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Chapter 5: Red Arrives and Senses Deception

Red enters the woods on her way to her grandmother's cottage, taking the familiar flowery trail as usual.

On her journey, she encounters a stranger—the Wolf, who introduces himself and engages Red in conversation.

The Wolf, posing as a lost traveler, subtly probes Red about her grandmother's situation and her feelings about the woods, while Red remains cautious, revealing little about her grandmother and her family.

Red allows the Wolf to walk partway with her, but both maintain a guarded distance, each testing the other's trust and intentions through clever, measured exchanges.

When Red arrives at the cottage, she finds 'Grandmother' (the Wolf in disguise) waiting for her.

The Wolf tilts his head with an exaggerated smile, his high-pitched voice echoing strangely among the trees. He gestures with a paw, inviting Red to step closer, his eyes glinting with curiosity and something unspoken. The Wolf tilted his head, an exaggerated smile stretching across his muzzle as his oddly high-pitched voice reverberated between the trees. With a graceful sweep of his paw, he beckoned Red nearer, the glint in his eye a peculiar mix of curiosity and something far more elusive. "Well, hello there, little one! What brings you so deep into these woods on such a fine day?" The question hung in the air, light and innocent on the surface, yet weighted by the enigmatic charm that seemed to shimmer in every calculated gesture he made. Red (Red Riding Hood) Red clutches her basket a little tighter, glancing nervously at the Wolf's strange smile. Red's fingers tightened around the woven handle of her basket as she eyed the Wolf's unnerving, too-wide grin. His voice, pitched oddly high, beckoned her closer, and she hesitated, the familiar path suddenly feeling less certain under her feet. Summoning her courage, she answered, her voice steady despite the flutter in her chest. "I'm just on my way to visit my grandmother—she lives just beyond the bend." The words slipped out almost automatically, but Red kept a careful watch on the Wolf's expression, searching for any hint of danger behind that strange smile. The Wolf

leans in, his ears perked and eyes glinting with curiosity, voice lilting unnaturally high as he smiles just a bit too widely. The Wolf leaned in, his ears perking with a keen, almost theatrical curiosity. His eyes glinted, reflecting a mischief barely concealed beneath the surface as he flashed a smile just a shade too wide to be genuine. His voice, pitched unnaturally high in a playful lilt, beckoned her closer with practiced ease. “How delightful! Is your dear grandmother expecting you, or will your visit be a surprise?” he inquired, the question curling from his lips as if spun from silver, inviting her trust with every syllable. Red (Red Riding Hood) Red shifts her basket nervously, glancing at the Wolf’s unnaturally cheerful grin. Red shifted the weight of her basket from one arm to the other, her fingers tightening around the woven handle as she eyed the Wolf’s smile—it was far too wide, far too bright to be genuine. She hesitated, but her voice came out steady as she explained, “She knows I’m coming—I bring her fresh bread from Mother every week.” The words felt both like an answer and a shield, a reminder of her routine and her purpose, though the Wolf’s oddly pitched tone made her wonder if today’s journey would be anything but ordinary. The Wolf leans in closer, his bright eyes glinting as he tilts his head, voice lilting sweetly but just a bit too shrill. The Wolf leaned in, his sharp eyes gleaming with an unsettling brightness as he cocked his head, the corners of his mouth curling into a charming, almost playful smile. His voice, pitched just a touch too high to be soothing, danced in the air between them like a teasing melody. “Such a thoughtful granddaughter you are—tell me,” he coaxed, his words flowing as smoothly as a practiced verse, “is your grandmother quite alone out there?” The question lingered with a peculiar sweetness, inviting trust even as it pressed just a little too close. Red (Red Riding Hood) Red shifts her basket nervously, glancing at the Wolf with uncertainty. Red shifted her basket from one arm to the other, the rough handle biting into her palm as she studied the Wolf warily. His voice, oddly high-pitched and sweet, tugged at her curiosity even as it set her nerves on edge. She hesitated, then spoke, her tone gentle but edged with worry. “It’s just Grandmother and her little cat out there,” she admitted, eyes flicking toward the shadowed path ahead. “She always says the woods are peaceful, but I can’t help worrying sometimes.” The Wolf steps a little closer, his smile widening as his high voice echoes oddly among the trees. The Wolf stepped a little closer, the curve of his smile growing wider, his oddly high voice ringing through the hush of the trees. With a subtle beckoning gesture, he fixed his luminous eyes upon her, admiration lacing his words. “Oh, how brave you must be, venturing all by yourself!” His tone danced between flattery and curiosity, inviting her to draw nearer while casting a gentle spell of trust. The Wolf leans in closer, his bright eyes unblinking, voice lilting as he gestures subtly toward the two diverging trails. The Wolf leaned in, the faintest hint of a smile playing at the corners of his mouth, his bright eyes never wavering from Red’s. With a graceful flick of his paw, he gestured toward the two trails that split apart beneath the dappled light. His voice, smooth yet pitched curiously high, curled through the air like a ribbon as he beckoned her a step nearer. “Tell me, little one, which path do you take to reach her cottage—the flowery trail or the path that winds through the shadows?” Red (Red Riding Hood) Red shifts her basket on her arm, glancing nervously at the Wolf, uncertain but trying to sound cheerful. Red shifted the weight of her basket, fingers tightening around the worn handle as she glanced up at the Wolf. Its voice was oddly high, beckoning her nearer, but she held her ground, forcing a cheerful note into her own reply. Usually, she explained, she preferred the flowery trail—its brightness cheered her, and she couldn’t help but gather daisies along the way, their sunny faces a comfort against the shade of the woods. Even as she spoke, Red couldn’t quite banish her nervousness, but she met the creature’s gaze with determined curiosity, refusing to let her unease show. The Wolf leans in closer, his bright eyes glinting with a peculiar intensity as he gestures subtly toward the darker path. The Wolf leaned in, the peculiar brightness in his eyes sharpening as he gestured almost imperceptibly toward the darker fork in the path. His voice,

pitched oddly high and lilting like a tune half-remembered, wrapped itself around Red like silk. “Ah, the flowery trail—such a lovely choice,” he remarked, his words slipping out with effortless charm. Yet beneath that praise lingered a tantalizing question, coaxing her curiosity. Did she ever wonder, he implied with a sly tilt of his head, what secrets the shadowed path might hold? Red (Red Riding Hood) Red shifts her basket nervously and glances at the Wolf, her fingers fidgeting with the edge of her cloak. Red shifted her basket, its weight oddly comforting against her hip as she eyed the Wolf with a mixture of curiosity and caution. Her fingers toyed nervously with the edge of her crimson cloak as she considered his question about her journey. Did she ever wonder what lay beyond the familiar path? Of course she did—her heart often tugged toward adventure—but Mama’s advice echoed in her mind, gentle yet firm. Red drew in a steadying breath, her voice soft and thoughtful. Sometimes she did wonder, she admitted to the Wolf, but Mama always said to choose the sunny way, just to be safe. The Wolf leans in just a bit too close, eyes glinting with a curious intensity as he grins, his sharp teeth barely visible beneath a friendly smile. The Wolf leaned in, just a hair too close, his eyes glinting with a curious intensity that danced somewhere between friendly and unsettling. His grin, wide and charming, revealed a hint of sharp teeth lurking beneath that practiced smile. With his voice pitched oddly high, airy and tinged with a playful trill, he beckoned her nearer. “Wise advice from Mama,” he mused, his gaze never wavering from Red, “but sometimes, little one, the most interesting things are found where the light barely touches—don’t you think?” The words slipped out like a secret, coaxing her curiosity, weaving a spell as he lingered in the shadows between menace and mirth. Red (Red Riding Hood) Red hugs her basket a bit closer, glancing nervously at the Wolf. Red hugged her basket a little tighter, feeling the rough weave press against her fingers as the Wolf’s strangely high voice danced through the air. She forced a polite smile, but her eyes flicked warily to the shadows between the trees. “Maybe,” she replied, her tone light but cautious, “but I think I’d rather stick to the flowers—Mama would be worried if I wandered too far.” Even as she spoke, her feet stayed planted on the narrow path, the memory of her mother’s warnings echoing in her mind. The familiar dialogue between Red and the disguised Wolf unfolds, with Red noticing oddities in ‘Grandmother’s’ appearance and behavior—her eyes, hands, ears, teeth, and voice—all while the Wolf attempts to reassure her and lure her closer.

Red’s suspicions grow, and she becomes increasingly wary, questioning the Wolf’s identity and intentions even as he tries to convince her of his harmlessness.

Red (Red Riding Hood) Red hesitates by the bedside, hands twisting at her basket strap, brow furrowed as she studies Grandmother’s face, her gaze lingering on the unblinking, gleaming eyes. Red paused just inside the dim cottage, her basket swinging gently in her hand. She took a tentative step forward, studying her grandmother curled beneath the heavy quilts. Something was off, though she couldn’t quite say what. The old woman’s eyes—were they always so large? The way the afternoon light glinted off them made Red’s brow furrow with concern and curiosity. “Grandmother, what big eyes you have today,” she murmured, edging closer, her voice gentle but probing. “Are you feeling quite yourself? The light seems to catch them differently.” Even as she spoke, Red’s mind raced, piecing together the oddities before her with the resourcefulness she’d inherited from her mother. The Wolf pats the pillow beside him, his smile gentle as he tucks his hands deeper beneath the shawl. With a gentle, almost inviting smile, the Wolf patted the empty pillow beside him, beckoning her nearer. He tucked his hands deeper beneath the shawl, his gaze never wavering from Red’s cautious face. “Ah, my dear,” he murmured, voice as smooth as velvet, “age tends to sharpen one’s senses.” His eyes glinted with an enigmatic warmth as he leaned forward just so, lowering his voice to a confidential hush. “Come closer, so I can see your lovely

face and hear all about your journey.” Red (Red Riding Hood) Red hesitates at the edge of the bed, clutching her basket, eyes flickering between the bonnet and the Wolf’s face. Red hesitated at the edge of the bed, her fingers tightening around the handle of her basket. Her gaze drifted from the familiar floral bonnet to the face beneath it, taking in every oddity with a careful, searching curiosity. “Your ears, Grandmother,” she ventured, her voice polite yet edged with caution, “they look so much larger than I remember. Is it the new bonnet?” She tried to keep her tone light, but couldn’t quite banish the note of uncertainty, watching as the Wolf—hidden in plain sight—shifted beneath the covers, adjusting the frilled cap as if to draw attention away from those unsettlingly large ears. The Wolf pats the quilted bed invitingly, keeping his hands hidden beneath the shawl while offering Red a gentle, expectant smile. The Wolf, still swaddled in Grandmother’s shawl, patted the quilted bed with a practiced ease, his hands kept demurely hidden beneath the folds. A gentle, expectant smile played at the corners of his mouth as he regarded Red with soft, luminous eyes. “Ah, this old bonnet,” he murmured, adopting a voice that wove warmth into every syllable, “was meant to keep out the chill, but I suppose it does rather make my ears stand out, doesn’t it?” He inclined his head, inviting her closer, and continued with a velvet charm, “Come, sit beside me, child, and tell me everything that’s happened since you last graced this cottage with your company.” Red (Red Riding Hood) Red hesitates at the foot of the bed, eyes flickering to where the Wolf’s paws clutch the shawl, her voice gentle but edged with uncertainty. Red hesitated at the foot of the bed, her gaze lingering on the way her grandmother’s shawl was bunched beneath those oddly large, rough hands—claws disguised beneath faded homespun. She offered a tentative smile, her voice gentle but shaded with uncertainty as she ventured, “Your hands seem rather rough, Grandmother—have you been working in the garden more than usual?” Even as she spoke, her eyes flicked from the Wolf’s grip on the shawl back up to the shadowed contours of the face on the pillow, searching for reassurance in familiar wrinkles but finding only something unsettlingly new. The Wolf tucks his claws more securely beneath the shawl, offering a gentle, beckoning smile to mask his unease. The Wolf, sensing the girl’s hesitation, tucked his claws more securely beneath the borrowed shawl, his smile turning gentle and inviting despite the unease that prickled beneath his fur. “These old hands have seen many seasons, my dear,” he explained smoothly, his voice warm and reassuring as he extended them—careful to keep the claws hidden. “It’s just the weather that makes them appear a bit more worn, that’s all.” He beckoned with a soft, persuasive glimmer in his golden eyes, the poet’s charm never faltering. “Now, don’t be shy. Come closer, and let me hold your hands in mine.” Red (Red Riding Hood) Red hesitates at the foot of the bed, fingers twisting the edge of her basket, her eyes narrowing as she studies the figure beneath the shawl. Red lingered at the foot of the bed, her fingers unconsciously twisting the frayed edge of her basket as she studied the figure swaddled beneath the shawl. Something was off. The voice that had greeted her was not the gentle, familiar lilt she remembered, but deeper—almost rumbling, as if strained through gravel. Red kept her tone cautious, masking her unease with a veneer of politeness. “Grandmother, your voice sounds different too,” she remarked, her eyes narrowing with concern. “It’s deeper, somehow; are you quite sure you’re feeling well?” The Wolf pats the spot on the bed beside him, curling the shawl tighter around his shoulders to further obscure his features, his eyes watching Red intently for any sign of suspicion. The Wolf patted the empty spot on the bed beside him, curling the faded shawl tighter around his shoulders, as if seeking warmth—or perhaps a little more concealment. His eyes, sharp and unreadable, lingered on Red, searching her face for the flicker of suspicion he so often encountered. With a voice touched by feigned frailty, he explained, “A touch of the cold has made my throat a little hoarse.” He offered her a reassuring, almost playful smile, the words slipping out as smoothly as honey. “But nothing a warm cup of tea and your company won’t cure.” Gesturing invitingly, he beckoned

her closer. "Please, sit right here by my side." Red (Red Riding Hood)Red hesitates at the foot of the bed, clutching her basket tighter and scanning Grandmother's face for reassurance. Red hesitated at the foot of the bed, her fingers tightening around the wicker handle of her basket. Her gaze swept over Grandmother's face—so familiar, yet today, oddly transformed. She tried to keep her tone light, polite, but caution threaded through her words as she ventured, "If you're certain, Grandmother..." The words trailed off as her eyes lingered on the strange shadows beneath those lashes, the sharpness at the edges of the smile. "Everything about you feels a little unfamiliar today—are you sure it's just the weather?" The Wolf pats the bed invitingly, drawing the shawl tighter around his shoulders, his eyes fixed on Red with an eager, almost hungry, smile. The Wolf patted the bed invitingly, his movements graceful yet deliberate, drawing the shawl tighter about his shoulders as though warding off a chill that only he could feel. His eyes never left Red, their gleam both eager and unsettling, his smile stretching just a bit too wide. "Ah, my dear," he said, voice smooth as velvet, "the years have a way of changing us in ways we never quite expect." For a moment, something flickered in his gaze—an old sorrow, perhaps, or something darker, quickly masked by charm. "But know this: my love for you remains just the same." He gestured to the space at his side, his tone coaxing, persuasive. "Come, let me tuck you in close, where it's warm." Red (Red Riding Hood)Red hesitates at the bedside, her eyes lingering on the Wolf's mouth, fingers tightening nervously around her basket. Red paused at the edge of the bed, her knuckles whitening as she clutched her woven basket a little tighter. Something about Grandmother's face—no, her mouth—seemed off, the firelight flickering across those gleaming, oversized teeth. With a cautious politeness, Red tilted her head, her voice gentle but edged with curiosity. "Grandmother, your teeth—they look so very sharp," she ventured, trying to make sense of the unsettling sight. "Have you changed your diet lately, or is it just a trick of the firelight?" The Wolf offers a gentle, toothy smile, carefully pulling the shawl higher as he pats the bed invitingly, his eyes fixed on Red with practiced affection. The Wolf offered her a gentle, almost reassuring smile, his teeth just barely visible beneath the upturned edge of Grandmother's shawl. With practiced ease, he drew the fabric higher about his shoulders, as if to ward off some imagined chill. Patting the bed invitingly, he fixed Red with a gaze full of what seemed like genuine affection. "It's only the shadows playing tricks, my dear," he murmured, his voice a velvet purr—disarming, persuasive. "Now, why don't you tell me all about your walk through the woods?" Red (Red Riding Hood)Red hesitates beside the bed, clutching her basket tighter, her gaze lingering on the Wolf's unsettling grin. Red shifted on the rough wooden bench, her gaze drifting to the silent trees beyond the cottage window. The woods had always held a hush, but tonight that quiet seemed deeper, stretched and taut like a string about to snap. She traced a finger along the grain of the table, searching for words. Sitting here, so close to someone she trusted, she couldn't shake the feeling that something was different—off-kilter, as if a shadow waited just out of sight, lurking beneath the surface of the familiar. The Wolf offers a gentle, reassuring smile and pats the bed invitingly, careful to keep his claws hidden beneath the shawl. The Wolf offered a gentle, reassuring smile, the expression softening his lupine features as he patted the bed invitingly. His claws, artfully concealed beneath the borrowed shawl, remained hidden from view. "Oh, child, perhaps it's simply your imagination running wild after a lonely walk—there is nothing to fear here with me," he murmured, his voice a soothing melody designed to lull suspicion. As Red lingered in the doorway, her gaze flickering over the unfamiliar silhouette, the Wolf adjusted the shawl with deliberate care, maintaining the illusion while his eyes glimmered with persuasive warmth. Red (Red Riding Hood)Red hesitates at the foot of the bed, her basket clutched tightly, eyes darting from the Wolf's mouth to his shadowed form under the covers. Red leaned forward, her brows knitting with concern as she studied her grandmother's face in the flickering candlelight. The old woman's smile stretched unusually wide, almost as if it

were trying to hide something else entirely. Red's curiosity, never content to rest, tugged at her thoughts. "Grandmother," she ventured gently, her voice a blend of warmth and wariness, "I can't help but notice how your smile looks so... wide tonight." She hesitated, searching her grandmother's eyes for reassurance. "Are you sure everything is as it should be?" The Wolf gently pats the seat beside him, his eyes glinting as he adjusts the shawl to further conceal his claws, leaning forward with a reassuring, inviting warmth. With a gentle pat on the seat beside him, the Wolf's eyes glinted with a peculiar warmth, an invitation wrapped in reassurance. He leaned forward, the shawl shifting ever so slightly as he adjusted it to better conceal the sharpness of his claws. "My dear," he murmured, his voice smooth as velvet, "sometimes a smile grows with happiness at seeing you—come closer." His gaze lingered on her, coaxing, as he offered to drape the shawl around her shoulders, promising to chase away the worries that creased her brow. Red (Red Riding Hood)Red hesitates before sitting, her eyes darting between the Wolf's face and hands, her body tense with suspicion. Red paused at the edge of the bed, her fingers tightening around the basket handle. Her gaze flickered between the Wolf's unsettling smile and the large, furred hands folded atop the quilt. Every instinct in her body screamed caution, but she forced her voice to remain polite, if wary. Edging closer, she perched lightly on the bed's edge, careful not to draw attention to her unease. "Grandmother," she began, her words slow and deliberate as she tried to keep her tone steady, "your embrace feels strangely strong—almost as if you were someone else entirely." The Wolf pulls Red in just a bit tighter, his eyes glittering as he offers a gentle pat on her shoulder, keeping his claws hidden beneath the shawl. The Wolf pulled Red just a bit closer, the glint in his eyes masked by a veneer of gentle warmth. His paw, hidden beneath the soft folds of Grandmother's shawl, came to rest lightly on her shoulder—a reassuring gesture, so carefully calculated. "Nonsense, my precious," he murmured, voice honeyed and smooth, as though the very notion of doubt were absurd. "Who else could I possibly be but your loving grandmother, eager to keep you safe and warm?" Red (Red Riding Hood)Red hesitates, pulling back slightly and searching the Wolf's face for a familiar kindness. Red hesitated at the bedside, her fingers gripping the edge of the faded quilt as she studied the figure before her. Something in Grandmother's eyes—usually so warm—seemed oddly distant, almost predatory. She pulled back just a little, searching the Wolf's face for any sign of the familiar kindness she remembered. Still, she kept her tone gentle, cautious yet polite, as she ventured, "If you truly are my grandmother, then why do I feel a chill even in your arms?" The Wolf tightens the shawl around Red, drawing her nearer, his gaze fixed intently on her, masking his hunger with a gentle, practiced smile. The Wolf's paw, velvet-soft yet unyielding, drew the shawl more snugly around Red's shoulders, pulling her closer until she could feel the warmth radiating from his side. His gaze, fixed intently on her, shimmered with a gentle, practiced smile that expertly concealed the glint of hunger lurking beneath. "Oh, little one," he murmured, voice low and charming as he brushed a stray curl from her cheek, "it's likely just the draft sneaking through the shutters. Come, nestle closer, and you'll see there's nothing to fear in these familiar arms." The words, wrapped in soothing cadence, drifted between them as he settled her against his chest, a masterful illusion of safety woven with every syllable. Red (Red Riding Hood)Red hesitates at the edge of the bed, her fingers gripping her basket tightly as she studies the Wolf's face in the flickering firelight. Red hesitated at the edge of the bed, her knuckles whitening around the handle of her basket. The firelight played across her grandmother's face—if it was truly her grandmother—casting deep shadows that made those eyes seem to gleam with a strange, unsettling hunger. Swallowing, she forced herself to keep her tone polite, though a thread of caution wove through her words as she studied the figure before her. "Grandmother, if you are truly yourself," she ventured, her voice steady despite the swift beat of her heart, "then why do your eyes gleam so hungrily when you look at me?" The chapter alternates between Red's encounter with the

Wolf in the woods and her subsequent suspicious conversation with ‘Grandmother’ in the cottage, emphasizing Red’s cleverness and independence as she navigates both situations with caution and resourcefulness.

Red (Red Riding Hood) Red pauses at the edge of the shadows, fingers tightening around her basket, eyes scanning the Wolf’s face with polite curiosity, masking the hint of wariness in her tone. Red hesitated at the edge where sunlight surrendered to the shadows, her grip tightening around the woven handle of her basket. She studied the Wolf’s features with a polite curiosity, careful to keep her voice even and friendly as she broke the quiet of the path. It was unusual, after all, to encounter anyone here—especially someone unfamiliar. “Good afternoon, sir,” she ventured, the greeting poised between caution and civility. “It’s a strange thing, meeting anyone on this path—especially someone I don’t recognize.” Her eyes didn’t flinch from his, searching for a flicker of intent. “Are you... looking for someone?” The question was gentle, but beneath its surface, Red weighed each of his gestures, quietly testing the boundaries of their unexpected encounter. The Wolf tilts his head, voice warm and disarming, while his eyes linger a moment too long on the basket Red carries. The Wolf tilted his head in a gesture of easy charm, a warm, disarming note coloring his voice as he addressed her. His gaze, however, lingered just a fraction too long on the wicker basket nestled in the crook of Red’s arm, as if appraising its contents. “Ah, good afternoon, young miss,” he said, his tone light and inviting. “I’m merely enjoying the shade of these woods, though it seems I’ve lost my way; do you often walk alone here?” Every word seemed chosen to put her at ease, even as he subtly probed for more. Red (Red Riding Hood) Red shifts her basket to the other arm, glancing sidelong at the Wolf, careful to keep a polite distance. Red shifted her basket to her other arm, the woven handle pressing into her palm as she measured the distance between herself and the Wolf. She kept her eyes on the dappled path ahead, the sunlight glimmering through the leaves, and answered the Wolf’s unspoken question with careful honesty. She didn’t venture into the woods often, and certainly never without a purpose; her errands were always brief, and she made a point of sticking to the sunlit trails whenever possible. Yet even as she spoke, Red listened for the subtle nuances in the Wolf’s tone and watched for any sign that the boundaries she set might be tested. The Wolf offers a gentle, reassuring smile, his eyes intent but his posture relaxed, as if inviting trust. The Wolf’s smile was gentle, almost reassuring, as he regarded her with eyes that seemed intent yet posture that radiated ease. He gave the impression of someone entirely at home in these woods, unbothered by their secrets. “Sensible of you,” he remarked, his voice a soothing current in the hush between trees. “These woods can be tricky for strangers, but with a guide, perhaps even their shadows hold no real threat.” Each word was offered lightly, coaxing trust as if he were merely sharing a harmless observation rather than laying the groundwork for something far more intricate. Red (Red Riding Hood) Red shifts her basket slightly, maintaining a careful distance while her eyes watch the Wolf’s movements. Red shifted her basket, the woven handle creaking softly as she adjusted her hold. She kept a measured distance, every instinct sharpened by the Wolf’s sly movements across the mossy path. Her voice was calm, but her gaze was alert, weighing the balance between confidence and caution. “A guide, perhaps—but only if one knows whom to trust in the shade as well as the light,” she said, each word carefully chosen, testing both her own resolve and the Wolf’s intentions. The Wolf tilts his head, voice gentle, eyes narrowing just enough to study Red’s guarded posture. The Wolf tilted his head, his voice a gentle caress as he let his gaze linger on Red, eyes narrowing just so—enough to study the wary set of her shoulders, the way she measured every inch of distance between them. A flicker of a smile touched his lips, enigmatic and inviting. “Trust is earned, not given,” he murmured, letting the words slip into the hush beneath the trees, “especially where shadows linger.” His tone

was coaxing but never insistent, as if he himself were made of secrets and moonlight. “Tell me, what brings you beneath these trees today, if not the sunlit path?” The question hung between them, both challenge and invitation, as he maneuvered with practiced ease through the delicate dance of strangers testing the edges of familiarity. Red (Red Riding Hood) Red shifts her basket to the other arm, eyes lingering on the Wolf’s paws before meeting his gaze with polite caution. Red shifted the weight of her basket to her other arm, her fingers tightening around the woven handle as she regarded the Wolf with polite caution. Her gaze lingered, just for a moment, on his large, bristled paws before rising to meet his eyes. “My grandmother lives just beyond the bend,” she explained, her voice steady but measured, each word carefully chosen as if testing the boundaries of their familiarity. “She’s unwell, and I bring her what comfort I can.” Red’s chin lifted slightly, betraying a quiet resolve. “Though I take care not to linger where the trees grow thick.” The subtle warning in her tone hung in the air, a gentle assertion of her own wariness as she watched the Wolf’s reaction. The Wolf inclines his head respectfully, keeping his stance relaxed, but his eyes linger a moment too long on Red’s basket. The Wolf inclined his head with courtly respect, his posture easy and unthreatening, though his gaze lingered a fraction too long on the basket swinging from Red’s arm—a detail she did not miss. “A granddaughter’s devotion is a rare and precious thing,” he remarked, voice velvet-smooth and edged with admiration that felt almost too precise. He allowed a gentle smile to play at his lips, then gestured lightly to the winding path ahead, as if inviting her into the rhythm of their encounter. “May I walk a little way with you, just until the path forks? For company’s sake, if you’ll permit.” Red (Red Riding Hood) Red shifts her basket to her other arm, taking a measured step forward while glancing sidelong at the Wolf. Red shifted her basket to her other arm, her fingers absently tracing the worn handle as she measured the Wolf with a sidelong glance. Each movement was deliberate, a silent testing of the space between them. “Is it for company’s sake, or just curiosity?” she mused, her tone light but edged with caution. Still, she took a step forward, her boots brushing the mossy path. “I suppose a short walk won’t do any harm,” she added, making her own boundaries clear, “so long as we keep to the open path.” The Wolf falls into step beside Red, keeping a respectful distance, his eyes watchful but his tone light and inviting. The Wolf matched his pace to Red’s, careful to maintain a courteous distance, his every movement a study in unassuming grace. Sunlight dappled their path, and with a glance upward through the green canopy, he let a smile curl at the edges of his lips. “Let us walk where the sunlight touches the leaves,” he suggested, his voice warm and inviting, yet laced with just enough intrigue to draw her in. As he spoke, his eyes lingered thoughtfully on Red, measuring the effect of his words. “And perhaps you’ll be kind enough to tell me more of your grandmother—she must be quite remarkable to inspire such care.” Red (Red Riding Hood) Red glances sideways at the Wolf, her pace steady but her grip tightening slightly on her basket. Red’s footsteps remained even, though her grip on the basket tightened almost imperceptibly. She cast a careful glance sideways at the Wolf, measuring the distance between them—not just the physical space, but the boundary of trust. “My grandmother is well,” Red offered, the words chosen with intent. Privacy was a shield her grandmother cherished, a lesson Red had learned and now wielded in turn. She kept her tone light, though her eyes never quite left the Wolf’s. “She values her solitude above everything else. So I try not to share too much with anyone she hasn’t met.” The Wolf tilts his head, adopting a gentle, deferential posture, but his eyes quietly study Red’s face for any sign of further suspicion. The Wolf tilted his head, adopting a posture so gentle and deferential that it seemed almost humble. Yet behind the softness of his manner, his eyes remained sharp, quietly studying Red’s face for any flicker of suspicion. “Of course,” he murmured, his voice smooth as silk, “one should never betray a trust lightly.” He let the words linger, a thoughtful pause, before continuing with a smile that was warm but never too familiar. “I would not dream of prying—

only hoping to pass a little time in pleasant company while the path allows.” Every gesture and reply was measured, his charm woven carefully into the space between them, inviting trust even as he watched for the boundaries Red might set. Red (Red Riding Hood)Red glances sideways at the Wolf, her grip tightening on her basket as she carefully watches his expression. Red’s fingers tightened around the wicker handle of her basket as she stole a sidelong glance at the Wolf, her gaze never lingering too long but never shying away either. She measured each word carefully, letting a small, knowing smile play at the corners of her mouth. “Pleasant company is best enjoyed with a watchful eye, I think—especially when the woods are so full of secrets.” The words slipped out lightly, but behind them lay a gentle warning, her curiosity tempered by caution as she studied the twitch of his ear and the lazy flicker of his eyes. The Wolf glances sideways, careful to match Red’s pace, his tone gentle but his gaze flickering to gauge her wariness. The Wolf glanced sideways, a practiced gentleness softening his tone as he carefully matched Red’s pace along the winding path. His eyes, however, flickered with a subtle, calculating gleam, ever alert to the shifting edges of her wariness. “Ah,” he mused lightly, as if sharing a private joke, “but secrets are merely stories waiting for the right listener.” He let the words hang in the air, his gaze lingering just long enough to test her boundaries before offering a disarming smile. “Perhaps you’ll find I’m content with only the tale of your walk, nothing more.” Each phrase was measured, his charm artfully woven with a hint of mystery, as if the truth he carried was nothing more than another story for another day. Red (Red Riding Hood)Red glances sideways at the Wolf, her grip tightening on her basket as she subtly positions herself closer to the sunlit edge of the path. Red’s fingers tightened around the handle of her basket, her gaze flickering toward the Wolf with a wariness she tried to disguise as casual curiosity. The sunlight beckoned just beyond the tangled shadows, and she edged closer to its warmth, careful with each step. She knew stories could shift and curl like smoke—especially when told by those who preferred to listen rather than speak. For Red, every word she uttered felt as deliberate as her footsteps, measured and precise, aware that both could lead her into danger if she wasn’t vigilant. The Wolf matches Red’s pace, maintaining a respectful distance, his eyes occasionally flicking to her basket as if admiring the cloth rather than its weight. The Wolf matched Red’s pace with practiced ease, always maintaining just enough distance to signal respect, but never so far as to seem aloof. His gaze lingered on her basket, though his expression betrayed only a polite curiosity, as if he admired the cheerful cloth draped over it rather than pondering its contents. “Wise indeed,” he murmured, his voice a velvet purr threading through the hush of the forest. “The wrong word in the wrong ear can echo far beyond these trees.” His eyes flicked up to meet hers, a conspiratorial glint in them. “Though you needn’t fear—my interest is only in sharing the quiet between footsteps, nothing more.” Each word seemed weighed, each gesture measured, as if he were both offering and withholding himself in the same breath. Red (Red Riding Hood)Red glances sidelong at the Wolf, her grip tightening on her basket as she steps into a patch of sunlight, putting a measured distance between them. Red’s fingers tightened around the woven handle of her basket as she slipped into a patch of sunlight, letting its warmth settle on her shoulders and putting a measured distance between herself and the Wolf. She glanced at him sidelong, her eyes thoughtful and unafraid, testing the boundaries between caution and curiosity. Instead of answering his probing gaze with words, she tipped her chin ever so slightly, her voice quiet but certain as she suggested, “Let’s walk quietly, and let the woods speak for us.” Her tone carried a gentle firmness—an invitation to listen rather than interrogate. “Sometimes,” she added, almost as if confiding a secret, “silence tells more than a stranger’s questions.” The forest, ancient and watchful, seemed to agree, its hush settling around them as they moved forward together.

As the forest's hush settled between them, Red's cautious words lingered in the air, her suspicions sharpened by the stranger's presence. Yet, with every step closer to her destination, an uneasy tension grew—a sense that something familiar awaited her, yet not as it seemed. Unbeknownst to Red, the Wolf's deception inside the cottage was already underway, setting the stage for an encounter where truth and lies would soon intertwine.

Chapter 3: The Wolf's Deceptive Bargain

Red, gripping the basket, paused beside a fallen log and adjusted her scarf, her eyes alert to the forest's shadows.

The Wolf, disguised as a lean, dark-haired poet with a silver-tipped cane, emerged from the thicket, bowing and speaking in veiled, poetic riddles about the secrets of the woods and wandering hearts.

Their conversation unfolded as a cautious duel of wits, with Red questioning the Wolf's familiarity with the forest and probing his motives.

The Wolf sweeps into a deep, graceful bow, his gaze lingering on Red with a glimmer equal parts mischief and warmth, his smile unreadable but inviting. With a flourish that seemed almost theatrical, the Wolf swept into a deep, graceful bow, his cloak swirling around him like a shadow made of silk. When he straightened, his gaze lingered on Red, a glimmer in his golden eyes that danced somewhere between mischief and warmth. His smile hovered, unreadable yet impossibly inviting, as he recited with a poet's lilt, "Ah, but what brings a wandering heart to these tangled woods? Are you searching for something, or merely following where the wildflowers nod?" Red (Red Riding Hood) Red tilts her head slightly, studying the Wolf with a mix of curiosity and guarded politeness. Red tilted her head, her gaze lingering on the Wolf as she weighed his poetic greeting. Curiosity flickered in her eyes, tempered by the caution she reserved for strangers in the woods. "Perhaps I follow the path for both reasons," she admitted, voice thoughtful and measured. Her fingers grazed the edge of her basket, as if seeking reassurance from the simple, familiar weave. "Though I wonder if the wildflowers hide more than they reveal," she added, her words carrying a hint of challenge beneath their polite surface, as if she were probing the mysteries that lingered just out of sight among the tangled roots and blossoms. The Wolf He steps lightly closer, voice low and eyes intent, as if inviting her to share in a private confidence. With a practiced grace, the Wolf stepped lightly closer, the dappled sunlight flickering across his enigmatic smile. His voice dropped to a confidential murmur as he leaned in, eyes gleaming with a secret invitation. "Sometimes," he intoned, weaving the words into the hush between them, "the wildest blooms guard the sweetest secrets, if one knows how to listen to their whispers." The verse lingered, curling around Red's curiosity, as if he'd unlocked some hidden code in the tangled bramble at her feet. Red (Red Riding Hood) Red tilts her head, her gaze steady on the Wolf, a cautious smile playing at her lips. Red tilted her head, her gaze steady on the Wolf as she considered his poetic greeting. A cautious smile played at her lips, curiosity flickering in her eyes. "Then perhaps you can teach me how to listen," she said, her voice low and thoughtful, as if weighing each word. She watched him closely, her clever mind working behind the brave facade. "For I suspect not all secrets wish to be found." The words lingered in the air, Red's empathy and resourcefulness evident in the gentle challenge woven within her request. The Wolf steps lightly beside Red, his gaze intent yet inviting, as if daring her to accept the challenge. The Wolf stepped lightly beside Red, his movements almost weightless, every gesture calculated yet disarmingly graceful. His gaze lingered on her—intent but inviting, as though he were daring her to rise to his unspoken challenge. With a courtly bow and the hint of a

conspiratorial smile, he recited, “Ah, but secrets have a way of finding those who walk with open eyes and careful feet—shall we see what the forest wishes to share tonight?” The words slipped from him like a silken ribbon, wrapping the hush of the twilight woods in a sense of possibility, as if the very trees leaned closer to listen. Red (Red Riding Hood) Red casts a cautious glance deeper into the trees, her hand tightening around her basket as she steps just within arm’s reach of the Wolf. Red cast a cautious glance deeper into the trees, her grip tightening around the handle of her basket as she edged just within arm’s reach of the Wolf. He greeted her with an elaborate bow, reciting a line of verse about wandering hearts, his tone dripping with charm. Unmoved, Red squared her shoulders and met his gaze, replying with a slight, knowing smile, “Lead on, then, but I hope your words are as gentle as your manners—some whispers in these woods can turn to warnings, after all.” Her voice was light, but beneath it lay a warning of her own, woven into the crisp air between them. The Wolf responded with enigmatic hints about his comfort in darkness and his own history as both hunter and hunted.

Red (Red Riding Hood) Red narrows her eyes, her grip tightening on her basket as she shifts her weight, placing herself between the Wolf and the path ahead. Red’s gaze sharpened, a subtle warning glinting behind her steady eyes as she shifted her weight, planting herself firmly between the Wolf and the narrow path that wound deeper into the trees. Her fingers tightened around the basket’s handle, knuckles pale against the woven wood. She tilted her head, curiosity flickering in her voice, “You seem to know every twist and turn of this forest, more than any traveler I’ve met.” For a moment she studied him, searching his face for a hint of honesty. “How is it you’re so familiar with these woods?” The Wolf offers a toothy grin, his eyes flicking to the shadows beyond Red, as if recalling secret paths unseen by most. The Wolf’s grin widened, sharp and self-assured, as his amber eyes darted briefly to the shadows curling behind Red—shadows he seemed to know by heart. “Ah, little one,” he murmured, the words slipping from his tongue like velvet, “when you spend as many nights beneath these branches as I have, the forest itself becomes your map.” The way he said it, with that smooth confidence, made it sound as if the thickets and twisted roots whispered their secrets only to him. Red (Red Riding Hood) Red tightens her grip on her basket, her eyes scanning the shadows behind the Wolf as if searching for unseen threats. Red tightened her grip on her basket, her knuckles pale against the woven handle as she studied the Wolf. Shadows curled and flickered behind him, shapes shifting in the uncertain half-light. She narrowed her gaze, unconsciously shifting her stance as if bracing herself against more than just the chill in the evening air. Her voice, low and steady, cut through the hush between them as she asked, “And what is it that keeps you wandering here after dark, when most creatures seek the safety of their dens?” The question hung in the air, laced with curiosity and a trace of challenge, betraying her need to understand what sort of danger—or adventure—lurked beneath his calm exterior. The Wolf’s eyes gleam faintly in the dim light, his posture relaxed but alert, studying Red’s wary expression. The Wolf’s eyes gleamed faintly in the dim light, reflecting a sly amusement as he lounged against the mossy trunk, posture languid yet coiled with subtle readiness. He studied Red’s wary expression, the way she shifted her weight and narrowed her gaze, suspicion sharpening her features. With a slow, knowing smile, he let his words curl out like smoke: “Some of us find comfort in shadows, Red, where secrets are thick and the curious seldom tread.” Red (Red Riding Hood) Red tightens her grip on her basket, her eyes never leaving the Wolf’s, a cautious step increasing the distance between them. Red tightened her grip on the wicker handle of her basket, feeling the rough weave bite reassuringly into her palm. She took a cautious step back, widening the gap between herself and the Wolf, yet never let her gaze waver from his. Her eyes, sharp and searching, narrowed as she studied the glint in his. “Comfort, or something

to hunt,” she ventured, her voice steady despite the wariness fluttering in her chest. “Tell me, Wolf—what do you truly seek among these secrets?” Her question hung in the cool woodland air, edged with genuine curiosity and a challenge she wasn’t afraid to voice. The Wolf’s eyes glint with a sly, knowing light as he circles Red, keeping a measured distance yet never breaking her gaze. The Wolf’s eyes glinted with a sly, knowing light as he circled Red, his movements graceful yet just distant enough to keep her guessing. Never once did he break her gaze, his smile lingering at the edges—part invitation, part challenge. “Curiosity, perhaps,” he murmured, letting his words drift between them like mist. He tilted his head, studying her with that enigmatic charm, and added, “But isn’t it true, Red, that those who walk alone in the woods often carry secrets of their own?” The implication hung in the air, his tone persuasive and teasing, as if he were gently unspooling the edges of her caution to see what she might reveal. Red (Red Riding Hood) Red tightens her grip on her basket, eyes never leaving the Wolf as she subtly shifts her weight, ready to move if needed. Red tightened her grip on the basket, the woven handle digging into her palm as she faced the Wolf squarely. Her eyes, sharp and unflinching, never strayed from his predatory gaze. Subtly, she shifted her weight, every muscle tensed and ready to spring if the need arose. “Maybe,” she allowed, her voice low and even, “but it’s those who lurk in the shadows asking questions who worry me most, Wolf.” Her words hung between them, edged with wary challenge, as she measured his reaction, determined not to be the prey. The Wolf tilts his head, his eyes glinting with a sly, knowing light as he circles a step closer, never breaking Red’s gaze. The Wolf tilted his head, a sly, knowing glint flickering in his eyes as he drifted a step closer, his gaze never wavering from Red’s. “Ah, but it is only the wary who survive these woods,” he murmured, the words curling from his lips with the easy grace of a practiced poet. His smile deepened, enigmatic and inviting all at once. “Perhaps I ask because I’ve learned to recognize another soul who doesn’t quite trust the dark.” Red (Red Riding Hood) Red tilts her head, eyes narrowing further, her grip tightening on the basket as she steps just out of reach. Red tilted her head, eyes narrowing as she studied him, every line of her posture wary and unyielding. Her grip on the basket tightened, knuckles whitening, and she took a deliberate step just out of his reach—a subtle but clear assertion of her boundaries. “Trust is earned, not given,” she said, her tone quiet but steady. The challenge in her gaze was unmistakable. “So if you know these woods so well, then tell me: what would you warn a stranger to beware of, Wolf?” The Wolf lowers his head, eyes glinting with a mix of warning and invitation, as he steps just slightly closer to Red, the leaves crunching beneath his paws. The Wolf dipped his head, eyes glinting with a teasing mix of warning and invitation as he let the space between them shrink by a measured step. Leaves crunched softly beneath his paws, the sound oddly deliberate in the hush of the wood. With a voice that seemed to ripple through the undergrowth, velvet-smooth and edged with secret knowledge, he murmured, “Beware the paths that twist away from the sun, for in their shadows, not every creature is content to let you pass unharmed.” The words lingered in the air, woven through with both caution and promise, as Red watched him warily, uncertain whether his advice was a kindness—or a challenge. Red (Red Riding Hood) Red’s hand tightens around her basket as she studies the Wolf, her eyes searching his face for any hint of truth or deception. Red’s fingers curled tighter around the handle of her basket, a subtle anchor as she studied the Wolf before her. There was something unsettling in the way he spoke—too measured, too knowing. Her gaze sharpened, lingering on the flicker of his eyes and the twitch of his jaw, searching for any glimpse of honesty or guile. Shifting her stance defensively, she let her curiosity guide her words, her voice steady but edged with challenge. “Wise words,” she remarked, not letting her skepticism show. “But you speak as if you’ve seen what waits in those shadows firsthand. Is that where you make your den, Wolf, or are you one of those creatures yourself?” The Wolf lowers his head, letting his yellow eyes catch the fading light, a faint smile

hinting at something hidden as he studies Red's reaction. The Wolf dipped his head, letting the last golden threads of daylight flicker across his enigmatic yellow eyes. A faint, knowing smile played at the corners of his mouth as he regarded Red, measuring her suspicion with the practiced ease of someone well-acquainted with masks. "Perhaps I am both the watcher and the watched, Red," he mused, his voice a velvet caress over the fading hush of the woods. "One who knows what to fear because I have been feared myself." The words lingered in the air, ambiguous and unsettling, as if they carried secrets meant only for the twilight. Instead of a simple, transactional exchange, their dialogue became an extended negotiation—Red challenged the Wolf to prove his trustworthiness by walking ahead and showing her the shortcut in daylight, insisting that trust must be earned and openly displayed.

The Wolf leans forward, cane tapping rhythmically atop a cluster of mushrooms, eyes glinting with amusement as he studies Red's reaction. The Wolf leaned forward, his cane tapping out a sly rhythm atop a cluster of mushrooms, amusement flickering in his eyes as he watched Red's uncertain expression. "The woods are full of winding ways and shadowed trails," he mused, his voice honey-smooth, each word seeming to coil through the dappled air. "Most would lose themselves before the sun sets." He let the implication hang, then continued, lowering his voice conspiratorially. "Yet I hold the secret to a path so swift you'd reach Grandmother's doorstep before the wolves even begin their hunt." His gaze drifted down to the basket swinging from Red's arm, and his smile widened, all teeth and charm. "All I ask is a taste of that honey cake—so renowned, even the birds sing of its sweetness. A fair trade, wouldn't you say?" Red (Red Riding Hood) Red clutches the basket closer, eyeing the Wolf's grin with a mixture of curiosity and caution. Red's fingers tightened around the handle of her basket as she studied the Wolf's sly grin and the rhythmic tapping of his cane against the soft bed of mushrooms. Curious, but not easily swayed, she met his gaze with steady resolve. The bargain he proposed certainly sounded tempting, but Red's sense of responsibility tugged at her heart. Grandmother trusted her with the cakes, after all. She hesitated, then spoke up, her voice measured yet firm. It did seem a fair enough trade, she admitted, but insisted that he promise the shortcut he offered was truly safe and reliable—she could not abide the thought of disappointing Grandmother. The Wolf leans in with a glint in his eye, brushing aside a fern to reveal a faint, hidden path. The Wolf leaned in close, a glint of mischief flickering in his amber eyes as he brushed aside a curtain of ferns, revealing a faint, nearly forgotten path winding into the shadows. With a sly smile, he tapped his cane on a patch of plump mushrooms at his feet—as if sealing the pact with a gentle, rhythmic promise. "But of course, my dear," he crooned, his voice smooth as velvet and just as inviting, "my word is as golden as the honey in that cake—one morsel, and I'll guide you where even the thorns dare not follow." Red (Red Riding Hood) Red clutches her basket a little tighter, her gaze lingering on the patch of mushrooms where the Wolf's cane rests. Red's fingers curled tighter around the handle of her basket as she studied the Wolf, her eyes drifting to where his cane tapped the cluster of pale mushrooms. He wore a sly smile, suggestion lingering at the corners of his mouth—always bargaining, always weaving shadows. Red tilted her chin, refusing to let uncertainty show. "If your word is golden," she said, her voice quiet but steady, "then let it shine in daylight, not in shadows." She met his gaze directly, her cleverness shining through. "Walk ahead, Mr. Wolf—show me each step as we go." The Wolf He gestures grandly to a narrow, overgrown path, beckoning her forward while glancing slyly over his shoulder. The Wolf's eyes gleamed with a secretive amusement as he swept his cane through the cluster of mushrooms, clearing a path with a flourish that was almost theatrical. He bowed low, a gesture both courtly and mocking, and straightened with a sly smile curving his lips. "Then let us walk together, Red," he murmured, his tone silk-smooth, "and may

your trust be as sweet as your Grandmother's recipe." As he beckoned her forward toward the narrow, overgrown path, his gaze flickered slyly over his shoulder—inviting, yet unreadable—his every movement a calculated blend of charm and hidden intent. The Wolf, intrigued and compliant, accepted her terms, guiding Red while continuing to charm and reassure her.

Red remained wary, repeatedly testing his promises and making it clear she would follow only if convinced of her safety.

The Wolf licks a stray crumb from his paw, his gaze fixed warmly on Red, even as the shadows behind him seem to deepen. The Wolf delicately licked a stray crumb from his paw, his eyes never leaving Red's face. Warmth radiated from his gaze, though the shadows behind him seemed to coil and deepen, stretching across the moss and roots. With a sly, reassuring tilt of his head, he gestured farther into the tangled woods, voice velvet-smooth as he murmured, "Trust me, little one." He let the words linger, their promise curling with the mist. "The darkest paths are often the safest—so long as you walk beside someone who knows the way." His smile widened, impossibly gentle, and he extended his paw in invitation. "Stay close, and no harm shall find you." Red (Red Riding Hood) Red clutches her basket tighter, her eyes flicking from the Wolf's teeth to the shadowed path ahead. Red's fingers tightened around the wicker handle of her basket as she watched the Wolf bite into the cake, crumbs clinging to the edges of his mouth. His paw gestured toward the deeper gloom of the woods, promising shortcuts and safety in the same smooth breath. Red hesitated, her gaze darting warily from the gleam of his teeth to the uncertain path ahead. If he was so certain, perhaps she could follow—but she couldn't let herself be led blindly. She drew herself up, voice steady despite the nerves prickling beneath her skin, and asked, "If you're certain, I suppose I'll follow—but how do I know your way truly leads to safety, and not deeper danger?" The Wolf flashes a reassuring smile, gesturing invitingly down the winding, dim-lit path as his eyes glint with hidden intent. The Wolf flashed a reassuring smile, crumbs from the cake dusting his lips as he gestured invitingly down the winding, dim-lit path. His eyes glinted with secret knowledge, all hidden intent and guile. "Ah, but danger knows my scent and flees before me, dear Red; with each step I take, the shadows shrink away." The words unfurled from his tongue like velvet, smooth and persuasive, as if the darkness itself bent to his will. Red (Red Riding Hood) Red hesitates, clutching her basket a bit tighter, her eyes narrowing as she studies the Wolf's face. Red hesitated, her fingers tightening around the wicker handle of her basket as she studied the Wolf's face, searching for any flicker of truth behind his toothy smile. The woods behind him loomed deeper, shadows gathering like secrets. "Maybe so," she said, voice low and steady, "but sometimes, it's what walks beside us that we ought to fear most." The words slipped out almost like a warning, her gaze never wavering from his as a crumb of cake clung stubbornly to his whiskered chin. The scene ended with Red stepping off the main path, tightly gripping her basket and following the Wolf's lead, but her skepticism remained evident, and the Wolf's anticipation was tinged with fascination at Red's independence and cleverness.

As Red's footsteps faded into the tangled woodland, her mind replayed the earlier warnings echoing from home. The Wolf's words lingered, but so did her mother's caution—a reminder that trust must be earned, not given lightly. Before Red's journey deepens, memories of her mother's steadfast guidance and the new responsibility she'd been entrusted with rise to the surface, shaping every decision she's about to make.

Chapter 1: Red Receives a Mission from Mother

Red stands at the table, slicing a heel of bread with a worn knife, crumbs scattering across the wood.

Her mother, apron tied neatly, busies herself bundling a parcel with cheese and wild herbs, her hands moving with practiced precision.

She glances out the window toward the woods, then turns to Red, voice low but firm: 'Your grandmother needs these supplies, and she is alone now.

Red's MotherShe gathers up the basket, placing it gently in Red's hands, her eyes lingering on the edge of the woods visible through the window, worry etching her brow. Her mother gathered up the basket, placing it carefully into Red's hands. She paused, her gaze drifting to the dark fringe of the woods just beyond the window, worry lines deepening on her brow. "Red, listen to me," she said quietly, her voice steady but edged with concern. "Your grandmother needs these supplies, and she's alone now—there's no one else to help her. You must take these to her before nightfall." There was no room for argument, only the gentle insistence of a mother determined to keep her family safe. Red (Red Riding Hood)Red clutches the basket tightly, her gaze flickering between her mother's worried face and the looming trees outside. Red clutched the basket more tightly, feeling the weave press against her palm as she glanced between her mother's anxious face and the shadow-streaked woods beyond the window. She straightened her shoulders, determined, and met her mother's gaze. "I understand," she said quietly, her voice steady despite the flutter of anticipation in her chest. "I'll go right away." Still, a thoughtful crease appeared between her brows as she glanced once more at the treeline. "Is there anything in the woods I should be careful of?" she asked, her curiosity and caution both evident as she prepared herself for whatever might await beyond their cottage door. Red's MotherShe places the basket in Red's hands, her eyes filled with worry as she brushes a strand of hair from Red's face. Red's mother pressed the woven basket into her daughter's small hands, her fingers trembling just slightly as she tucked a loose strand of hair behind Red's ear. Her gaze flickered anxiously toward the shadowy edge of the woods beyond the window, worry etched in the lines around her eyes. "Stay on the path, Red, and don't talk to strangers," she said quietly, her voice steady but edged with concern. "Promise me you'll be careful." But the forest is not always kind—go swiftly, do not stray from the path, and trust your own good sense.

Red's Mother takes Red's hands in hers, her eyes filled with concern and love, making sure Red listens closely to her warning. Red's mother reached out and gently took her daughter's hands, her grip both steady and warm. Her eyes, brimming with concern and love, searched Red's face as if memorizing every line. "Before you go," she began quietly, her voice carrying the weight of countless warnings and hopes, "remember what I've always told you." She spoke softly but firmly, as if each word might shield Red from the shadows between the trees. "The forest is not always kind. You must go swiftly, never stray from the path, and above all, trust your own good sense." She squeezed Red's fingers, her gaze unwavering, and added, "Promise me you'll remember, my dear." Red (Red Riding Hood)Red grips her basket tightly, glancing toward the shadowy trees with a mix of determination and unease. Red's fingers tightened around the handle of her basket as she cast one last glance toward the shadowy fringe of the woods, determination warring with a flicker of unease in her chest. Her mother's warnings echoed in her mind—swift steps, eyes sharp, heart steady. She drew a slow breath, squaring her shoulders, and assured her mother with quiet resolve that she would keep to the path and watch carefully, no matter what she might hear or see

among the trees. ' Red knots her red cloak securely around her shoulders, fingers lingering over the fabric, then reaches for the basket her mother offers.

Their gazes meet—Red's determined, her mother's cautious.

Red (Red Riding Hood) Red squares her shoulders, voice steady but her hands clenched tight around the basket. Her eyes flick to the door, then back to her mother's worried face. Red squared her shoulders, forcing steadiness into her voice even as her hands tightened around the basket's worn handle. Her gaze darted to the door—the world beyond calling to her—before she looked back at her mother's anxious eyes. Their gazes locked, her mother's worry palpable, but Red refused to let it sway her resolve. She drew a breath, quiet but firm, and said, "I know what you're going to say, but I have to do this, Mother. Grandma needs me, and I won't let fear stop me." Red's Mother She reaches out, gently grasping Red's hand, her eyes searching for reassurance. Red's mother reached out, her fingers wrapping gently around her daughter's hand. There was a tremor of worry in her touch, her thumb absently tracing circles against Red's skin as if she could ward off the dangers through tenderness alone. Their eyes met—Red's gaze steady, almost defiant, while her mother's flickered with concern. "Red, being brave doesn't mean ignoring the dangers," she said softly, the words drawn out by a mother's love and caution. "Promise me you'll keep to the path and watch for the shadows." Even as she spoke, her gaze lingered on her daughter, searching her face for reassurance, unwilling to let go until she saw it. Red (Red Riding Hood) Red lifts her cloak, her jaw set with quiet determination, even as her mother reaches out as if to hold her back. Red gathered the folds of her crimson cloak, her fingers steady despite the tremor in her mother's hand hovering nearby. Their eyes locked—her mother's gaze shadowed with worry, Red's own bright with resolve. She offered a small, reassuring smile, her jaw set. "I promise I'll be careful," she said softly, conviction threading through her words. "But I can't turn back just because the woods are dark." With a last lingering look, she stepped forward, determination outweighing fear as she slipped into the waiting shadows beneath the ancient trees. Red's Mother Her mother's fingers tighten around the edge of Red's cloak, reluctant to let go. Her mother's fingers tightened around the edge of Red's cloak, knuckles pale with the effort of holding on just a moment longer. Their eyes met—Red's steady and determined, her mother's shadowed by worry. She hesitated, searching Red's face as if she could keep her safe through sheer will. Then, in a quiet, steady voice edged with caution, she murmured, "Just remember, Red, there's more in those woods than darkness—and not all of it shows itself at first glance." With a final nod, Red steps out into the cool morning, boots crunching on gravel, as her mother stands in the doorway, watching until Red disappears into the green shadow of the trees.

The objective is set: Red is to deliver food and medicine to her grandmother, proving her reliability while her mother entrusts her with the family's safety.

The result: Red embarks on her journey, the weight of her mother's trust and warnings guiding her first steps into the woods.

Unbeknownst to Red, as she ventures deeper beneath the leafy canopy, another figure is already moving swiftly through the forest. While Red's journey has just begun, a darker presence draws nearer to her destination, setting a different kind of challenge in motion. As the morning light filters through the trees, the path ahead grows more uncertain—not only for Red, but for those waiting at the journey's end.

Chapter 4: Wolf Reaches Grandmother's House

The Wolf pads silently from shadow to shadow, his paws barely stirring the needles on the ground. He lifts his muzzle, sniffing the faint aroma of woodsmoke and baking bread drifting from Grandmother's cottage ahead.

The Wolf circles the clearing, ears pricked for sounds from within—the soft clink of a teacup, the scrape of a chair.

Driven by both hunger and curiosity, he skirts the garden, then slinks up to the back window, rising on his hind legs to peer inside.

He spots Grandmother folding linens at the hearth, her movements steady and practiced.

Without hesitation, the Wolf skirts the wall, then scratches lightly at the door with calculated gentleness.

When Grandmother calls out, 'Who is there?

Grandmother clutches her shawl tighter, her voice trembling as she peers toward the dimly lit doorway. The old woman paused in her knitting, the rhythmic click of her needles halting mid-air. Years of solitude had tuned her senses finely to the forest's hush and stir, and when the faint creak of the cottage door reached her ears, she straightened in her chair. Her voice, gentle yet edged with caution, called out into the dim light, "Who is there? Is that you, child?" She waited, heart steady but alert, her gaze fixed on the entrance. Yet a shadow lingered, and she asked again, softer now, perceptive as ever, "Or... someone else?" ' the Wolf pitches his voice high, mimicking Red's tone: 'It's me, Grandmother—Red, with a basket for you.

The Wolf pitches his voice high, carefully mimicking Red's cheerful tone as he stands outside Grandmother's door, one paw resting lightly on the latch, straining to sound innocent and familiar. With a practiced ease, the Wolf pressed his paw lightly against the wooden latch, tilting his head just so as though listening for a response from within. Then, in a voice pitched high and sweet—so uncannily like Red's that even the birds outside quieted to listen—he called through the door, "It's me, Grandmother—Red, with a basket for you!" Each syllable dripped with careful innocence, disguising the cunning glint in his eye as he awaited the old woman's unsuspecting reply. ' He waits, poised and alert, tail flicking, ready to act the moment the latch lifts.

His objective: gain entry and outwit the old woman before Red arrives.

Unbeknownst to Red, while the Wolf schemes at Grandmother's door, the forest path before her grows unfamiliar and strangely quiet. The thrill of the race begins to fade, replaced by a prickle of unease as she winds deeper into the woods. With every step, the shadows lengthen, and Red soon finds herself crossing paths with someone she never expected to meet—a mysterious stranger whose sudden appearance will change the course of her journey.

Chapter 2: Red Encounters the Handsome Stranger

Red steps briskly down the narrow path, her basket swinging at her side, brushing aside a low-hanging branch with a practiced swipe.

She pauses to adjust the red cloak at her shoulders, scanning the undergrowth for mushrooms.

Lucian emerges from behind a birch tree, axe slung over one shoulder, boots muddy from the morning's work.

He intercepts her path, calling her name and expressing concern about her being in the woods at this late hour.

Lucian (The Woodsman) Lucian steps out from behind a mossy oak, his axe slung casually over his shoulder. He raises a hand in greeting, his eyes scanning the path behind Red before settling on her with a cautious, half-smile. Lucian stepped out from behind a mossy oak, his sturdy figure framed by dappled light and shadow. The weight of his axe rested easily across his shoulder, a familiar extension of himself, but his posture was relaxed, his intent anything but threatening. He lifted a hand in greeting, eyes sweeping the path behind Red with a practiced caution before finally settling his gaze on her. A half-smile tugged at his lips—warm, yet edged with concern.

“Red?” he called, his voice low and earnest, the syllables softening as he took in her familiar face. “It’s been a while since anyone’s braved these woods at this hour.” Red (Red Riding Hood) Red tightens her grip on her basket, her eyes flickering with surprise and a hint of caution as she slows her steps, studying Lucian’s face in the dappled light. Red’s fingers tightened unconsciously around the handle of her basket as she caught sight of the figure stepping between shafts of sunlight, blocking her path. She slowed, her boots scuffing against the moss, and studied Lucian’s familiar face, surprise flickering momentarily across her features before caution settled in her eyes. She tilted her head, curiosity mingling with a wariness she couldn’t quite mask, and spoke, her voice carrying softly through the hush of the woods. “Lucian? I wasn’t expecting to see anyone out here—especially not you.” Lucian (The Woodsman) Lucian lowers his hand, a hint of concern in his eyes as he steps closer, scanning the shadowy trees behind her. Lucian stepped into her path, his broad figure framed by the gathering dusk. He raised a hand in greeting, but his gaze lingered over her shoulder, searching the shifting shadows between the trees. Concern flickered in his eyes as he drew closer, his voice low and earnest. “I could say the same—what brings you out so late, Red?” Red (Red Riding Hood) Red shifts the basket on her arm and glances down the shadowed path, her expression a mix of concern and determination. Red shifted the weight of the basket on her arm, its woven handle pressing a familiar groove into her palm. Her gaze lingered on the shadowed path ahead, concern flickering across her face but never quite dimming the spark of determination in her eyes. When he stepped into her way, raising a hand in greeting and calling her name, she offered a quick, earnest smile. “Just running an errand for my grandmother,” she explained, her tone gentle yet resolute. “She wasn’t feeling well, so I thought I’d bring her some supper.” The words carried a quiet pride; this was her task, her small adventure, and she meant to see it through. Lucian (The Woodsman) Lucian steps closer, his expression shifting from curiosity to genuine concern as he gestures down the path toward Red’s destination. Lucian stepped out from the shadow of a leaning pine, his broad frame blocking the narrow path ahead. He lifted a hand in greeting, the corners of his mouth softening when he saw her, but the warmth in his eyes quickly gave way to concern. As he glanced down the winding trail that led deeper into the woods—toward Red’s destination—his voice took on an earnest edge. “You know these woods can turn treacherous after sundown,” he said, the caution in his tone unmistakable. Without waiting for protest, Lucian shifted closer, protective and steadfast. “Let me walk with you, just to be safe.” Red (Red Riding Hood) Red shifts her basket to her other arm and offers a cautious but genuine smile. Red shifted the woven basket to her other arm, feeling the familiar weight settle comfortably against her hip. She paused, meeting Lucian’s gaze as he stepped into the sun-dappled path, his hand raised in

greeting and her name lingering in the air. A cautious but genuine smile touched her lips, softening the determination in her eyes. "I appreciate your concern, Lucian," she said, her voice steady with an undercurrent of warmth, "but I can handle myself." Still, her adventurous spirit flickered, and she hesitated for a moment before adding, almost conspiratorially, "Though I wouldn't mind the company." Lucian (The Woodsman) Lucian falls into step beside Red, his axe slung casually over his shoulder, eyes scanning the shadowed trees. Lucian fell into step beside Red, his axe slung carelessly over one broad shoulder as his eyes swept the shifting shadows of the forest. He lifted a hand in greeting, his voice warm and steady as he called her name. With a gentle, almost teasing smile, he nodded toward the winding path ahead. "All right," he said, his tone light but earnest, "just as long as you don't mind some conversation to pass the time." The words carried a quiet reassurance, as if promising his presence would turn the journey's dangers into something almost companionable. Red explains she is bringing supper to her ailing grandmother.

Lucian (The Woodsman) Lucian leans on his axe, brow furrowed with concern as he studies Red and the basket in her hands. Lucian leaned heavily on his axe, the muscles in his forearms taut beneath worn sleeves. His eyes lingered on the basket Red clutched so tightly, then drifted to the narrow path that wound deeper into the shadowed woods. Concern carved new lines into his brow as he studied her small frame, dwarfed by the towering trees. "That's quite a journey for someone your size, Red," he said quietly, the warmth in his voice edged with worry. "These woods aren't as friendly as they look." His gaze returned to hers, earnest and searching. "Are you sure it's wise to travel alone?" Red (Red Riding Hood) Red lifts her chin with a small, confident smile, clutching her basket a little tighter as she glances down the shadowed trail. Red lifted her chin, a small, confident smile playing on her lips as she tightened her grip on her basket. The path ahead lay draped in shadows, familiar and yet inviting in its mystery. She caught Lucian's pointed glance at her basket and sensed the question blooming behind his eyes—was she truly going all the way to her grandmother's alone? She met his gaze, her voice steady with assurance and a hint of pride. Of course she was. She'd walked this winding trail countless times before; every twist, every ancient tree was etched in her memory. There was comfort in that, and a thrill—she knew this place by heart, and she was ready for whatever might wait beyond the next bend. Lucian (The Woodsman) Lucian folds his arms, his gaze scanning the shadows between the trees as if expecting something to emerge. Lucian folded his arms, the muscles beneath his worn shirt taut with a protective tension. His eyes swept the dusky spaces between the trees, lingering on each shifting shadow as if he half-expected trouble to materialize. He glanced down at the basket in Red's hands—a silent question hovering in the air. "Even a well-trodden path can hide new dangers," he said quietly, voice edged with earnest concern. "Especially with all the talk of wolves lately." The words carried the weight of caution and care, echoing his unspoken wish that she might reconsider venturing so far alone. Red (Red Riding Hood) Red lifts the basket a little higher with a determined smile, glancing toward the sun-dappled trail ahead. Red shifted the weight of the basket, her grip tightening as she smiled with quiet determination. The path ahead shimmered beneath the canopy, sunlight flickering across her boots. Lucian's gaze flickered to the woven bundle in her hands, his question hanging in the morning air. Red met his eyes, her tone both practical and reassuring. Wolves belonged in stories, she reminded herself—they never prowled beneath the clear light of day. And Gran was waiting, expecting the bread she'd promised. With a confident nod, Red stepped forward, letting her promise and her certainty guide her down the trail. Lucian (The Woodsman) Lucian shifts his axe to one shoulder, gaze steady but gentle, silently offering protection. Lucian shifted his axe to one broad shoulder, his stance relaxed but his eyes unwavering as he watched her. His gaze flickered to the basket nestled in the crook of

her arm, then back again, gentle but edged with concern. “Still,” he said quietly, his voice low and earnest, “promises mean little if danger finds you first.” He hesitated, then added, steady and resolute, “Let me walk with you, just until the bend.” The offer hung in the air—no demand, only the quiet persistence of someone unwilling to leave her unguarded. Lucian warns her of the dangers and offers to accompany her for safety.

Lucian (The Woodsman) Lucian shifts his weight from one foot to the other, his gaze flickering to Red before settling on the path ahead. He keeps his voice low and gentle, careful not to startle her, yet there’s a subtle tension in his posture—a readiness, as if bracing for her reaction. Lucian shifted his weight from one boot to the other, the muscles in his jaw working as he glanced at Red, then let his gaze rest on the winding path ahead. His voice, when he spoke, was low and careful, as if he feared startling her, though there was a subtle tension in the set of his shoulders—a protective readiness she’d come to recognize. “If you’d like,” he offered gently, “I can walk with you a ways. The woods aren’t always kind to those traveling alone.” Red (Red Riding Hood) Red meets his gaze steadily, her basket shifting slightly in her grip as she waits for his answer. Red didn’t flinch beneath Lucian’s steady gaze. Her fingers tightened around the handle of her basket, the weight shifting lightly as she considered his offer. He had spoken in that cautious, low voice of his, careful not to startle her, but she sensed something beneath it—a wariness, perhaps, or something unspoken. She tilted her head, a hint of curiosity flickering in her eyes, and finally broke the silence. “Thank you, Lucian—I’d appreciate the company, though I can’t help but wonder if it’s me or the woods you don’t trust.” The words came out gentle but probing, her cleverness woven through each syllable as she waited for his answer, unafraid of what she might hear. Lucian (The Woodsman) Lucian glances at Red, his gaze searching, then steps aside to let her choose the path. Lucian shifted his weight, boots pressing softly into the moss, and glanced at Red with a searching look that lingered a heartbeat too long. He stepped aside, making room for her to choose her path, but his presence remained steady and close. “A bit of both, if I’m honest,” he admitted, his voice low and careful as if the trees themselves might overhear. “The woods have their secrets, and folk aren’t always what they seem.” The concern behind his words was unmistakable, underscoring the quiet promise that he would walk beside her, no matter which way she chose. Red (Red Riding Hood) Red adjusts the basket on her arm, meeting Lucian’s gaze with a wary but earnest smile. Red adjusted the basket on her arm, the woven handle pressing into her palm as she regarded Lucian with a mixture of caution and sincerity. Her smile, though wary, was genuine. “Then perhaps it’s best we watch each other’s backs,” she said, her tone reflecting both her curiosity and the undercurrent of uncertainty between them. “Since neither of us seems entirely certain what we’re walking into.” Unlike before, Red, after initially asserting her independence, accepts Lucian’s company for part of the way, with the understanding that she values her autonomy but recognizes the dangers.

Red (Red Riding Hood) Red squares her shoulders, looks Lucian in the eye, and offers a warm but resolute smile, making it clear she appreciates his concern while asserting her independence. Red squared her shoulders, meeting Lucian’s gaze with a steady confidence that belied her youth. A warm, resolute smile curved her lips—she wanted him to know she valued his concern, truly—but she still shook her head, politely but firmly. “Thank you for offering, Lucian,” she said, her voice gentle yet unwavering, “but I promise I can handle this on my own.” She glanced toward the familiar path that wound through the trees, her eyes bright with purpose. “It’s not far, and I’ve made this journey many times before.” Her words left no room for doubt: she was more than capable, and she intended to prove it. Lucian (The Woodsman) Lucian nods, stepping back with a respectful smile, his watchful gaze lingering just a moment before he lets her continue on her path.

Lucian inclined his head, a gentle, respectful smile curving his lips as he stepped back, giving Red space to make her choice. His eyes lingered on her just a moment longer, protective and quietly earnest. “I understand, Red,” he said, his voice low and steady with the weight of his loyalty. “Just know—if you ever need a hand, I’m not far behind.” With that, he let her go on her way, steadfast in his silent promise to watch over her from the shadows of the forest. As they walk together, their conversation turns more personal—Lucian reveals he lost someone to the woods before, explaining his deep concern for Red.

Lucian (The Woodsman) Lucian releases his grip on the axe and steps back, hands open and visible, his gaze earnest but conflicted as he tries to meet Red’s wary eyes. Lucian released his grip on the axe, letting its weight sink into the soft earth between them—a wordless gesture of surrender. He stepped back, careful to keep his hands open and visible, as if to quiet the wary tension flickering in Red’s eyes. His voice was low, edged with earnestness and concern. She didn’t have to worry, he promised silently with every movement. The axe would stay here, at her feet—proof that he meant her no harm. He hesitated, searching her face, and confessed that he knew too well what shadows crept between these trees, what dangers waited for the unwary. The thought of anything happening to her was unbearable; he couldn’t live with himself if he let harm come to her. “Let me watch over you,” he asked, not with insistence but with quiet resolve. Just until she was safely out of the woods. Red (Red Riding Hood) Red narrows her eyes, glancing from Lucian to the axe and back, her grip tightening on her basket as she takes a cautious step back. Red’s eyes narrowed, flickering between Lucian’s guarded face and the heavy axe he now planted deliberately into the yielding earth. The gesture was meant to reassure, but her instincts made her wary. Her fingers tightened around the worn handle of her basket as she took a careful step back, refusing to be lulled by mere symbols of peace. “If you really mean that,” she pressed, her voice low but unwavering, “then tell me—what exactly are you so afraid I’ll run into out here?” Lucian (The Woodsman) Lucian’s gaze flickers to the dark thicket beyond, his knuckles whitening as memory flashes across his face. Lucian’s gaze flickered to the dark thicket beyond, shadows shifting in his memory as his knuckles whitened around the haft of his axe. He hesitated, then quietly drove the blade into the soft earth between them—a silent promise that he meant no harm. His voice was low, earnest, almost pleading as he kept his eyes on Red. It wasn’t just wolves that haunted these woods, he reminded her, letting the weight of his words settle between them. There were shadows lurking among the trees that hungered for far more than blood. Red (Red Riding Hood) Red narrows her eyes, taking a cautious step back, studying Lucian as if weighing every word for hidden threats. Red instinctively narrowed her eyes, a prickle of caution running down her spine as she edged a step back from Lucian. She studied his face, searching for any hint of deception in the lines of his jaw, the flicker of his gaze. Without a word, Lucian hesitated, then drove his axe into the soft earth between them—a silent gesture of peace, or perhaps surrender. His voice came low and uncertain, weighted with something he couldn’t quite name. “Shadows that know your name, Red—creatures drawn by something about you, something I don’t understand and can’t fight alone.” Lucian (The Woodsman) Lucian keeps his hands open and lowered, his eyes flickering with guilt and worry as he watches Red’s face for any sign of trust. Lucian hesitated, the weight of his concern settling in the lines of his face. Carefully, he planted his axe into the soft earth at their feet—a silent gesture of peace, his hands left open and lowered in plain sight. His eyes, shadowed by guilt and worry, searched Red’s face, desperate for some flicker of trust. “Is it so hard to believe,” he said quietly, his voice rough but earnest, “that I want nothing from you but to keep you from becoming another story whispered around these woods?” Red (Red Riding Hood) Red tightens her grip on her cloak, eyes narrowed, watching Lucian for any sign of deceit.

Red's fingers tightened around the edge of her scarlet cloak, the fabric bunched in her fist as she fixed Lucian with a steady, probing stare. She watched him closely—every hesitant breath, every flicker of uncertainty in his eyes—as if she could peel back the layers of his intent just by sheer will. When he finally moved, it was with a kind of silent surrender: the axe in his hand found the earth, its blade biting into the soft ground between them, a wordless gesture of peace.

But Red was not so easily swayed. Her brow furrowed, lips set in a determined line. “Stories don’t save lives, Lucian,” she said quietly, her voice edged with both challenge and a trace of vulnerability. “So if you want me to trust you, tell me—why do you care what happens to me at all?” The question hung between them, heavy as the axe, demanding an answer that went deeper than simple tales. Lucian (The Woodsman) Lucian’s gaze drops, his hands trembling slightly as he steps back from the axe, vulnerability flickering across his face. Lucian’s gaze dropped, his hands trembling ever so slightly as he stepped back from the axe. Vulnerability flickered across his usually steady features. He hesitated, then silently planted the axe into the soft earth at their feet—a wordless gesture of peace, of intention. For a moment, he seemed to struggle for breath before finding his voice, low and rough with memory. Once, he had lost someone to these woods when he’d thought he could keep his distance. He would not make the same mistake again. Red (Red Riding Hood) Red narrows her eyes, taking a cautious half-step back, her grip tightening on her cloak as she studies Lucian’s face. Red’s eyes narrowed with suspicion, and she took a cautious half-step back, her fingers tightening around the edge of her crimson cloak. She studied Lucian’s face, searching for any flicker of deception or threat as he hesitated, then silently drove his axe into the soft earth at their feet—a gesture of peace, she realized. Still, her voice was steady, though tinged with something vulnerable and sharp. “You think I’m like her, don’t you—the one you lost?” Lucian (The Woodsman) Lucian lowers his gaze, his hands open and empty, the axe still rooted in the earth between them. Lucian hesitated, the lines of worry sharpening around his eyes as he lowered his gaze. In a slow, deliberate motion, he pressed the head of his axe into the soft earth between them—a quiet gesture of peace. His hands remained open and empty, as if to show her he meant no harm, but his voice, when it finally came, was thick with the weight of old memories. Red was not her—he could see that now—but the fear that gripped him then was the same fear that gripped him now. He simply could not turn his back and leave her to the mercy of the woods; something deep and earnest in him refused to let the forest decide her fate. Red (Red Riding Hood) Red folds her arms tightly across her chest, her eyes searching Lucian’s face for any sign of a lie. Red folded her arms tightly across her chest, her posture guarded as her eyes searched Lucian’s face for the flicker of truth or the shadow of deceit. She watched his hesitation—the way his knuckles whitened around the axe handle—until, finally, he silently planted the blade into the soft earth between them. The gesture was meant to reassure, but Red’s curiosity and skepticism refused to be quelled so easily. Her voice, low and unwavering, cut through the silence: was he just haunted by guilt, and was she merely the next girl who happened to need saving? Lucian (The Woodsman) Lucian looks away, fists clenching at his sides, the memory of loss flickering in his eyes before he meets Red’s gaze with quiet resolve. Lucian’s gaze dropped, the lines of his jaw tightening as old grief shadowed his face. He turned away, fists curling at his sides, then let out a slow, steadying breath. Without a word, he drove his axe into the damp earth between them—a gesture of peace, not threat. When he finally looked up at Red, his eyes held a quiet, steadfast resolve. It was never about undoing the past; he couldn’t. But he could refuse to turn his back, not when he knew the dangers lurking in the forest and knew, with absolute certainty, that he could help. Red, empathetic but still determined to forge her own path, thanks Lucian for his honesty and help, but ultimately insists on completing the journey alone beyond a certain point.

Red (Red Riding Hood) Red grips the stick tightly and steps past Lucian, her chin lifted with new resolve. Red's fingers curled around the fallen stick, knuckles whitening as she tapped it lightly against a stone. The hollow sound echoed her determination. She met Lucian's gaze, gratitude shining briefly in her eyes. "I truly needed your help back there," she said, voice steady with emotion. But as she stepped past him, chin lifted and shoulders squared, her resolve solidified. "From here, I need to do this myself. I have to see it through—on my own terms." The words hung in the air, a gentle but unyielding declaration. With the stick gripped firmly in her hand, Red strode forward, her heart pounding with anticipation and newfound courage. Lucian (The Woodsman) Lucian nods solemnly, stepping back into the shadow of the trees, his watchful gaze lingering on Red as she moves forward. Lucian nodded solemnly, his broad shoulders blending into the shadowed trunks behind him. From the edge of the clearing, he watched Red stoop to pick up a fallen stick, tapping it lightly against a mossy stone before she set off. His voice, low and earnest, carried after her—gentle but insistent. "I understand, Red," he said, the caution in his tone unmistakable. "Just remember, the woods are never truly silent, so listen well as you go." As Red stepped forward, Lucian's gaze lingered, protective and unwavering, until the crimson of her cloak faded deeper into the forest gloom. Lucian, respecting her decision but anxious, promises to stay close and keep watch from a distance.

Their exchange reveals not only the tension between Red's independence and Lucian's protectiveness, but also a growing trust and understanding between them, shaped by shared vulnerabilities and honest dialogue.

As Red disappears deeper into the thicket, Lucian lingers at the edge of the path, his gaze following her determined stride. The forest seems to breathe around him, shadows shifting with each step she takes. Even as he respects her wishes, an uneasy prickle settles along his spine—a silent warning that the woods hold secrets neither of them can predict. Drawn by instinct and concern, Lucian moves quietly through the undergrowth, alert for any sign of danger. It is in this charged silence that the forest reveals its true threat, and Lucian finds himself face to face with the very danger he had tried to warn Red about.

Chapter 6: Lucian Confronts the Wolf

Red stands at the threshold of Grandmother's cottage, hand on the worn wooden latch, when Lucian bursts from the tree line, axe gripped tightly.

Lucian positions himself protectively between Red and the Wolf, but Red immediately steps forward, placing herself physically and emotionally between them.

Rather than simply demanding the Wolf state his intentions, Red asserts herself as a shield for Lucian, declaring her intent to prevent harm to him and anyone else.

The Wolf, provoked by Red's defiance and Lucian's secrets, taunts Red with hints of hidden truths and his own predatory hunger.

Lucian, troubled, warns Red that there are dark secrets between them, urging her not to bear burdens that aren't hers.

Red, however, insists on choosing mercy and standing her ground, declaring her willingness to

share Lucian's burdens and face coming darkness together.

Red (Red Riding Hood) Red plants her feet in the muck, her cloak flaring as she faces The Wolf head-on. Her eyes flick to Lucian—wary, but resolute—then back to the predator, her voice unwavering despite the tension crackling in the air. Red planted her feet firmly in the muck, the weight of her resolve pressing down as her cloak snapped in the rising wind. Mud clung stubbornly to the hem of her dress, but she ignored it, every muscle taut as she stepped deliberately between Lucian and the looming shadow of the Wolf. Her heart hammered in her chest, but her voice emerged clear, unwavering—a challenge cast into the charged air. “If you want him,” she declared, meeting the Wolf’s hungry gaze without flinching, “you’ll have to go through me first.” The words hung between them, final and immovable. Her eyes flicked briefly to Lucian—wary, protective—then returned to the predator, her stance defiant. “This ends here, Wolf. I won’t let you hurt anyone else—not while I still stand.” The Wolf bares his teeth in a slow, mocking grin, circling just beyond her reach, his eyes never leaving Lucian’s trembling form. The Wolf bared his teeth in a slow, mocking grin, circling just beyond her reach—each step deliberate, measured, and never breaking eye contact with Lucian’s trembling silhouette. Mud clung to her hem as she stepped forward, purposefully blocking the space between predator and prey. “Brave words, little Red,” he drawled, his tone silk-wrapped steel, “but you know nothing of the hunger that drives me—or the secrets he keeps from you.” The words slid between them like a knife, his gaze glittering with a private amusement, as if he relished every ounce of fear and uncertainty he conjured in the twilight hush. Lucian (The Woodsman) Lucian tightens his grip on his axe, eyes flickering between Red’s determined face and the Wolf’s looming form. Lucian’s grip on his axe tightened, knuckles blanching as he watched Red step forward, her boots sinking deeper into the thick mud, the hem of her cloak already stained and heavy. She placed herself squarely between him and the Wolf, her back straight with resolve. Lucian’s heart pounded with a mixture of fear and frustration—protectiveness warring with the knowledge of all she didn’t understand. His eyes flickered from her determined face to the Wolf’s hulking shadow, and in a voice roughened by worry, he murmured, “Red, you don’t know what you’re protecting—there are truths between us darker than the forest itself.” Red (Red Riding Hood) Red lifts her chin defiantly, her fists clenched at her sides as she blocks the path, her gaze unwavering despite the fear tightening her throat. Mud clung stubbornly to the hem of her skirt as Red stepped forward, her boots sinking into the soft earth. She lifted her chin, fists clenched at her sides, and planted herself squarely between them, her shadow slicing the gray light. Fear coiled in her chest, tightening her throat, but she refused to let it show in her eyes. Maybe she didn’t know everything—she was the first to admit it—but she knew enough, enough to stand here and block the path. Someone had to choose mercy when all they seemed to offer was blood. And if that someone had to be her, so be it. The Wolf lowers his head, eyes glinting, muscles tensing as he circles closer, weighing Red’s resolve against his own desperation. The Wolf lowered his head, eyes gleaming with a hungry intelligence as he began to circle, muscles taut beneath his ragged fur. Red stepped forward, her boots sinking into the mud, the hem of her cloak heavy and stained, defiantly positioning herself between the two. The Wolf’s tone softened, a silken thread weaving through his words, as he regarded her with a mixture of amusement and desperation.

“Mercy is a luxury for those who have never starved, Red,” he murmured, voice edged with both charm and warning. His gaze never left her face, searching for cracks in her resolve. “And you may find the truth you defend will devour you faster than my jaws ever could.” Lucian (The Woodsman) Lucian tightens his grip on his axe, eyes flicking between Red’s determined face and the Wolf’s prowling silhouette, torn between confession and protection. Lucian’s grip tightened around the haft of his axe, knuckles whitening as he watched Red step forward, mud clinging

stubbornly to the hem of her skirt. She planted herself between him and the Wolf—foolhardy, maybe, but brave in a way that made his heart ache. His eyes darted from her determined face to the shadowy figure circling just beyond, torn between the urge to confess everything and the desperate need to keep her safe.

He drew a steadying breath, voice low but urgent. Mercy was a fine thing, he knew, but it would never be enough to shield her from what was coming. And he couldn't—wouldn't—let her bear the weight of his mistakes. Not now. Not ever. Red (Red Riding Hood) Red squares her shoulders, chin lifted in defiance, as she glances back at Lucian, then fixes her unwavering gaze on the Wolf, her stance unyielding despite the tremor in her hands. Mud clung stubbornly to Red's hem as she stepped forward, planting herself firmly between Lucian and the Wolf. Her shoulders squared, chin lifted in quiet defiance, she glanced back at Lucian—her eyes steady, though her hands betrayed a faint tremor. Yet her resolve held fast. She would not waver. "Let me carry the weight with you, Lucian," she said, voice low but unwavering. If darkness truly threatened them, then they would face it side by side—not as prey or predator, but as those who refused to surrender. Lucian struggles with his instinct to protect Red but ultimately relents, agreeing to let her take the lead while promising to intervene if necessary.

Lucian (The Woodsman) Lucian's grip tightens and relaxes on the axe handle. He keeps his body between Red and the shadows beyond, but his eyes meet hers, searching for the certainty he's struggling to find in himself. Lucian's grip tightened and loosened around the axe handle, knuckles paling in the shifting light. He kept his solid frame between Red and the restless shadows at the forest's edge, the familiar weight of duty pressing down on him. His jaw worked as he glanced her way, clearly wrestling with the urge to shield her from every threat these woods could conjure.

"I can't just stand by," he admitted, voice low with the strain of it. Every instinct screamed for him to keep her sheltered, to make certain nothing—nothing—could get close. But as his gaze met hers, something in her steady eyes unsettled him. He could see it—the silent plea for him to trust her, to let her try.

Lucian's axe lowered a fraction, the gesture hesitant but deliberate. "But—damn it, Red," he managed, the words rough, "I see the way you look at me. Like you need me to let you try." He held her gaze, searching for certainty, for something to steady him. "If you're sure about this," he said, the words weighted with hope and fear alike, "say it now. I need to hear it." Red (Red Riding Hood) Red meets his gaze steadily, her voice soft but unwavering, her hands clenched to hide the tremor of nerves as she steps just a little closer, bridging the space between them. Red met his gaze steadily, the tremor in her hands hidden behind clenched fists. She stepped a little closer, closing the distance that fear would have kept between them. Her voice was soft but unwavering as she said, "I am sure, Lucian." She could see the tension in his jaw, the uncertainty flickering in his eyes, and pressed on, needing him to hear her conviction. "I need you to trust me, just this once, because I know what I'm walking into, and I won't let either of us down." The words hung between them, quiet but resolute, as she willed him to see the courage she felt burning inside. Lucian (The Woodsman) Lucian's grip on the axe tightens and loosens in turn, his jaw working as he forces himself to lower it another inch, eyes never leaving Red's face. Lucian's fingers flexed around the rough haft of his axe, tendons standing out beneath sun-browned skin. He forced himself to lower it another inch, though the motion seemed to cost him. His eyes—steady, earnest, filled with a protectiveness that bordered on pain—never left Red's face. The words, when they came, sounded as if he'd wrestled them from some deep, stubborn place. It wasn't easy, he confessed, to simply stand aside and trust in hope, not when every instinct in him screamed to pull her back, to keep

her safe—even if it meant she'd hate him for it. Red (Red Riding Hood)Red steadies her voice, meeting Lucian's gaze with quiet determination, her hand hovering near his arm but not touching, the space between them charged with both tension and trust. Red steadied her voice, meeting Lucian's gaze with quiet determination. Her hand hovered near his arm—close enough to offer comfort or ask for trust, but not quite touching—while the air between them pulsed with a tension born of worry and hope. She saw how his jaw tightened, the muscles working as he fought some inner battle, yet his grip on the axe slackened just a little, betraying both his protectiveness and his doubts.

"I won't hate you for wanting to protect me, Lucian," she said, her words gentle but resolute. "But if you never let me step forward, I'll never be more than someone you have to save." The admission hung in the charged silence, her courage quietly insisting on a chance to prove itself. Lucian (The Woodsman)Lucian's grip on the axe loosens as he steps back, jaw tight, eyes flicking between Red and the shadowed path, fighting the urge to shield her with his own body. Lucian's grip on the axe loosened, the tension in his shoulders a visible battle between trust and caution. He took a measured step back, his jaw set, eyes darting from Red to the dark, uncertain path ahead. Though every instinct urged him to step in front of her, to shield her from what lurked in the gloom, he forced himself to relent. "All right," he said quietly, lowering the axe just a fraction, "I'll let you lead. But if things go sideways, I won't hesitate—you understand me?" The words carried the weight of his promise, unwavering and resolute, even as he fought the urge to reach for her hand. The Wolf circles, testing Red with riddles and insinuations, but Red meets his every word with steadfast courage and clever retorts, refusing to be intimidated.

The Wolf circles Red at a slow, deliberate pace, his gaze never leaving her face. His tail flicks, and he bares his teeth in what might be a smile—or a warning—as he closes the space between them, head lowering, voice silky and low. The Wolf emerged from the shadows, his eyes gleaming with a peculiar intelligence as he swept his hat off in a flourish—his disguise as a traveling poet impeccable. He paused, arching an eyebrow at Red and letting his gaze linger just a moment too long to unsettle. "My, my," he drawled, voice smooth as velvet, "out here all alone, are we?" He circled her slowly, the gentle crunch of leaves beneath his boots the only sound in the hush of the woods. He leaned in conspiratorially and, with a sly smile, gestured to the tangled thickets beyond. "The woods are deep, you know. Dangerous for little ones who stray from the path." His words hung in the air, both a warning and an invitation, as if every syllable concealed a secret and every glance harbored a scheme. Red (Red Riding Hood)Red tightens her grip on her basket, forcing her voice steady as her eyes track the Wolf's slow, circling movements. Red's fingers tightened around the handle of her basket, the woven reeds creaking in her grip as she forced her voice to remain steady. Her eyes never left the Wolf's measured prowl, tracking his every step as he circled her, claws gliding over the mossy earth with barely a sound. "I know these woods better than you think, sir," she said, her words calm but edged with warning. "And I'm not afraid of shadows—only of things that hide in them." Despite the chill threading through her veins, Red stood her ground, refusing to let the Wolf see even a flicker of fear. The Wolf leans in, his breath warm against Red's cheek, a slow, deliberate grin exposing the sharp gleam of his fangs. The Wolf leaned in, his breath warm against Red's cheek, a slow, deliberate grin spreading to reveal the sharp gleam of his fangs. Circling her at a measured pace, he cocked his head, eyes glinting with sly amusement. "Oh, but shadows are clever," he murmured, his voice as smooth as velvet and just as dangerous. "They make friends of teeth and hunger and things that wear polite smiles." His claws barely made a sound on the forest floor, but the threat in his words lingered, chilling the air between them. Red (Red Riding Hood)Red tightens her grip on her basket, eyes never leaving the Wolf,

her voice steady but her knuckles white against the wicker. Red tightened her grip on the basket, the woven wicker digging into her knuckles as she watched the Wolf circle her, his eyes glinting in the dusky light. She stood her ground, refusing to let him see her fear, her voice steady even though a chill raced down her spine. “Still,” she said, gaze unwavering, “I suppose even shadows forget themselves, sometimes—until something reminds them what’s waiting in the dark.” The Wolf pauses just behind Red, his breath warm on her neck, eyes fixed on the tremor of her pulse. The Wolf lingered just behind her, close enough that Red could feel the brush of his breath against her nape, warm and unsettling. His eyes, sharp and unreadable, tracked the flutter of her pulse beneath the thin skin of her throat. With a slow, deliberate grace, he circled her, claws gliding over the moss without a sound. Head cocked in apparent curiosity, his voice slipped into the hush between them, velvet-smooth and edged with something darker. “And what might you be, little one—reminder or meal?” Red (Red Riding Hood) Red stands her ground, voice steady but her hand tightens around the basket’s handle, eyes never leaving the Wolf as he circles closer. Red felt the Wolf’s eyes tracking her every move, their glint sharp as he circled, his claws whispering against the leaf-strewn earth. She held her ground, the basket’s handle digging into her palm, but her gaze stayed steady, refusing to show fear. “I suppose that depends on whether you’re hunting, or merely hoping I’ll run,” she said, voice calm though her heart hammered in her chest, her words hanging in the air between them like a challenge. The confrontation shifts as Red takes command, not only of her own fate but of the narrative between the three, determined to be neither prey nor pawn as the storm intensifies around them.

As the storm outside rages with renewed ferocity, Red’s quick thinking shifts the balance, her resolve forging a path through fear and uncertainty. The tension within the cottage lingers, but the Wolf’s defeat is only the beginning. With danger still lurking in the shadows, Red must now face the consequences of her choices, and decide how far she is willing to go to protect those she loves. As dawn breaks, her journey takes a new direction—toward rescue, and toward a truth she alone must uncover.

Chapter 7: Red Rescues Grandmother and Makes Her Choice

Red pushes open the creaking cottage door, her cloak snagging on a splintered frame.

She scans the dim room and spots Grandmother bundled in a woolen blanket on the bed, her face pale but alert.

Red crosses the room quickly, kneeling beside Grandmother and pulling the blanket tighter around her shoulders.

She checks the latch on the window, ensuring it is locked, then searches the shelves for a flask of water and offers it to Grandmother.

Grandmother, motivated to reassure Red, clasps her granddaughter’s hand and murmurs, ‘You came just in time, child.

Grandmother squeezes Red’s hand gently, her eyes shining with both relief and gratitude as she offers a weak but heartfelt smile. Grandmother squeezed Red’s hand, her fingers trembling but

warm with affection. Relief shimmered in her eyes, mingling with gratitude as she managed a feeble yet heartfelt smile. “Oh, my dear Red, you came just in time, child,” she murmured, her voice soft but steady despite her weariness. “I don’t know what I would have done without you here. You are such a blessing to your old grandmother.” Red (Red Riding Hood)Red squeezes Grandmother’s hand gently and leans in close, her eyes filled with concern and affection. Red squeezed Grandmother’s hand, her fingers gentle and warm, and leaned in until their foreheads nearly touched. Worry flickered in her eyes, but affection shone brighter. “Oh, Grandmother,” she whispered, voice steady despite the rush of emotion, “I’m so glad I made it—I’ll always come when you need me.” I knew you would.

Grandmother sits in her armchair, a gentle smile tugging at the corners of her lips as she gazes out the window, lost in thought. Grandmother sat nestled in her favorite armchair, her hands folded neatly in her lap as she gazed out the window at the shifting shadows beneath the trees. A gentle smile tugged at the corners of her lips, warmth and pride softening her wise eyes. She had always known—deep down—that Red would find her way here, just as she always did. Even now, as the familiar creak of the cottage door announced her granddaughter’s arrival, Grandmother’s heart swelled with quiet certainty. Of course Red had come. She always did have a way of following her heart, no matter what anyone said. ’ Red listens for any sounds outside, her eyes darting to the shadowed corners, determined to secure the cottage and protect Grandmother.

Outside, the first rays of dawn begin to filter through the trees, casting a soft glow over the battered cottage. As the danger fades into memory, Red takes a steadying breath, feeling the weight of her choices settle around her. With Grandmother safe beside her and the Wolf gone, a new sense of calm fills the room—one that hints at the promise of healing and the unknown path that lies ahead. The ordeal has changed them both, and as morning breaks, Red steps toward the door, ready to face whatever comes next.

Chapter 8: Resolution and A New Beginning

Red and Lucian stand by the split-rail fence, both aware of a growing sense of unease in the woods.

Red (Red Riding Hood)Red tugs her hood a little tighter, leaning casually against the fence, her gaze curious but warm as she tries to catch Lucian’s eyes. Red tugged her hood a little tighter against the morning chill, the fabric comforting beneath her fingers as she leaned casually against the split-rail fence. Her gaze found Lucian, busy at the woodpile, every swing of his axe measured and intent. She watched him for a moment, a quiet smile playing at her lips. There was something familiar in the way he worked—steadfast, just as he’d been last autumn when he’d pulled her from the tangled thicket without hesitation.

Tilting her head, Red called out gently, her voice carrying warmth and curiosity. “You know, Lucian, you chop wood with the same determination you had back then,” she said, remembering the brambles and his steady hand. She studied his face, searching for the flicker of thought behind his concentration. “Are you preparing for another long night, or is something on your mind?” The question lingered, genuine concern woven through her words as she waited for him to meet her eyes. Lucian (The Woodsman)Lucian pauses, wiping sweat from his brow, and glances over at Red with a half-smile that doesn’t quite reach his eyes. Lucian paused in his work, wiping the sweat from his brow with the back of his hand. His gaze drifted to Red, lingering just a

moment too long as she adjusted the hood of her familiar red cloak beside the weathered fence. He offered her a half-smile—an attempt at reassurance, though worry still shadowed his eyes. “Old habits die hard, Red,” he said, voice low and earnest. His hand tightened on the axe handle as he glanced toward the darkening line of trees. “Besides, the forest’s been restless lately, and I’d rather be ready than sorry.” Red (Red Riding Hood) Red leans in a little, her fingers tightening around the fence rail as her gaze flickers from Lucian’s steady hands to the shadowed line of trees beyond. Red adjusted the hood of her cloak, fingers curling tighter around the rough fence rail as she watched Lucian’s steady hands work. Her gaze drifted past him, searching the edge of the woods where shadows pooled between ancient trunks. The word lingered on her lips, colored by a restless energy she could not quite hide. “Restless, you say?” she murmured, her curiosity sharpening the question as she leaned in, hoping for a glimpse of whatever adventure the forest might promise. Lucian (The Woodsman) Lucian pauses, glancing toward the shadowed tree line, then sets another log on the pile with deliberate care. Lucian paused midway through stacking the firewood, his gaze drifting toward the shadowed tree line where the afternoon light failed to reach. He set another log on the pile with deliberate care, the motion slower than usual as if weighing his words. Red adjusted the hood of her cloak, watching him from the split-rail fence, her presence both comfort and concern. Lucian’s voice was low, edged with caution born from too many nights spent listening to the forest’s secrets. Tracks had appeared where they shouldn’t be, he thought grimly—unmistakable signs pressed into the damp earth. And lately, after sunset, there were far too many eyes glittering in the darkness, watching from places the woodsman preferred remained empty. Red (Red Riding Hood) Red leans forward, gripping the fence rail, her gaze fixed on the shadowed tree line as if expecting movement. Red leaned forward, her fingers curling tightly around the rough wood of the fence rail, the fabric of her crimson hood shifting as she adjusted it against a chill breeze. Her eyes stayed fixed on the shadowed tree line, searching for any flicker of movement among the tangled undergrowth. The crows had been circling closer to the village lately, she’d noticed—dark shapes winging low above the rooftops, their calls sharper than usual. It made her wonder, not for the first time, whether whatever lurked beyond the fence was searching for more than just scraps this time. Lucian (The Woodsman) Lucian wipes sweat from his brow, glancing toward the shadowed treeline with a wary frown. Lucian wiped the sweat from his brow, his gaze lingering on the shadowed edge of the treeline. A wary frown creased his features as he studied the shifting darkness where the forest pressed close. Whatever lurked out there, he knew, was clever enough to realize they were watching—but bold enough not to care. The thought tightened his grip on the axe at his side, and he cast a protective glance toward Red, silently promising himself that he would let nothing slip past his vigilance. Red (Red Riding Hood) Red tightens her grip on the fence, her brows knitting together in concern as she glances toward the winding path leading to her grandmother’s cottage. Red tightened her grip on the rough wood of the split-rail fence, her brows knitting together as she watched Lucian stride with that familiar, unsettling confidence down the winding path toward her grandmother’s cottage. The evening light caught the edge of her red cloak as she pulled the hood forward, a protective gesture born of both habit and unease. Trouble had a certain way of following boldness, she mused, her mind racing ahead of Lucian’s footsteps. Should she warn Grandmother to keep her lantern burning late into the night? The thought lingered, heavy and insistent, as she weighed the risks in the deepening dusk. Lucian (The Woodsman) Lucian hefts another log onto the wheelbarrow, his gaze flickering toward the shadowed tree line as his jaw tightens with concern. Lucian hefted another log onto the wheelbarrow, muscles taut beneath his homespun shirt. His gaze flickered warily toward the shadowed tree line, jaw tightening as a familiar unease settled over him. “Red,” he said, his voice low and earnest, “be sure to tell your grandmother to keep the lantern burning tonight, and bar

her door.” He paused, the weight of his concern evident as he straightened and brushed sawdust from his hands. “I’ll circle the edge of the woods before dusk, just to be certain everything’s as it should be.” As Lucian stacks firewood, he and Red discuss strange signs—restless wildlife, unusual tracks, and circling crows—hinting at a new, more cunning threat.

Lucian (The Woodsman) Lucian gently presses the talisman into Red’s palm, his calloused fingers lingering for a moment before letting go. He meets her gaze, earnest and protective, a faint smile tugging at the corners of his lips. Lucian set aside his axe, the weight of the day’s labor evident in the slow, deliberate way he wiped sweat from his brow. He reached into his pocket and drew out a small talisman, its smooth surface shaped and polished by patient hands. Gently, he pressed the carved wood into Red’s palm, his calloused fingers lingering in a silent promise of protection. Their eyes met—his gaze steady, earnest, protective. A faint smile flickered at the corners of his lips as he explained, voice low and heartfelt, that the talisman was more than a simple trinket. He had carved it from the heartwood of the old yew, the very tree that had sheltered him during a violent storm. The wolf etched onto its surface stood for vigilance, for strength, for the duty of watching over those they cared about. He urged her to keep it close, and, should she ever find herself lost among the tangled shadows of the woods, to remember that she was not alone. Red (Red Riding Hood) Red meets Lucian’s gaze, her eyes shining with gratitude, before slipping the wolf talisman into a hidden pocket. Red met Lucian’s gaze, her eyes shining with gratitude as she accepted the small, carved wolf talisman from his calloused hand. The wood felt warm in her palm, a silent testament to the care and hours Lucian had poured into its making. She closed her fingers around it, letting its weight anchor her for a moment before she slipped it into the hidden pocket beneath her cloak. As she did, Red couldn’t help but sense the comfort of Lucian’s watchful spirit accompanying her, a silent promise of protection as she prepared to step into the unknown. Lucian gifts Red a wolf-shaped talisman, carved from yew, symbolizing both protection and the bond between them.

Their conversation reveals a deepened trust and shared vigilance: Red acknowledges that the talisman carries not just luck, but a promise between them, and Lucian reassures her she is never alone.

Red (Red Riding Hood) Red turns the talisman over in her palm, her fingers tracing the carved pattern. She looks up, searching Lucian’s face, her voice quiet but steady. Red turned the talisman over in her palm, feeling the cool, rough grain of the carved wood beneath her fingertips. She let her gaze linger on the intricate patterns, tracing them as if trying to unlock some hidden meaning. When she finally looked up, her eyes found Lucian’s, searching his expression for something unspoken. Her voice was quiet but steady, the words emerging almost as a confession. She remembered, aloud but softly, “Do you remember the first time you gave this to me?” Back then, she hadn’t understood—couldn’t have understood—what it truly meant. Now, each time she held it, the weight seemed to grow, as if the talisman carried more than luck or protection; as if it bore the silent promise that bound them together. Lucian (The Woodsman) Lucian’s gaze softens as he reaches out, his hand hovering just above Red’s, uncertain if he should touch the talisman or let her hold it a while longer. Lucian hesitated, his calloused hand hovering just above Red’s as she turned the talisman over in her palm, feeling the rough grain of the wood. His gaze, usually so guarded, softened as he watched her. He hadn’t meant for the gift to burden her. The thought troubled him; with quiet earnestness, he murmured, “I never meant for it to weigh on you, Red.” His voice was low, almost apologetic, as if he feared the token had become more a shackle than a comfort. “I only wanted you to remember you’re never alone in these woods—not while I still draw

breath.” The words lingered in the hush between them, threaded with his care and the unspoken promise beneath. Red (Red Riding Hood) Red traces her thumb over the carved symbol, her gaze flickering between Lucian’s face and the silent shadows beyond them. Red traced her thumb over the carved symbol, the talisman turning slowly in her palm. The wood felt cool and rough against her skin, grounding her thoughts as her gaze flickered between Lucian’s searching eyes and the silent shadows shifting beyond the firelight. She hesitated, then allowed herself a small, wry smile. Maybe that was it—the reason she kept the talisman so close, even in the moments when fear threatened to swallow her. It wasn’t only about her own survival anymore. The weight of responsibility, of caring for something beyond herself, pressed gently but insistently at her heart, and the talisman served as a quiet reminder of that truth. Lucian (The Woodsman) Lucian reaches out, his callused fingers gently brushing Red’s hand, steadying the talisman between them as if anchoring them both. Lucian reached out, his callused fingers brushing against Red’s hand, steadying the talisman as if anchoring them both in the hush between ancient trees. His gaze lingered on the weathered charm resting in her palm, the wood cool and rough, shaped by time and worry. “You carry it like I carry your trust,” he said quietly, his voice steady and earnest, “worn smooth by worry, but unbroken, and more precious for every trial it’s seen.” The words settled between them, gentle as his touch, a promise threaded through with all the care and caution he held for her. When Lucian suggests escorting Red to Grandmother’s, the conversation shifts to strategy—they debate possible paths, realizing the wolf anticipates their movements and that the obvious trails are now traps.

Red (Red Riding Hood) Red steps forward to pick up the last log, her fingers accidentally brushing against Lucian’s as they both reach for it. She looks up, her cheeks warming, holding his gaze a moment longer than usual before smiling shyly. Red stepped forward, reaching for the last log just as Lucian’s hand brushed against hers. The sudden contact sent a warmth rushing to her cheeks, and for a breathless moment, she held his gaze, a shy smile flickering across her lips. “Thank you, Lucian,” she murmured, her voice soft but sincere as she helped steady the wood between them. She glanced at the growing stack, her curiosity piqued by the sheer effort involved. “I never realized how much work goes into preparing for winter,” she admitted, her fingers lingering on the rough bark before she tucked a stray strand of hair behind her ear. “It’s easier with you here.” Lucian (The Woodsman) Lucian smiles, their fingers lingering for a heartbeat as they lift the last log together, a quiet warmth settling between them. Their hands brushed as they hefted the final log together, and Lucian’s smile lingered, gentle and earnest. For a moment, their fingers touched—a subtle exchange of warmth that neither seemed in a hurry to break. As Red stepped forward to help settle the logs, Lucian’s voice was quietly sincere, the affection in it understated but unmistakable. “It’s easier with you too, Red,” he admitted, glancing at her with a soft look that belied his usual caution. “I never thought I’d look forward to company at the woodpile.” The words seemed to settle in the hush between them, carrying a weight as solid and comforting as the wood they stacked side by side. Red (Red Riding Hood) Red meets Lucian’s eyes for a moment, a soft smile playing on her lips as their hands touch over the last log. Red met Lucian’s gaze, a gentle smile flickering across her lips as she stepped forward to help with the last of the logs. Their hands brushed—just for a moment—over the rough bark, and she felt a warmth that lingered between them. “Sometimes,” she murmured, glancing up at him from beneath the brim of her hood, “I think the work feels lighter just because we’re together.” The words slipped out softly, threaded with gratitude and something more, as she steadied the log and let her fingers rest against his before moving away. Red insists they must avoid predictability and instead take an unconventional route, even if it’s more dangerous.

Together, they decide to cut through the brambles, trusting their instincts and resourcefulness over the familiar paths.

Red (Red Riding Hood) Red glances down the shadowed path, her grip tightening on her basket as she looks back at Lucian, concern flickering in her eyes. Red's gaze lingered on the shadowed path ahead, uncertainty threading through her features as her fingers curled tighter around the wicker handle of her basket. She looked back at Lucian, concern flickering in her eyes before she shook her head, her voice low but steady. It wasn't so simple—heading that way would leave them exposed, she knew. The wolf had prowled these woods far longer than either of them, its secrets woven into every thicket and hollow. "If we take that route," she murmured, weighing the risks aloud, "we'll be right in the open. The wolf knows these woods better than we do." Lucian (The Woodsman) Red glances around, scanning the dense thicket for a safer path, her jaw set with determination. Red glanced around, her eyes narrowing as she searched the dense thicket for any hint of a safer path. Her jaw set with determination, but Lucian gently caught her arm before she could move. "We need to think like him," he murmured, his voice low but insistent, refusing to let her charge blindly ahead. "Not just run where he expects." His grip was steady—protective, not restraining—reminding her that survival required more than courage; it needed cunning. Red (Red Riding Hood) Red folds her arms tightly, gaze fixed on the shadowy path, her voice firm but edged with worry. Red folded her arms tightly across her chest, her eyes fixed on the shadowy path ahead. Though her voice was firm, a thin thread of worry wove through it as she considered the plan and shook her head. "That's exactly why I can't agree—we'd be playing right into his claws." Lucian (The Woodsman) Red folds her arms tightly, her gaze flickering toward the shadowed trees as if expecting movement. Red folded her arms tightly across her chest, eyes darting toward the shadowed trees as if she half-expected a shape to break free from their gloom. Lucian took in her tension, his own gaze lingering on the tangled undergrowth. His voice was low but certain as he said, "If we make ourselves predictable, he'll hunt us down before we even reach the river." The warning was not just for her, but for the silence pressing all around them—a reminder that caution, not comfort, was their safest companion in these woods. Red (Red Riding Hood) Red glances anxiously at the tangled shadows between the trees, her grip tightening on her basket. Red hesitated at the edge of the path, her eyes searching the tangled shadows between the trees. The basket in her hand felt suddenly heavier, the familiar weight grounding her as unease prickled along her spine. She considered the options laid out before her, the trails winding into darkness, each one beckoning with false promises of safety. But instinct whispered warnings she couldn't ignore. She shook her head, resolve settling in her chest. Every path he expects us to take is a trap—I can feel it. The certainty of the thought steeled her, and she tightened her grip on the basket, determined not to let fear dictate her next move. Lucian (The Woodsman) Lucian narrows his eyes, scanning the shadowed trees for any hint of a hidden trail. Lucian narrowed his eyes, his gaze sweeping over the shadowed trees as if searching for secrets woven into the undergrowth. He kept his voice low, almost grave, as he spoke—more to the forest than to Red, though his words were meant for her. If they followed the obvious paths, he warned, they would be walking straight into danger, just as the Wolf would expect. Unless they found a way he couldn't anticipate, they risked leading themselves toward peril with every step. Red (Red Riding Hood) Red glances toward a dense, tangled patch of brambles, her jaw set with determination. Red's gaze lingered on the dense, tangled patch of brambles ahead, her jaw set with determination. The well-trodden trail behind her felt suddenly predictable, an easy road that anyone—even those she wished to avoid—could follow without effort. She weighed her options, curiosity and resolve warring in her chest, before a subtle shake of her head dispelled any hesitation. Instinct, she reminded herself,

mattered more than habit. If there was a way through that wild thicket, perhaps it was a path her pursuer wouldn't dare attempt. Trusting her gut over the familiar route, Red stepped closer to the brambles, ready to test her cleverness against the shadows of the woods. Lucian (The Woodsman) Lucian gestures toward the dense undergrowth, determination sharpening his gaze. Lucian's hand swept toward the tangled brambles ahead, his eyes narrowing with quiet resolve. "Let's cut through there, Red," he said, the steel in his voice softened by concern. "If it's rough for us, it'll slow him too." The undergrowth loomed thick and shadowed, but Lucian's protective instinct was unmistakable—he would not risk the easier path, not with danger close behind. Red sets off toward Grandmother's, Lucian promising to guard her, both determined to outwit the lurking danger.

Hand in hand, Red and Lucian disappeared into the tangled brambles, their courage and trust lighting the way through shadow, as the forest watched in silence—a new chapter beginning beneath the sheltering trees.