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Chapter 1: Red Receives Her Grandmother’s Cryptic Letter

Red sits at the rough wooden table, sorting through a bundle of letters when her fingers pause on an envelope sealed with wax and her grandmother’s symbol.

She breaks the seal, unfolds the parchment, and scans the cryptic message inside.

Red’s Mother enters, arms laden with kindling, and sets it down with a thud, glancing warily at the letter.

She warns Red not to venture near the woods, recounting the echoing howls she heard the night before, and pleads with Red to promise she will stay close to the cottage.

Red’s MotherShe pulls Red gently aside, her hands trembling slightly as she brushes a strand of hair behind Red’s ear, her voice hushed and urgent. Red’s mother caught her gently by the arm, her fingers trembling as she tucked a loose strand of hair behind Red’s ear. Her eyes darted toward the shadowed window, as if the darkness beyond might press itself through the glass. In a voice made thin by worry, she whispered urgently, “Stay away from the woods today.” The memory of the night before flickered in her gaze. “I heard howls echoing through the trees. Closer than ever—I lay awake, listening, and couldn’t sleep for fear of what might be out there.” Her grip tightened,

both loving and insistent. “Whatever’s in those woods, it’s dangerous. Promise me you won’t go near.” Red twists her fingers in her cloak, eyes darting toward the shadowed tree line beyond the cottage window. Red twisted her fingers in her cloak, her gaze flickering anxiously toward the shadowed tree line that loomed beyond the cottage window. Her mother’s warnings echoed in her mind—howls in the night, danger lurking just out of sight. Yet Red’s voice trembled with a determined compassion as she pressed, “But Mama, what if someone needs help out there—what if they’re calling for us?” Even as she spoke, the woods seemed to listen, their darkness deep and unreadable, tempting her curiosity and her courage. Red’s MotherShe kneels beside Red, gripping her hands tightly, her eyes filled with fear and pleading. Red’s mother knelt beside her, fingers tightening around Red’s hands as if she could anchor her daughter in place. Her eyes shimmered with fear, searching Red’s face for understanding. “Oh, Red,” she whispered, voice trembling and stern, “those weren’t cries for help—they were warnings, wild and sharp, and no good ever comes from answering them.” The memory of the echoing howls from the woods last night seemed to linger in the air between them, her anxiety palpable as she pleaded with Red not to venture near the shadowed trees. Red’s mother clutches Red’s hand tightly, her eyes searching her daughter’s face for reassurance. Red’s mother gripped her hand so tightly that Red could feel the tremor in her fingers. Shadows from the morning light flickered across her worried face as she searched Red’s eyes, hoping for a promise that would ease her fears. “Please, Red, for my peace of mind,” she murmured, voice trembling with memory of the echoing howls she’d heard from the woods last night, “promise me you’ll stay within sight of the cottage today.” Red glances toward the dark line of the trees, her curiosity warring with her mother’s fear. Red’s gaze drifted toward the brooding line of trees at the edge of the village, their shadows deepening as dusk crept in. Her mother’s words—woven with worry and edged with the memory of last night’s echoing howls—hung in the air between them like mist. Red’s heart beat with curiosity, but she could feel her mother’s fear pressing against her resolve.

“I’ll stay close,” she promised, voice gentle but steadfast, her eyes lingering on the woods. Yet the restless sounds from the darkness seemed to cling to her thoughts, stirring questions she could not ignore. They haunted her, those howls; and beneath her determination lay a quiet wonder about what truly lurked beyond the trees. Red’s MotherRed’s mother pulls Red gently into a protective embrace, her hands trembling ever so slightly as she glances anxiously toward the dark line of trees beyond the cottage window. Red’s mother drew her close, arms wrapping protectively around her daughter’s small frame. Her hands, though gentle, trembled almost imperceptibly as she peered out the window, gaze fixed on the brooding silhouette of the woods. “Wonder all you wish from the safety of our doorstep, child,” she murmured, her voice low and edged with worry. The memory of distant, echoing howls from the night before seemed to linger in the room. With a sternness born of fear and love, she added, “But remember—curiosity is no match for the shadows in those woods.” Red, troubled but resolute, discusses her concerns and curiosity about the sounds, and reveals the symbols from her grandmother’s message to her mother and the villagers.

Red holds out the scrap of cloth, displaying the copied symbols to the gathered villagers, her voice steady despite her mother’s anxious calls from the doorway. Red stepped forward, the scrap of cloth held firmly in her hand, its edges trembling only slightly as she displayed the copied markings to the cluster of villagers. Her mother’s anxious voice called from the doorway, but Red pressed on, her gaze steady and voice unwavering. “Could everyone look at this?” she asked, letting her words settle over the crowd. “I found these strange symbols in a letter, and I need to know what they mean.” She turned the cloth so the odd shapes caught the light, scanning the faces before her for any flicker of recognition. “Has anyone seen markings like these before?” she added,

determination sharpening the compassion in her tone, as if she hoped someone's memory might pierce the mystery that had set her heart racing. VillagersHe shuffles backwards, making a warding gesture, while a hush falls over the gathered villagers. Old Man Harris squinted at the faded cloth, his gnarled fingers trembling as he traced the strange symbols embroidered along its edge. The gathered villagers leaned closer, their breaths held tight with the tension of old stories. Harris's voice, tinged with fear and the weight of superstition, barely rose above a whisper as he warned, "Those marks... they belonged to the old forest cult, child—best you leave such things be." His gaze darted nervously toward the shadowy tree line, as if expecting something ancient and unwelcome to emerge at the mere mention of the cult, and a shudder ran through the crowd. Red's MotherShe reaches for Red's arm, her grip gentle but urgent, eyes darting nervously to the other villagers. Red's mother reached for her daughter's arm, her grip gentle yet threaded with urgency. Her eyes flickered anxiously toward the cluster of villagers, as if the forest's shadow might stretch all the way into their midst. "Red, please..." she murmured, voice tight with worry as she watched Red copying the strange symbols onto a scrap of cloth. "Don't go stirring up trouble—those markings are nothing but bad luck." She squeezed Red's arm, her sternness tempered by fear. "You know how stories about the forest end." Red clutches the cloth tighter, scanning the crowd for any sign of recognition or willingness to speak, her resolve deepening despite her mother's anxious grip on her arm. Red clutched the scrap of cloth tighter, her fingers knotting around the edges as her gaze swept over the gathered villagers. Not one face hinted at understanding, yet she refused to let uncertainty stop her. Her mother's grip on her arm was anxious and insistent, but Red felt her resolve deepen, steeling herself against the familiar fear that always lingered at the edge of the woods. She couldn't simply turn away from what she'd found—not when the strange symbols she'd copied might be tied to the forest cult. Someone in the crowd had to know what they wanted, or what danger they might bring. Red's determination burned brighter, her compassion and suspicion driving her to seek answers, even as her mother's worry tried to hold her back. VillagersShe pulls her shawl tighter and backs away, eyes darting toward the shadowy edge of the woods. Aunt Marla pulled her shawl tighter around her shoulders, the fabric bunching in her clenched fists as she took a wary step back. Her eyes flickered toward the woods, lingering on the shifting shadows as if half-expecting something to emerge. Leaning in close, her voice barely more than a tremor, she glanced at Red's scrap of cloth and murmured a warning. Some in the village believed the cult marked their chosen with symbols like those, she said, and by displaying them—even just copying—Red might draw unwanted attention. Red squares her shoulders, meeting the villagers' wary eyes, determination burning in her own as she tucks the cloth safely away and begins scanning the crowd for anyone willing to speak further. Red squared her shoulders, bracing herself against the heavy silence that had settled over the village square. The wary eyes of the villagers flickered over her, but she met each gaze with a steady, unflinching determination. As she tucked the cloth, marked with the strange symbols, safely into her pocket, she let her resolve settle. If knowing the truth meant risking their attention, so be it. Someone here remembered more—she could sense it in the tension beneath their guarded looks—and Red was determined to find out who. Her eyes swept over the crowd, searching for even the slightest crack in their composure, for any sign of someone willing to break the silence that had kept their secrets hidden for too long. VillagersRed leans in, her eyes bright with determination, as the circle of villagers grows tense, some edging away and others watching her with wary fascination. Red leaned in, her eyes bright with determination, and the circle of villagers seemed to contract around her, tension rippling through the crowd. Some edged away, clutching their shawls tighter, while others hovered close, drawn by wary fascination. Young Tom, barely daring to raise his voice above the hush, glanced at the scrap of cloth Red held and admitted, almost as if confessing a secret, that his grandfather used to tell tales of those

mysterious symbols. According to the old stories, they weren't just marks—they were warnings, meant to keep outsiders from stumbling onto secrets buried deep in the woods. His words hung in the air, feeding the shiver of unease that passed from villager to villager. Red steps closer to Tom, her eyes earnest and determined, clutching the cloth tightly as the villagers exchange uneasy glances. Red stepped closer to Tom, the scrap of cloth clutched tightly in her hand, its surface now marked with the strange symbols she'd copied from the letter. Around them, the villagers exchanged uneasy glances, wary of anything connected to the woods, but Red's voice was steady, her gaze locked earnestly on Tom. "I need to hear those tales," she said, her tone both urgent and compassionate, the determination in her eyes clear. "Please—anything your grandfather told you could help me understand what we're facing." VillagersTom glances around warily as a hush falls over the villagers, a chill settling in the air. Tom glanced around, his shoulders hunched as if bracing for a sudden wind, though the only chill in the air was the hush that had fallen over the crowd. Superstitious whispers seemed to press in from all sides as Red copied the letter's strange markings onto a scrap of cloth, her curiosity drawing wary glances. After a moment's hesitation, Tom nodded, voice low and tremulous. He recounted what had been told: the symbols warned that danger followed anyone who sought the heart of the forest, and that some secrets out there were guarded by more than mere shadows. RedShe holds the cloth higher, her gaze sweeping the wary faces gathered around, determined to break their silence. Red held the cloth higher, letting the lamplight catch the strange, looping marks she'd copied from the letter. Her eyes swept over the cluster of villagers—neighbors, friends, and strangers alike—each face shadowed with fear or suspicion, lips pressed tight as secrets. She could feel the pressure of their silence, thick as fog. Refusing to let it win, Red drew a steadying breath and raised her voice, clear and unwavering. "If anyone else knows anything—anything at all—about these markings or what lies in the heart of the forest, now's the time to speak up." The words rang through the tense hush, her determined gaze daring them to remain silent. VillagersWidow Lark clutches her shawl tighter, voice shaking as she glances warily at the tree line, the other villagers drawing back in uneasy silence. The villagers drew back, unease rippling through the small crowd as Red bent over her scrap of cloth, copying the strange markings with careful strokes. Every eye flickered between her hands and the shadowed tree line. Widow Lark, clutching her shawl tighter against her trembling frame, stepped forward. Her gaze, hollow and wary, lingered on the dark woods. "My late husband once bore such a mark," she murmured, voice thin with remembered dread, "after a night lost in the woods—and he was never the same again." The words hung in the cold air, pressing a deeper silence upon the villagers, as if the trees themselves were listening. Red's hand tightens around the scrap of cloth, her determination unwavering as she waits for the widow's reply. Red's fingers curled tighter around the scrap of cloth, the strange markings she had copied from the letter smudged slightly beneath her thumb. The widow's cottage felt colder than usual, heavy with secrets and the scent of old wood. Red's heartbeat quickened, but she kept her voice gentle, careful not to startle the old woman. Yet there was steel beneath her words, a resolve that would not waver.

She stepped closer to Widow Lark, compassion and suspicion warring quietly in her chest. "Please, Widow Lark," Red said, her tone unwavering despite the tremor of curiosity. "Can you tell me what changed in him after he returned, or what he saw among those trees?"

The question lingered in the hush of the room, Red's eyes searching the widow's face for any flicker of truth. VillagersThe villagers murmur anxiously, some backing away, while Red stands her ground, determination flickering in her eyes despite her mother's anxious gasp. Widow Lark shivered, her fingers twisting nervously at the frayed edge of her shawl. Among the anxious murmurs, she leaned closer, voice low and quavering as if afraid the forest itself might overhear.

She spoke of the old wanderer who had once emerged from the woods, his words tangled in riddles. He claimed the trees whispered and that the shadows watched, warning that the strange symbols marked a boundary—a warning, he'd said, to turn back or risk losing oneself to the forest's will.

As she spoke, a few villagers edged away, casting uneasy glances toward the dark line of trees. Red, unmoved by their fear, pressed harder on the cloth, determination flickering in her eyes; her mother's anxious gasp barely registered as she traced the unfamiliar markings, unwilling to let superstition dictate her next step. RedShe clutches the scrap of cloth tightly and steps toward the woods, her resolve unwavering despite the fearful murmurs behind her. Red clutched the scrap of cloth so tightly her knuckles whitened, the strange markings copied from the letter smudging beneath her thumb. The fearful murmurs of the villagers fluttered at her back, but she paid them no mind. Taking a resolute step toward the shadowed line of the trees, she lifted her chin, determination burning in her eyes. If the forest wanted to keep its secrets, she thought fiercely, it would have to try harder—because she would not turn back until she knew the truth. Instead of immediately sneaking away, Red openly questions the villagers about the markings, drawing fearful and superstitious responses.

Several villagers share legends and personal stories about the symbols, revealing their connection to an old forest cult and warning that those marked are sometimes changed or cursed.

Despite her mother's heightened protests and the villagers' warnings, Red insists she must learn the truth, seeking out anyone who might help her understand the dangers ahead.

The scene ends with Red more determined than ever, having gathered new, unsettling information, and resolved to uncover the meaning behind her grandmother's warning—even if it means facing the secrets of the forest herself.

As dawn breaks, Red stands at the edge of the village, the weight of the letter heavy in her pocket and her resolve unshaken. The forest looms before her, its shadows deep and forbidding, yet filled with the answers she seeks. With one last glance back at the familiar world she is leaving behind, Red steps forward, crossing the threshold into the forbidden woods, where every step draws her closer to the truth—and the dangers that await.

Chapter 2: Crossing Into the Forbidden Forest

Red tightens her red cloak around her shoulders and steps toward the shadowed treeline, scanning the fog for any sign of movement.

Her mother stands blocking the narrow path, gripping Red's arm and glancing nervously at the forest.

Red pulls her arm free, checks the contents of her satchel—bread, lantern, knife—and pushes past her mother, determined to reach her grandmother.

Red's Mother calls after her in a low, urgent voice, warning her not to stray from the path and to return before nightfall, but Red does not look back.

Red walks steadily forward, her eyes fixed on the winding path ahead, not looking back at her mother calling from behind. Red walked steadily forward, her gaze unwavering as she traced the

winding path that cut through the tangled edge of the woods. Behind her, Mother's voice drifted through the hush of morning, low and urgent—Red could hear the tremor of worry woven into every word: "Red, don't wander off! Stay on the path, and be home before the sun sets!" But she didn't slow, didn't look back. Her feet, quick and certain, carried her onward, the promise of what lay ahead pulling stronger than the caution in her mother's voice. The shadows between the trees whispered secrets, and Red pressed on, determination settling in her heart like a stone, even as compassion flickered for the woman who waited anxiously behind her. Red's MotherMy voice trembles as I call after her, watching her small figure grow distant, heart tight with fear and hope. Her voice trembled as she called after Red, watching her daughter's small figure grow ever more distant along the winding path. The ache in her chest tightened with every step Red took away from the cottage, fear and hope warring within her. "Red, please listen," she urged, her words low and urgent, strained with all the worry a mother could bear. "There are dangers in the woods you cannot see, and I need you safe with me before darkness falls." The plea hung in the air as Red hesitated, sunlight already slanting through the trees, and Red's mother pressed a trembling hand to her heart, praying her warning would be enough. RedI call back over my shoulder without slowing down, eyes fixed on the winding path ahead. Red didn't slow her pace, boots crunching over the tangled roots as she pressed on, the looming shadows of the woods stretching before her. Behind her, Mother's voice trembled with warning, sharp as the snap of a twig—reminding, pleading, telling her, once again, not to stray from the path. Red kept her gaze fixed ahead, determination steeling her spine. Without turning, she called back over her shoulder, her voice quick but steady, "I promise I'll be careful, Mother!" The words hung in the cool air, a promise tossed between the trees, even as suspicion flickered in her mind—carefulness alone might not be enough in a place where danger watched from every shadow. This time, however, Red pauses for a brief moment in response to her mother's pleading and reassures her: 'I promise I'll be careful, Mother.

' With that, she turns and continues into the woods, the crisp snap of twigs under Red's boots marking her entry into the forbidden woods as her mother's warnings faded into the thickening trees.

The forest quickly swallows any trace of the familiar world Red has left behind. As she ventures deeper, the light dims and the air grows heavy, every step taking her further from safety and closer to the unknown. Shadows shift between the ancient trunks, and the silence is broken only by her own cautious movements. What awaits in the heart of the woods is far more cunning than any warning she received—soon, Red's resolve will be tested by a presence both alluring and dangerous, one that offers her a choice darker than any she's faced before.

Chapter 3: The Wolf's Sinister Bargain

Red unlocks the cabin door and steps inside, scanning the dark corners for any sign of her grandmother.

Suddenly, The Wolf emerges from behind a tattered curtain, his fur slick from the rain and eyes glinting with intent.

He circles Red, sniffing the air and brushing his tail against the wooden floor.

Red grips her lantern tighter, demands to know where her grandmother is, and refuses to back down.

Red stands tall, her knuckles white around the lantern handle, eyes fierce and unwavering as she stares into the darkness. Red planted her feet firmly on the mossy earth, refusing to let the shadows intimidate her. Her knuckles whitened around the lantern's handle, its trembling light catching the fierce determination in her gaze. She stared into the murky depths beyond the trees, voice steady and unyielding. She refused to back away—not now. “I won’t leave until you tell me where my grandmother is,” she demanded, the words edged with compassion and suspicion both. “I’m not afraid of you.” Red’s jaw set, eyes narrowed. “Now, answer me—where is she?” The Wolf proposes a sinister bargain: if Red brings him the Woodsman’s silver axe, he will let her grandmother go unharmed.

Red clenches her fists, voice trembling as she tries to mask her fear with defiance. Red’s fists were tight at her sides, knuckles pale with effort. She forced herself to meet the Wolf’s gleaming eyes, her voice trembling despite the defiant tilt of her chin. “If I do as you ask,” she managed, determined not to let her fear show, “how can I trust you’ll keep your word and let her go?” Suspicion flickered in her gaze—she’d learned long ago that promises made in the shadow of the woods were rarely kept. The Wolf bares his teeth in a wicked grin, his eyes glinting with cruel anticipation. The Wolf bared his teeth in a wicked grin, his eyes glinting with cruel anticipation as he leaned closer to Red, the shadows deepening along his bristled fur. His voice was a velvet threat, low and unyielding, as he reminded her that trust was a luxury she could no longer afford. “Bring me the axe by moonrise,” he murmured, each word slicing through the hush of the woods, “or your grandmother will pay the price.” The promise of violence hung in the air between them, tangible as the damp earth under Red’s trembling feet. Red clenches her fists, voice trembling as she tries to stand her ground, eyes darting between the Wolf’s cold gaze and the path leading deeper into the woods. Red’s fists clenched at her sides, knuckles whitening as she forced herself not to flinch beneath the Wolf’s cold gaze. Her voice trembled, but she kept her chin high, refusing to let fear take hold. She glanced once toward the winding path deeper into the woods, then back at the creature blocking her way. “And if I refuse,” she asked, steadying herself, “or if I fail—what then?” He flicks his ear, waiting for Red’s decision.

Red, suspicious but desperate, agrees to the terms and backs out of the cabin, lantern swinging and boots sinking into the wet earth as she hurries towards the Woodsman’s hut.

Red clutches the lantern tighter, her breath coming quick and shallow. She glances over her shoulder at the cabin, eyes narrowed, before turning toward the looming shadows of the Woodsman's hut. Her boots squelch in the mud as she forces herself onward, jaw set, determination flickering behind her wary gaze. Red drew a sharp breath, her knuckles whitening around the worn basket handle. If that's what it takes, she thought, setting her jaw with a resolve hardened by too many unanswered questions. Still, suspicion gnawed at her. What if this was another trick? Her mind raced, but she forced herself to push the doubt aside. No time for hesitation now. She needed answers—whatever the cost. With a final glance toward the shadowed trees, Red stepped forward, determination burning in her chest.

Unsettled by the wolf's cryptic words and the chill that lingers in their wake, Red presses forward, the darkness of the forest crowding close around her. Each step toward the Woodsman's hut feels heavier, her mind racing with questions and a growing sense of unease. The path twists beneath her feet, leading her deeper into the tangle of trees, until at last, a dilapidated cabin comes into view through the mist, its windows dark and silent.

Chapter 4: Red Finds the Abandoned Cabin

Red grips her woven basket tightly, stepping over a fallen branch as she approaches the creaking cabin.

She scans the perimeter, her boots sinking slightly into the mud, and peers through a cracked window, searching for signs of her grandmother.

Suddenly, the Woodsman emerges from behind a cedar, axe in hand, his boots scraping against gravel.

'You shouldn't be here, girl,' he warns, voice low and urgent.

Red narrows her eyes, refusing to back away.

Red clenches her fists, standing her ground and meeting the challenge head-on. Red clenched her fists, her knuckles whitening as she stood firm, refusing to let fear root her to the spot. The shadows before her deepened, but she only narrowed her eyes, her voice steady and low. She would not step aside—not now, not ever. If whoever or whatever lurked in those woods thought they could frighten her into turning back, they were sorely mistaken. Too much was at stake for her to run; too much depended on her courage. With her heart pounding, Red met the darkness head-on, refusing to yield an inch. 'My grandmother's missing.

I have to find her.

' The Woodsman glances at the gnawed marks on the cabin door, then steps closer, lowering his axe.

The Woodsman runs a rough fingertip over the deep grooves in the wood, eyes narrowed, listening

for any movement beyond the tree line. The Woodsman ran a rough fingertip along the deep grooves gouged into the wood, his eyes narrowing as he listened for the faintest movement beyond the tree line. He glanced at the gnawed marks marring the cabin door and stepped closer, lowering his axe with deliberate care. “Those ain’t no squirrel teeth,” he muttered under his breath, voice low and wary. Experience told him what the marks meant—something big had been here, and it was hungry. The WoodsmanHe runs his rough fingers along the ragged wood, eyes scanning the treeline for movement. The Woodsman ran his rough fingers along the ragged wood, his gaze never leaving the shadowed treeline. He paused at the cabin door, lowering his axe with a wary precision, eyes narrowing at the gnawed marks that marred the surface. “I’ve seen marks like these before,” he muttered, voice low and edged with unease, “out past the ridge—never this close to home.” The words hung in the chilly air, as if the forest itself was listening, and he instinctively shifted his stance, prepared for whatever might lurk beyond the trembling leaves. The WoodsmanHe runs his fingers along the deep grooves, eyes narrowing as he scans the treeline for movement. The Woodsman ran his calloused fingers along the deep grooves gouged into the cabin door, his eyes narrowing as he scanned the shifting shadows at the edge of the treeline. He stepped closer, lowering his axe with deliberate caution, the weight of experience settling on his shoulders. “If it’s bold enough to come this close,” he muttered, voice low and edged with warning, “it won’t stop at the wood next time.” ’Wolf’s been near.

Tracks everywhere.

’ He gestures at muddy paw prints near the threshold.

The Woodsman stoops low, tracing a finger along one of the paw prints, his brow furrowing with concern as he scans the shadows beyond the threshold. The Woodsman stooped low, tracing a finger along one of the muddy paw prints near the threshold. His brow furrowed, eyes narrowing as he scanned the shadows just beyond the door. Those prints hadn’t been there that morning—he was certain of it. Something had wandered close, heavy paws pressing deep into the soft earth, their spread and depth betraying a creature larger than a fox or the neighbor’s dog. The pattern told a story: perhaps it had come seeking shelter from the relentless rain, or perhaps it was something altogether hungrier. He straightened, glancing at the lantern hanging by the door, the practical edge in his voice clear as he murmured to himself that it would be wise to keep it close tonight, just in case. Red kneels, tracing the claw marks with her finger, then stands.

Red frowns, glancing over her shoulder at the shadowy treeline, her fingers still tingling from the rough grooves. Red knelt beside the twisted undergrowth, her fingers tracing the strange marks in the damp soil. She frowned, her breath catching as she studied the gouges. These weren’t from any animal she’d seen before; they were too deep, too deliberate. Her mind raced with possibilities, suspicion prickling at the back of her neck. She glanced over her shoulder toward the safety of the village, determination hardening in her chest. Whatever had made these tracks, she would find out—no matter how dark the woods became. Red glances over her shoulder, unease flickering across her face as she scans the shadowy woods. Red knelt beside the twisted undergrowth, her breath catching as her fingertips traced the fresh, deep claw marks gouged into the earth. The forest behind her seemed to press in closer, shadows thickening among the ancient pines. She rose slowly, dust clinging to her knees, and glanced over her shoulder, unease flickering across her face as she scanned the gloom for movement. Whatever did this was hunting—and it knew exactly what it wanted. The certainty of that thought settled cold in her chest, sharpening her suspicion as she studied the trail, determined to protect her village and those she loved. Red glances warily over her shoulder, her hand moving instinctively to the hilt of her knife. Red knelt beside the deep furrows

etched into the earth, her finger lightly tracing the jagged edges where something sharp had torn through the soil. A cold breeze rustled the undergrowth, and she glanced warily over her shoulder, every sense alert. Her hand moved instinctively to the hilt of her knife—a familiar comfort in the shadow of the woods. Whatever had left these marks might still be lurking nearby, she reminded herself, the thought flickering with urgency through her mind. She straightened, determination hardening her features as she silently vowed to stay cautious. ‘Help me search inside,’ she insists.

The Woodsman nods, pushing the door open with his shoulder.

The Woodsman nods, pushes the door open with his shoulder, and steps quietly inside, eyes scanning the dim light ahead. The Woodsman paused at the edge of the tree line, his eyes narrowing as he surveyed the shadow-draped path ahead. Every instinct told him this forest guarded its secrets closely, but he’d seen enough to know hesitation was more dangerous than fear. He tightened his grip on the axe slung over his shoulder and, with a steely resolve that came from years of surviving what the woods could throw at him, murmured, “Alright then. Let’s see what waits beyond.” Without another word, he stepped forward into the gloom, his silhouette quickly swallowed by the dense embrace of the forest. Together, they enter the shadowy cabin, the floorboards creaking beneath their weight, determined to uncover any trace of Grandmother’s fate.

Red clutches her cloak tighter, eyes darting to the corners where the flickering lantern light can’t reach. She glances at the Woodsman, seeking reassurance before carefully stepping further into the dim cabin. Red pressed forward, her footsteps deliberate despite the tangled roots and clutching shadows. She glanced back at the Woodsman, her eyes sharp and wary. “Stay close,” she urged, voice low but unwavering, as if each word was a lifeline in the darkness. The forest pressed in around them; every shifting branch and flicker of movement made her pulse quicken. It felt as if the shadows themselves were watching.

With a determined set to her jaw, Red scanned the undergrowth for any trace of Grandmother—broken twigs, a scrap of cloth, something. Compassion warred with suspicion in her gaze, but her resolve never faltered. She was certain Grandmother must have left some sign, some clue to guide them. No matter what it took, Red was determined: they had to find her. The WoodsmanHe scans the dim corners, gripping his axe tightly, stepping protectively beside Red as the wind rattles the windowpanes. The Woodsman scanned the dim corners, his grip tightening around the axe handle as the wind rattled the windowpanes. Stepping protectively beside Red, he fell into his natural role—a sentinel against whatever darkness might lurk within these walls. His heart thundered in his chest, but his voice was steady as he murmured, “I’m right behind you, Red.” Each word was a quiet vow, his presence a shield. Whatever waited in the shadowy depths of the cabin, they would face it together. The floorboards creaked beneath their weight as they advanced, determination settling over him like a second skin. Red gently pushes open a dusty door, her breath catching as the hinges groan and darkness spills into the narrow hallway. Red pressed her palm against the dusty door, feeling the rough wood beneath her fingertips as she eased it open. The hinges protested with a hollow groan, and a wave of darkness seeped into the narrow hallway. Her breath caught, heart pounding as she stepped inside. The floorboards creaked with each cautious movement, echoing their presence in the shadowy cabin. Determined but wary, Red leaned forward and whispered to her companion, her voice barely above the hush of the settling dust, “If we listen carefully, maybe we’ll hear something—a whisper, a creak, anything that could guide us to her.” The Woodsman edges forward, scanning the dim corners, his grip tightening on the axe as a cold draft stirs dust across the warped floorboards. The Woodsman edged forward, his boots sending

uneasy groans through the warped floorboards as he scanned the dim corners of the cabin. A cold draft slipped past, stirring dust into pale motes that danced around his tightened grip on the axe. Without taking his eyes from the shifting shadows, he murmured, “Let’s move slow, Red—every step might reveal a clue or wake whatever’s hiding in these shadows.” The warning was low, meant as much for the unseen things lurking in the darkness as for his companion, each word weighted with the grim experience that had etched lines into his wary face. Red lifts the trembling lantern higher, casting shaky light over faded photographs and a battered rocking chair, her eyes searching every corner for a sign of Grandmother. Red lifted the trembling lantern higher, its frail glow barely pressing back the shadows that clung to the cabin’s every corner. Faded photographs stared silently from crooked frames and the battered rocking chair creaked as if unsettled by their presence. Determined despite the shiver in her mother’s breath behind her, Red’s gaze swept the room, searching for any sign of Grandmother. Though the darkness threatened to swallow them whole, Red tightened her grip, refusing to let fear take hold. The answer was here—she could feel it, hidden somewhere just beyond the reach of her shaking light—and nothing would stop her from finding it. —————

As Red’s determination steels her against the encroaching darkness, the unseen menace lurking within the cabin’s shadows begins to set its plan in motion. While she edges deeper into the gloom, unaware eyes track her every move, and outside, the wind carries a low, hungry growl that neither she nor the Woodsman yet hear. Unbeknownst to them, the real danger is not what they have found, but what is waiting for them in the silence—a cunning predator preparing to spring its trap.

Chapter 5: The Wolf Sets His Trap

Red crouches behind a thicket, scanning the forest for movement, her hand tightening around a basket filled with supplies for Grandmother.

She senses the Wolf is near, catching his scent on the wind, and her urgency grows.

Red insists they take a shortcut through the woods to save time.

The Woodsman, recognizing her determination and the danger, agrees and follows her lead as she navigates the forest with boldness.

Red tightens her grip on the basket, scanning the shadowed trees for any sign of movement. Her breath is shallow, every muscle tensed for flight or fight. Red tightened her grip on the basket, the wicker handle digging into her palm as she scanned the shadowed trees. Every breath was shallow, her senses sharpened with tension. She could almost taste the Wolf on the wind—fresh earth, raw hunger lingering just beyond sight. If she didn’t move now, she knew with a certainty born of fear and instinct, he would find her first. Together, they move swiftly and quietly, Red pushing them onward, both intent on reaching Grandmother’s cabin before the Wolf does.

Red grabs her basket and starts running down the forest path, glancing nervously over her shoulder. Red snatched up her basket, heart pounding as she sprinted down the winding forest path. Shadows darted between the trees, and every rustle made her glance nervously over her shoulder. She couldn’t shake the thought: they had to hurry—if he reached Grandmother first, who knew what might happen? Determination fueled her steps. Nothing could happen to Grandmother. Not while Red was here to protect her. She beckoned urgently, “Come on, this way!” leading the way

deeper into the woods, every stride driven by love and a fierce resolve. Red breaks into a run along the winding forest path, glancing anxiously over her shoulder. Red broke into a run along the winding forest path, her breath quickening as she glanced anxiously over her shoulder. The shadows seemed to lengthen with every step, urging her onward. We can't waste a single second, she thought fiercely; every moment we lose puts Grandmother in more danger. Determination burned in her chest, sharper than fear—she would not let him reach Grandmother first. Red grabs your hand and starts running toward the narrow forest path, glancing anxiously over her shoulder. Red's grip tightened around my hand as she pulled me into a run, her breath coming in short, determined bursts. The winding path to the woods was slick with dew, but she didn't hesitate, only glanced over her shoulder with a flash of anxiety in her eyes. "If we keep moving and stick to the shortcut through the woods," she said, her voice low and urgent, "we might just beat him there." The resolve in her words matched the fierce determination in her stride—she would let nothing stand between us and Grandmother. —————

The desperate urgency in Red's actions propels her forward, heart pounding with both fear and determination. The shadows of the forest close in around her as she races against time, every step bringing her closer to the peril that awaits. Unbeknownst to the wolf, Red is no longer the helpless child he remembers—she is ready to confront the danger head-on. As the cottage comes into view, a new resolve steels her nerves; the moment for hesitation has passed. Now, Red must summon every ounce of courage she possesses, for the real fight is about to begin.

Chapter 6: Red Fights Back

Red crouches behind a fallen log, gripping a makeshift sling in her hand while scanning the underbrush for movement.

The Woodsman strides quietly into the clearing, boots crunching on twigs, and signals Red to stay low.

He unsheathes his axe, its metal reflecting the dying light, and whispers, 'The wolf's trail leads west.

Are you ready?

' Red nods, stuffing a stone into her sling and replying, 'We have to reach Grandmother before it does.

' Together, they advance, Red marking trees with chalk as they move and the Woodsman pausing to listen for rustling in the brush, their coordinated actions driven by the urgency to rescue Grandmother and outsmart the wolf.

Red grips a piece of chalk tightly, her hands trembling just a little as she draws another mark on the rough bark. She glances nervously at the Woodsman, her eyes darting between the shadowy trees and the path ahead. Red's fingers tightened around the piece of chalk, leaving a faint dusting on her knuckles as she pressed another careful mark into the coarse bark. Her hand trembled, but her voice stayed steady—calm, determined—as she glanced at the Woodsman beside her. "I'll keep marking the trees so we don't lose our way," she murmured, casting a wary look toward the shifting shadows between the trunks. "You listen for anything unusual." The path ahead seemed to narrow, darkness pressing in at the edges, but she forced herself onward. "We have to stay sharp—Grandmother's counting on us, and the wolf could be anywhere." Each word anchored

her courage, even as suspicion prickled at the back of her mind and the silent woods pressed closer. The Woodsman crouches low, axe ready, scanning the shadows for any sign of movement while keeping pace with Red. Low to the ground, the Woodsman moved alongside Red, his axe gripped tightly and eyes narrowed against the encroaching gloom. Each time the wind shifted, a new sound teased at his senses—an uncertain crackle of leaves, the distant snap of a branch. He paused, scanning the dense, tangled shadows to their left, then murmured in a rough undertone, “Every time the wind shifts, I catch a new sound—stay close and keep your eyes open; if we move together, we’ll be harder to ambush.” With another glance over his shoulder, he pressed forward, always keeping Red within arm’s reach as she marked their path with swift strokes of chalk. Red crouches beside a tree, swiftly drawing two chalk lines while scanning the shadows for movement. Red crouched low beside the rough bark of a pine, her fingers moving quickly to draw two crisp chalk lines on its trunk. She kept her eyes trained on the shifting shadows between the trees, every sense alert for the telltale flicker of movement. Determined to keep their path clear for the Woodsman behind her, she explained in a low, steady voice, “If we spot any fresh tracks or fur, I’ll mark it with a double line so you know it’s wolf sign.” The chalk felt reassuring in her palm—a small tool, but vital. She straightened, scanning the undergrowth again, suspicion and resolve sharpening her features as they pressed deeper into the dark woods. The WoodsmanHe grips his axe tighter, eyes scanning the undergrowth as he nods to Red, silently rehearsing their plan. The Woodsman gripped his axe tighter, its familiar weight comforting in his calloused hands. His wary eyes swept the tangled undergrowth, never resting for long in one place. A brief nod to Red passed between them—silent understanding, a plan rehearsed more with looks than words. He paused, muscles tensed, and glanced back at her. If he raised his axe as a signal, she would know exactly what to do: drop low, stay behind him, let him draw the creature’s attention, and slip past to Grandmother’s safety. The woods had taught him practicality—the difference between courage and recklessness—and now, every sense was tuned to the forest’s secrets as they pressed forward, Red marking their path with swift chalk strokes while he listened for the faintest sign of danger.

As the echoes of their whispered strategy faded into the hush of the forest, a tense anticipation settled between Red and the woodsman. Every snapped twig and rustle of leaves seemed to signal the wolf’s presence drawing closer. With hearts pounding and nerves taut, they inched forward, fully aware that the next encounter would decide not only their fate, but Grandmother’s as well. The final confrontation was inevitable—and it was about to begin.

Chapter 7: The Final Confrontation

Red enters the cabin, clutching the iron poker, as Grandmother urgently warns her to stay back, seeking to protect Red and buying time by pleading with The Wolf for mercy.

The Wolf, unmoved by appeals and taunting their fear, reveals his predatory intent but is momentarily distracted by Grandmother’s offer to sacrifice herself for Red.

Grandmother clutches the quilt tighter around her trembling shoulders, her eyes wide with terror as she glances from the flickering shadows to The Wolf’s gleaming fangs. The grandmother clutched the patched quilt tighter around her frail shoulders, knuckles white against the faded fabric. Pale and shivering, she could not tear her wide eyes away from the Wolf’s gleaming fangs. The flickering shadows on the cabin walls seemed to dance closer, as if emboldened by her terror. Voice trembling, she gestured with urgent desperation toward the darkened heart of the room, her words spilling

out in a fearful rush. “Please, stay back—I’ve nothing here for you but old bones and colder soup. Mercy, I beg you, leave me be!” Her plea hung in the air, fragile and uncertain, as she shrank further beneath the quilt, silently praying the ancient secrets she guarded would be enough to save her. The Wolf edges closer, claws scraping against the hearthstones, his yellow eyes never leaving Grandmother’s face. The Wolf edged closer, his claws scraping with deliberate menace against the hearthstones, each movement calculated and unhurried. His yellow eyes locked onto Grandmother’s pale, shivering form beneath the patched quilt, never blinking, never wavering. With a slow tilt of his head, he let the flickering firelight illuminate the cruel set of his mouth. “Mercy is a word for the weak, old woman—what I seek is not your scraps, but the taste of your trembling fear.” The words curled through the shadowed room, heavy and predatory, as he watched every tremor ripple through her frail body, savoring the growing terror that was as tangible to him as the scent of blood. Grandmother clutches the quilt tighter, her voice quavering as she edges further from the hearth, eyes locked on The Wolf’s advancing shadow. Grandmother clutched the patched quilt tighter to her chest, her knuckles whitening as she edged further from the hearth. The Wolf’s shadow stretched across the wooden floor, swallowing the last flickers of firelight. Her voice, thin and trembling, broke the silence—urgent, almost pleading—as she gestured toward the darkened heart of the cabin. “If you have any heart,” she whispered, her eyes never leaving the creature’s looming form, “think of your own mother—she would weep to see you like this.” The Wolf prowls closer, claws scratching softly against the floorboards, eyes glinting hungrily in the gloom. The Wolf prowled nearer, its claws whispering over the warped floorboards, each soft scrape punctuating the hush. In the gloom, its eyes glinted with a predator’s hunger, fixed on the trembling figure beneath the patched quilt. Grandmother’s hand fluttered in a desperate gesture toward the shadowed hearth, but the Wolf only smiled, lips curling over sharp teeth. “My mother taught me to hunt,” it murmured, voice silken and low, “not to heed the whimpers of prey.” Grandmother clutches the quilt tighter to her chest, her eyes darting desperately toward the cottage door, voice quavering as she pleads. Grandmother clutched the patched quilt tighter to her chest, her knuckles pale against the faded fabric as she shivered. Her eyes darted desperately toward the cottage door, searching the darkness beyond as if she could already sense the footsteps approaching. Voice trembling, she pleaded into the gloom, “Then take pity, if not on me, on the little one who will soon come through that door—let her find me alive, I beg you.” The words hung in the chilly air, her urgent gesture toward the shadowed heart of the woods betraying both her fear and the secret knowledge she carried. The Wolf’s eyes gleam hungrily as he shifts closer to the firelight, casting a long, monstrous shadow across Grandmother’s bed. The Wolf’s eyes gleamed with a ravenous intelligence as he edged closer to the flickering firelight, his form stretching a monstrous shadow across the faded quilt where Grandmother lay trembling. His voice curled through the gloom, velvet-soft and chilling, as he watched her futile gesture toward the darkened heart of the cottage. “Little ones make for sweeter stories—and sweeter meals; perhaps I shall wait for her after all.” The words lingered in the air, heavy with threat and dark anticipation, while Grandmother shrank further into the tattered patchwork, unable to tear her gaze from the beast who already seemed to savor his patience. Grandmother clutches the quilt to her chest, her voice quavering as she lifts pleading eyes to The Wolf, desperate to shield her granddaughter from the looming danger. Grandmother’s fingers curled tighter around the faded quilt, its familiar weight pressed to her chest as if it might shield her from the terror crouching just beyond the lamplight. Her voice shook with a desperate courage as she met The Wolf’s gaze, her eyes pleading and full of old secrets. “No—take me, but spare her, I implore you!” The words tumbled out, fragile yet fierce, her frail body trembling beneath the patchwork as she nodded toward the shadowed heart of the cabin, determined to protect her granddaughter from the darkness prowling so near. The

Wolf slinks closer, eyes gleaming in the firelight, claws scraping softly against the hearthstones as Grandmother shrinks back, clutching the quilt tighter around her shaking frame. The Wolf slunk closer, eyes glinting amber in the flickering firelight. Each claw scraped softly against the hearthstones, a subtle music of menace that made Grandmother flinch and clutch the quilt tighter around her trembling shoulders. Her hand, pale and urgent, fluttered toward the darkened heart of the room, perhaps in a last, desperate plea for sanctuary. But the Wolf only smiled, teeth gleaming as he leaned in, voice a velvet snarl. “Such bargains are wasted on wolves, old woman—fear tastes richest when shared between kin.” The Wolf refuses any bargain, emphasizing the thrill of shared fear between kin.

As Red arrives, Grandmother points out The Wolf’s aversion to rue and wormwood, throwing herbs into the fire to create acrid smoke that forces The Wolf to retreat.

Red and Grandmother coordinate closely, reaffirming their unity and resolve as they block The Wolf’s escape, trading words of courage and warning while The Wolf circles, seeking a weakness.

Grandmother tosses another pinch of herbs into the fire, producing even thicker, acrid smoke. She steps protectively in front of Red, eyes never leaving the snarling Wolf who retreats, hackles raised and eyes gleaming with malevolence. Red clutches her cloak, half-hiding behind Grandmother, her face a mix of fear and awe. Grandmother tossed another pinch of herbs into the fire, the powder hissing as it met the flames. Smoke billowed, thicker and sharper than before, curling through the cabin until the air grew heavy with its bitter tang. She moved protectively in front of Red, her posture firm, her gaze never wavering from the Wolf. The creature drew back, hackles high and eyes burning with malice, nostrils flaring as the acrid scent reached him. Grandmother’s voice was quiet but steady—a whisper meant only for Red, yet heavy with warning. “Stay close,” she urged, shielding the girl with her frail frame. “Rue and wormwood—he cannot stand their scent. See how he recoils?”

Red clung to her cloak, half-hidden behind Grandmother, her heart pounding in her ears, caught between terror and awe at the old woman’s composure. Grandmother’s eyes tracked the Wolf’s every movement, her tone grave. “He is not invincible, child. But do not let your guard down. A wolf, even wounded, is most dangerous when cornered.” The fire crackled, smoke thickening, as the Wolf hesitated at the threshold, uncertain whether to flee or attack. Red clutches her cloak tighter, eyes darting from the curling smoke to the Wolf’s glinting fangs, her voice trembling but urgent. Red clutched her cloak tighter, the rough fabric bunching beneath her trembling fingers as her gaze flicked from the curling smoke—Grandmother’s desperate shield—to the Wolf’s glinting fangs. The air was thick with tension, every breath laced with the acrid scent of powder. Her voice, usually so steady, wavered with urgency as she pressed close to Grandmother, unable to tear her eyes from the smoke’s uncertain dance. “But Grandmother,” she murmured, suspicion and fear threading through her words, “what if the smoke fades—what do we do then?” Grandmother tosses another pinch of herbs onto the flames, the smoke thickening as she positions herself protectively between Red and the snarling Wolf. Grandmother tossed another pinch of dried herbs onto the flames, watching as the smoke thickened and curled through the cramped air of the cabin. She moved with quiet purpose, positioning herself between Red and the Wolf, her silhouette flickering against the glow. The Wolf snarled, hackles raised, but Grandmother stood firm, her voice low and steady as she murmured, “We keep the fire alive and our wits sharper still.” Her gaze never left the beast’s gleaming eyes. “Knowledge is our shield,” she continued, hands trembling only slightly as she reached for another handful of powder, “and his hunger—our greatest peril.” The Wolf circles just beyond the smoky haze, his eyes glinting with both fury and cunning, testing the shifting edge

of the smoke as he searches for a weakness. The Wolf prowled just beyond the swirling haze, his form a shadow stitched with glimmers of furious, calculating light. As Grandmother flung another handful of her bitter, powdered herbs into the flames, the smoke thickened, its acrid edges stinging his sensitive nose and forcing him back a step. Still, he did not retreat entirely. With a slow, sinuous grace, he traced the shifting border between safety and pain, his voice curling out from the darkness—unshaken, almost amused. “You may drive me back with your bitter herbs, old woman,” he intoned, every word a low, velvety threat, “but your fire will not burn forever—and when it dies, so does your hope.” His eyes lingered on the flickering blaze, already seeking the moment when her defenses would falter. Red vows not to let harm come to Grandmother again, while Grandmother hints at deeper secrets and old magic.

Red steps sideways, eyes fixed on the Wolf, mirroring Grandmother’s movements to close off another gap, her stance firm and ready. Red stepped sideways, her gaze unwavering as she tracked the Wolf’s restless circling. She matched Grandmother’s movements, each of them closing off another escape route, their bodies forming a barricade of determination. Her voice was low but urgent, meant only for Grandmother’s ears: “Stay close—don’t let him through.” Red’s stance was firm and ready, her clever eyes never leaving the Wolf’s shifting form. Compassion warred with suspicion in her heart, but she kept her focus sharp. “We have him trapped,” she assured, the words edged with resolve. “He won’t slip past us this time.” Grandmother plants her cane firmly, moving in sync with Red to cut off the Wolf’s path, her gaze unwavering as she tracks the creature’s every twitch. Grandmother planted her cane with deliberate force, moving in perfect step with Red as they angled themselves to block the Wolf’s escape. The beast circled warily, muscles rippling beneath its mottled fur, eyes flashing with cunning. Grandmother’s gaze never faltered, tracking every twitch and shift of their adversary. Her voice, low and steady, carried the weight of countless winters spent outsmarting the forest’s dangers. “Keep your eyes sharp, Red—every move he makes is a trick, but together we can hold the line.” The Wolf bares his fangs, circling low and quick, testing the resolve of Red and Grandmother as he searches for the weakest point in their defense. The Wolf bared his fangs, a glimmer of cruel intelligence in his eyes, and began to circle low and quick, his lean form a shadow weaving around Red and her grandmother. Every movement was calculated, predatory, each paw placed to test the shifting line of their defense. “You think you can block every path, little ones,” he purred, voice as smooth and dangerous as a blade, “but a cornered wolf bites hardest.” He paused, his gaze flickering between them, hunger and cunning mingling in his smile. “Step aside,” he warned, lips curling to expose the full measure of his teeth, “or I’ll show you just how sharp my teeth are.” Red and Grandmother shift in perfect sync, closing the gap between them and forcing the Wolf into an increasingly smaller space. Red and her grandmother moved as one, each step closing the space between themselves and the Wolf, hemming the creature in with silent determination. Red’s eyes narrowed, her voice steady and unyielding as she spoke, “We’re not afraid of your threats, Wolf.” She watched every twitch of his fur, every calculating glance as he circled, searching desperately for escape. “Every time you circle, we tighten our guard—there’s nowhere left for you to run.” Their unity was palpable, a wall of courage and resolve that left the Wolf with fewer options and no refuge. The Wolf lowers his stance, muscles coiled, eyes darting for any weakness in their defense as he feints left, testing their resolve. The Wolf lowered his stance, muscles taut beneath his bristling fur, every inch of him primed for violence. His eyes flickered—quick, calculating—searching for the slightest weakness as he feinted left, forcing Red and her grandmother to shift, blocking his escape with uncertain resolve. A sly grin curled across his muzzle as he circled them, voice velvet-smooth and chilling. “You underestimate me, Red,” he murmured, letting the words slink through the tense air. “I’ve

slipped through tighter nets than this, and your courage won't shield you forever." His gaze lingered on Red just a moment longer, hungry and amused, before he prowled on, relentless in his search for an opening. Grandmother shifts her stance, planting herself solidly beside Red, eyes never leaving the Wolf as he prowls the perimeter, searching for weakness. Grandmother shifted her stance, planting herself solidly beside Red. Her eyes never wavered from the Wolf as he prowled the edge of the clearing, searching for any hint of weakness between them. Her voice was low and steady, carrying the weight of hard-won wisdom and old scars. "Stand firm, Red," she murmured, her words meant as both shield and instruction. "His bluster is nothing but desperation, and together we'll outlast his cunning." As she spoke, Grandmother pressed a reassuring hand to Red's shoulder, signaling that their united front was more formidable than the beast realized. The Wolf feints left, then darts right, testing the barricade with a low, menacing snarl. The Wolf feinted left, muscles coiling beneath its mottled fur, then darted right, claws scraping against the packed earth as it tested the makeshift barricade. A low, menacing snarl rippled through the silence, chilling the air. Red and her grandmother shifted, bracing themselves, arms stiff and eyes wide as they blocked the beast's escape, their nerves stretched thin. Circling, ever calculating, the Wolf's gaze flicked between them—sharp, predatory, and amused. "You claim courage," it murmured, voice silk over steel, eyes lingering on Red's trembling hands, "but I see your hands trembling—how long before your resolve cracks and you leave a gap?" The words wound around them, insidious, as the Wolf pressed closer, testing not just the barricade but their will. Red and Grandmother shift in perfect tandem, blocking the Wolf's attempted feint toward the doorway, forcing the creature to retreat and reassess, hackles raised. Red and her grandmother shifted together, their movements almost instinctual, blocking the Wolf's attempted feint toward the doorway. The creature bristled, forced to retreat and circle, searching for another way out as its hackles rose. Red felt her hands tremble—she couldn't deny the fear threading through her veins—but her resolve never wavered. Every heartbeat brought them closer, tightening the net around the Wolf. Her eyes fixed on the beast, Red's voice rang clear and steady in the tense hush: "My hands may tremble, but my will does not—and every heartbeat, our net draws closer around you." The WolfHe feints toward Red, then pivots sharply, testing their coordination as he searches for an opening. The Wolf feinted toward Red, muscles rippling beneath his bristling fur, only to pivot sharply away. His movements were a calculated dance, testing the humans' coordination as he circled, eyes glinting with dark intelligence. Red and Grandmother shifted in tandem, bodies tense as they blocked each possible escape, unwilling to give ground. The Wolf's snarl deepened, his gaze flicking between them for any hint of hesitation. "You may draw closer," he rasped, voice curling around the words like smoke, "but every beast finds a crack to slip through." RedGrandmother shifts her stance, mirroring Red, both moving in unison to cut off the Wolf's latest attempt to dart past, their eyes locked on his every twitch. Grandmother shifted her stance, mirroring Red with practiced precision. Together, they moved in silent accord, cutting off the Wolf's latest attempt to slip past. Their eyes tracked every twitch of his shaggy frame as he circled, restless and calculating, searching for another way out. Red caught the determined glint in Grandmother's gaze—the same fierce love that had taught her to trust her instincts in these woods. Grandmother's voice rang steady and clear, her words woven with both warning and resolve: "We know these woods better than you, Wolf—every path, every shadow, and we will not falter now." The conviction in her tone settled over them like a protective cloak, as both women stood their ground, refusing to yield even an inch to the creature before them. The WolfHis muscles coil, ready to spring, but Red and Grandmother shift in perfect tandem, barring each feint with unwavering resolve. Muscles coiled beneath his bristling fur, the Wolf prowled in a tight circle, his body shifting with predatory precision. Each time he feinted left, Red and her Grandmother moved as one, matching his rhythm, blocking every attempt to

dart past. A low growl vibrated from his throat as he lunged right, only to be met again by their unwavering resolve. His lips curled into a chilling grin, eyes glinting with cunning hunger. “Then let us see whose patience breaks first,” he murmured, voice slick as oil and edged with menace. “For I am tireless when hunger drives me.” Red shifts, mirroring the Wolf’s lunge, her stance unwavering as Grandmother edges closer, blocking the last open gap. Red’s boots pressed into the dusty floor as she shifted, her movements mirroring the Wolf’s tense, predatory lunge. Grandmother, eyes sharp, edged forward until she blocked the last open gap between the creature and the door. The Wolf began to circle, muscles coiled with anticipation, searching for any weakness in their stance.

Red’s voice, steady and unwavering, cut through the taut silence. “We match your hunger with our resolve, Wolf,” she said, her gaze locked on the beast’s yellow eyes. “Every move you make only tightens our snare.” As she spoke, her determination radiated—brave, clever, and unwilling to let fear sway her. Grandmother’s presence at her side strengthened their line, leaving the Wolf with dwindling options and nowhere left to run. The Wolf darts toward a narrow gap between Red and Grandmother, testing their coordination as his muscles coil for a sudden burst. Muscles rippling beneath his mottled fur, the Wolf darted toward the slender gap between Red and her trembling grandmother, testing the limits of their coordination. He circled, movements fluid and predatory, yellow eyes flickering from one barricade to the next as he searched for weakness. The pair adjusted, bodies tense as they blocked his escape—a silent challenge in their stance. Pausing just long enough to let the threat simmer, the Wolf bared his teeth in a smile that was nothing short of dangerous. His voice slithered through the gloom, edged with both threat and desperation as he reminded Red, “Resolve may hold the line, Red, but the wild always finds a way.” Red and Grandmother shift in perfect synchrony, cutting off the Wolf’s latest feint and forcing him into a shrinking circle. Red and Grandmother pivoted as one, their movements so perfectly aligned that the Wolf’s latest feint faltered, trapping him within an ever-tightening ring of resolve. Red’s gaze flashed with determination as she pressed forward, her voice low but unwavering. “Not this time, Wolf—our unity is stronger than your wildness, and together, we close every gap you chase.” The words hung in the air, sharp with certainty, as the Wolf circled, his escape routes dwindling under their relentless coordination. The Wolf, cornered and growing desperate, threatens them, but the pair stand firm, matching his hunger with their determination and knowledge of the woods.

Red squares her shoulders, knuckles white around the poker, eyes fixed on The Wolf. Her voice shakes, but her stance is unyielding as she steps forward, placing herself between Grandmother and the advancing threat. Red squared her shoulders, feeling the chill of the iron poker biting into her clenched knuckles. She stared the Wolf down, forcing herself to hold his gaze even as her voice trembled. Yet she didn’t flinch, stepping forward to shield Grandmother from the looming danger. “I won’t let you hurt her again, Wolf,” she declared, every word ringing with defiance. “Not this time. Whatever happens, I will protect my family.” Behind her, Grandmother’s hands worked quickly, readying another handful of pungent herbs, while Red gripped the poker tighter, planting herself firmly between her loved ones and the hungry gleam in the Wolf’s eye. Grandmother crushes the dried leaves with trembling but deliberate fingers, casting a pungent cloud between herself and The Wolf. Grandmother’s fingers, though trembling with age and memory, crushed the brittle leaves with a practiced certainty, releasing a pungent, protective haze that drifted between herself and the Wolf. Her eyes, sharp and knowing, never left the creature as she scattered the herbs across the hearth. “The old ways have power yet, Wolf,” she said quietly, her voice carrying the weight of secrets and old hurts. She watched for any flicker of recognition or fear in the beast’s gaze, her meaning unmistakable as she reached for another handful of dried plants. “Choose your next move wisely—for my herbs are not all for healing.” In the thickening air, Red’s knuckles whitened around

the poker, the metal glinting in the firelight, while Grandmother prepared for whatever darkness the woods might send next. The Wolf lowers his stance, muscles tensed, eyes flicking between Red's raised poker and Grandmother's swirling herbs, as a low growl rumbles in his throat. The Wolf lowered his stance, muscles taut beneath his coarse fur, his eyes darting with predatory calculation between Red's trembling grip on the poker and the swirling herbs Grandmother measured out with practiced fingers. A low growl coiled in his throat, vibrating through the room with quiet menace. With a voice as smooth and dark as midnight, he let his words slip into the charged air: brave words, child—but courage tastes as sweet as fear when the hunt ends, and tonight, I feast. The scene closes as all three face off, each poised for a final confrontation, with Red and Grandmother united in defense and The Wolf more menacing, but also increasingly desperate.

As the echo of the wolf's final snarl faded into the hushed darkness, the tremors of battle lingered in the cramped cottage. Red's relief at finding her grandmother alive was shadowed by the realization that the danger was not yet past. Outside, the woods pressed close, secrets rustling between the trees. With the wolf defeated but the threat of the forest still looming, Red and her grandmother understood that escaping the confines of the cottage was only the beginning. The night held its breath as they prepared to venture into the uncertain wild, driven by hope and wary of what might still wait among the shadows.

Chapter 8: Escape from the Woods

Red crouches behind a fallen log, scanning the fog for movement while clutching a sturdy branch.

Grandmother limps beside her, clutching a torn shawl and pointing toward a narrow animal trail leading away from their cabin.

Red whispers, 'Stay close, the path's safer by the stream.

' Grandmother nods, pulling Red's sleeve to urge her onward.

They push through brambles, snapping twigs beneath their boots, both intent on escaping the Wolf's territory.

Their goal is to reach the village before the Wolf catches their scent.

As they round a mossy boulder, Grandmother signals for silence and Red freezes, listening to the muted crunch of heavy paws nearby.

They slip deeper into the thick brush, leaving only broken branches and crushed leaves behind.

As dawn broke over the distant rooftops, Red and her grandmother emerged from the trees, leaving the darkness of the woods—and the Wolf—far behind.