beneath, his gaze fixed on the glimmer of Red's eyes through the crack. Lucien let his hand rest gently against the weathered wood, fingertips tracing the age-softened grain as if searching for a hidden heartbeat beneath. His gaze lingered on the narrow slip of light where Red's eyes glimmered watchfully through the crack. Drawing a breath, he leaned in, lowering his voice to a velvet hush that seemed to settle over the threshold like twilight. He wove a story then—one of wandering souls and uncertain welcomes—letting each word hang between them like a question. Perhaps, he mused aloud, every true welcome began with two hearts, each daring to hope that the other's warmth was real. As he spoke, he inched nearer, careful not to startle, coaxing the possibility of trust from the silence that separated them. Red Riding Hood (Red) Red's hand hovers near the latch, eyes narrowed in wary curiosity, her voice gentle but edged with caution as she studies Lucien through the sliver of the doorway. Red's hand hovered just above the latch, her fingers tense, the smooth wood cool beneath her touch. She peered through the narrow opening, eyes narrowed in wary curiosity as Lucien spun his tales, voice lilting with practiced charm. Yet she didn't let herself be lulled. Her voice, gentle but edged with caution, slipped through the crack. “Maybe it does—but before I open this door, the traveler will have to show me his own warmth, not just the stories he carries on his tongue.” She studied him with a steady gaze, her determination as palpable as the chill that drifted in from the forest. Lucien (The Wolf) Lucien's hand, trembling ever so slightly, rests upon the wood of the cottage door, his gaze searching Red's eyes for any flicker of invitation. Lucien's hand, trembling ever so slightly, rested upon the rough wood of the cottage door. His gaze lingered on Red's face, searching her eyes for any flicker of invitation, some sign that he might be welcome. For a moment, the playful tales he'd spun of lost travelers and midnight roads faded from his lips, and a rare vulnerability crept into his voice. He hesitated, then let the truth slip through, low and sincere—a wish not merely to be admitted, but to be truly seen, trusted for whatever self hid beneath the night's disguise. Red Riding Hood (Red) Red drapes her shawl tighter and approaches the window, peering out through the sliver of glass to catch Lucien's gaze, searching for sincerity in his shadowed face. Red drew her shawl tighter around her shoulders, the familiar red fabric a comfort against the encroaching dusk. She approached the window, the floorboards creaking beneath her bare feet, and peered through the narrow gap in the curtains. Lucien stood just beyond the silvered glass, his features half-lost in shadow, his words drifting between them like a spell. Trust is earned in the hush between words, she thought, her gaze unwavering as she searched his face for sincerity. “Step closer to the window,” she called quietly, her voice steady but edged with challenge, “Let me see if your eyes hold as much warmth as your voice claims.” Lucien attempts to charm Red with stories and subtle hints about the dangers of the woods, and eventually reveals he possesses a scrap of grandmother's shawl, warning Red of a lurking threat.

Red Riding Hood (Red)Red plants her feet firmly in the dirt, arms outstretched protectively in front of the door, blocking Lucien's path. Her eyes narrow as she studies his every movement, bracing herself for any sign of deceit. Red planted her feet firmly in the dirt, her red cloak billowing slightly as she stretched her arms out to bar the door. Every muscle in her body was taut, her eyes narrowed and unwavering as she watched Lucien's approach. She measured each of his movements, alert for even the smallest hint of duplicity. "Stop right there, Lucien," she said, her voice steely with resolve. "I won't let you take another step toward the cottage unless you can prove you mean no harm." Determination flickered in her gaze as she demanded, "What brings you here, and why should I trust you?" Lucien (The Wolf)Lucien raises his hands slowly, palms open in a gesture of peace, maintaining a respectful distance as he speaks. Lucien lifted his hands, palms open in a careful gesture of surrender, his movements deliberate and slow so as not to startle her. He kept a respectful distance, acutely aware of the tension in Red's posture as she stood guard between him and the cottage. His voice, gentle yet edged with urgency, carried over the hush of the woods. He told her he understood her caution—how could he not, with suspicion crackling in the air? But, he insisted, there was danger prowling the forest tonight, and if she would only allow him a moment to explain, he could help protect both her and her grandmother. The earnestness in his gaze belied the wolfish cunning beneath, his need for acceptance flickering like candlelight behind his words. Red Riding Hood (Red)Red tightens her grip on her basket, eyes narrowed, refusing to move aside until Lucien produces evidence. Red planted herself firmly between Lucien and the cottage, her red cloak catching the waning light as she tightened her grip on the basket. She refused to budge, eyes narrowed with determined suspicion. "If you truly wish to help us," she said, her voice unwavering despite the tension in the air, "then show me something—anything—that proves your warning isn't just another trick." Her stance made it clear: she would not let him pass until he offered tangible proof, no matter how convincing his words might seem. Lucien (The Wolf)Lucien gently produces the familiar fabric from his coat, holding it out for Red to inspect, his gaze steady and sincere. Lucien's hand moved with deliberate gentleness as he reached into his coat, his eyes never leaving Red's wary face. From the folds of dark wool, he drew out the familiar scrap of fabric—her grandmother's shawl, unmistakable in its weave and faded scent. He offered it to her, palm open, his fingers betraying only the slightest tremor. "If proof is what you demand," he said quietly, his voice stripped of its usual mischief and charm, "look here: I found this torn scrap of your grandmother's shawl snagged on a bramble, far from the path she ever takes." The earnest steadiness in his gaze dared her to doubt him, even as a shadow of longing flickered behind his eyes. Red Riding Hood (Red)Red narrows her eyes, folding her arms and refusing to move aside, her gaze fixed on Lucien for any sign of deceit. Red stood her ground, arms folded tightly across her chest as Lucien approached the cottage. She narrowed her eyes, her gaze unwavering and sharp, searching his face for any flicker of dishonesty. "That could have been planted by anyone," she said, her voice steady and unyielding, making it clear she would not be easily convinced. "What makes you so sure it wasn't you?" Lucien (The Wolf)Lucien steps forward slowly, hands open and empty, his eyes focused on Red's unwavering stance. Lucien stepped forward, slow and deliberate, his hands raised to show they were empty. His gaze never wavered from Red's guarded posture—she was a barrier between him and the cottage, unyielding as stone. He tried to soften his voice, let sincerity seep through the cracks of his practiced charm. "I watched the shadows move," he explained, every word carefully chosen, "but they moved with purpose, not the aimlessness of wild things. That's what brought me here—I followed them, to keep you both safe." He let the tension in his shoulders sag, a hint of vulnerability slipping through. "If I meant you harm, would I have revealed myself at all?" Red Riding Hood (Red)Red narrows her gaze, edging closer to the cottage door while keeping Lucien in her peripheral vision, her grip tightening on the basket handle as she

prepares to move. Red narrowed her gaze, edging closer to the cottage door, every muscle in her body taut with resolve. She kept Lucien firmly in her peripheral vision, her grip tightening around the basket's handle as if it were both shield and weapon. Positioning herself squarely between him and the cottage, she set her feet, her stance unyielding. "If your intentions are true," she said, her voice steady and unmistakably clear, "then stand aside and let me go to my grandmother first—if there is danger, I will face it with my own eyes before trusting yours." The words came not as a plea, but as a challenge, her determination radiating with every syllable. Lucien (The Wolf) Lucien lowers his head in a gesture of submission, stepping back to show he means no threat, but his eyes remain fixed on the path, alert and wary. Lucien lowered his head, a deliberate gesture of submission, stepping back just enough to show he meant no threat. Still, his eyes remained fixed on the path ahead, alert and wary. Red had positioned herself squarely between him and the cottage, her stance unyielding, demanding proof of his intentions. Lucien hesitated, searching her face for even the slightest sign of trust. He spoke quietly, his voice edged with concern and persuasion, suggesting that if she insisted on going alone, she might walk straight into the danger he had sensed. It would be safer, he urged, if she allowed him to go ahead and clear the way—or, at the very least, to walk beside her. That way, he could prove he stood with her, not against her. Red Riding Hood (Red) Red gestures firmly for Lucien to lead the way, her eyes never leaving him as she holds her ground between him and the cottage. Red planted herself squarely between Lucien and the cottage, her red cloak catching the last rays of afternoon light. Determined not to let him out of her sight, she gestured firmly for him to move ahead. "Not until I see with my own eyes that you mean what you say," she insisted, her unwavering gaze fixed on him. Every muscle in her stance communicated her resolve as she added, "Walk in front of me, Lucien, where I can watch every move you make." Red remains skeptical, demanding proof of his intentions.

Lucien explains he followed suspicious shadows and wishes to protect her and her grandmother.

Red insists on maintaining control, instructing Lucien to walk in front of her so she can observe him closely as they approach the cottage together, accepting his warning but still withholding full trust.

The encounter ends with Red firmly in command, Lucien forced to comply with her cautious terms as they proceed toward grandmother's house, both wary of the dangers ahead.

As dusk settles over the battered cottage, uncertainty lingers in the air—each step Red takes alongside Lucien is heavy with the memory of what's just transpired. The echoes of the confrontation are still raw, but new questions press in, demanding answers and action. With her grandmother safe for now and Elias watching warily, Red knows that the next decision she makes will shape not only her fate, but the future of everyone involved. The path ahead is uncertain, yet as they move away from the chaos, the promise of a new beginning starts to take root.

Chapter 7: Red's Choice and A New Beginning

Red crouches near the cottage door, her fingers deftly gathering wild thyme and yarrow from the garden beds.

Elias approaches from the forest path, boots muffled by wet leaves, axe slung over his shoulder.

He pauses, scanning the woods for movement, then calls out in a low voice, 'You shouldn't be outside alone so early, Red.

' Red straightens, brushing dirt from her palms, and replies, 'Grandmother needs these for her tea. I can't wait.

' Elias steps closer, kneeling to help her pull stubborn roots free from the soil.

As Red gathers the herbs into her basket, Elias sets his axe down and inspects the cottage windows, checking the latches.

Together, they carry the basket inside, Elias's vigilant gaze lingering on the tree line, driven by his determination to keep Red safe.

Red, focused on her grandmother's recovery, thanks Elias but insists she can handle herself, determined to prove her independence.

As dawn broke over the quiet woods, Red stood at the threshold, the scent of herbs fresh in her hands, knowing that whatever the forests held, she was ready to meet it—no longer just a girl in a red cloak, but the keeper of her own story.