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Chapter 5: The Confrontation at the Cottage

Red and Elias arrive at the cottage, tension running high as Red hesitates at the threshold.

Elias stands protectively behind her, his ax ready.

When Red knocks, Lucien—posing as Grandmother—welcomes them in, his performance convincing at first.

The air is thick with suspicion as Lucien pours tea and offers it to Red, but she challenges him, refusing to drink until he does.

Lucien complies to ease her doubts, but the underlying distrust remains.

Elias, unsettled by signs of intrusion (muddy boots by the hearth), interrogates Lucien about them, suggesting that danger may already be inside.

Lucien WolfLucien pours the tea with careful grace, the porcelain cup clinking gently as he places it in front of Red. His eyes linger on her face, searching for a reaction, his demeanor gentle but watchful. Lucien poured the tea with meticulous care, the porcelain cup giving a soft clink as he set it before Red. His fingers lingered at the rim, and his gaze, gentle yet intent, traced the worry etched across her face. “Please, Red, have some tea,” he urged, the words low and coaxing as if the warmth of the brew could leech the tension from her shoulders. “You look weary—it will calm your nerves.” His voice was silk over steel, persuasive with a hint of something possessive beneath. Watching her closely, Lucien leaned in just a fraction, the corners of his mouth tightening with concern. “I would not see you come to harm under my roof.” Red (Red Riding Hood)Red hesitates, her fingers hovering over the delicate porcelain, eyes narrowed as she studies Lucien’s face for any sign of deceit. Red’s fingers lingered just above the rim of the porcelain cup, her hesitation masked by a polite smile. She watched Lucien closely, noting the careful way he poured the tea, the steadiness of his hands as he placed the cup before her. Something in his composure made her wary. With her eyes narrowed in quiet scrutiny, she tipped her head, voice gentle yet edged with curiosity. “Thank you, Lucien,” she said, her words deliberate, “but I can’t help but wonder—what exactly have you put in it?” Lucien WolfLucien meets Red’s gaze steadily, his lips quirked in a half-smile as he pushes the cup a fraction closer across the table. Lucien met Red’s gaze with unwavering intensity, his lips curling into a sly, half-smile as he nudged the delicate porcelain cup a shade nearer to her. The warm steam curled toward her, fragrant with chamomile

and honey—his choice of comfort, or so he claimed. His hands were steady, almost deliberate, as he poured the tea, watching her with an expression that hovered between invitation and challenge. “It’s only chamomile and honey, Red,” he murmured, his voice layered with reassurance and a hint of mockery. “Nothing more sinister than comfort—unless, of course, you suspect I’d wish you ill for trusting me.” The words lingered in the air, sweet as the tea yet tinged with a subtle threat, his eyes flickering with jealousy and something else, something desperate. Red (Red Riding Hood) Red wraps her hands around the cup but makes no move to drink, her eyes fixed on Lucien’s face, searching for the slightest twitch of guilt or malice. Red curled her hands around the cup, the warmth seeping into her palms, but she made no move to raise it to her lips. Her gaze never left Lucien’s face, sharp and unwavering, as if she could force the truth from him by sheer will. “Trust is earned, Lucien, not steeped,” she said quietly, each word measured, her voice carrying both challenge and apology. “Forgive me if I wait and watch you take the first sip.” Lucien Wolf Lucien lifts the delicate cup to his lips, his eyes never leaving Red’s, and sips slowly, the steam curling between them like a silent question. Lucien lifted the delicate cup to his lips, his gaze locked unwaveringly on Red. The porcelain trembled faintly in his hand, though his movements remained composed, careful not to betray the restlessness simmering beneath his exterior. Steam curled up between them, an unspoken challenge lingering in the air. “Very well, Red,” he murmured, his voice a velvet thread weaving through the tension. “If it eases your mind, I shall drink first.” He sipped slowly, letting the ritual reassure her, all the while watching for the flicker of trust—or suspicion—in her eyes. Lucien Wolf Lucien sips from his own cup, his gaze never leaving Red as steam curls between them, the space thick with unspoken challenge. Lucien’s fingers wrapped around his own cup, steady and deliberate, as he set another before Red. Steam curled upward, weaving between them in the charged hush. His gaze never left her, not even as he drew a slow sip from his tea, the porcelain muffling the edge of his grin. “See?” he murmured, voice low and coaxing, almost intimate. “No harm done.” He leaned in just enough to breach her wariness, eyes flickering with challenge and longing. “Now, will you trust me enough to join me,” he pressed, letting the words linger like the scent of bergamot, “or shall we sit in silence with our doubts between us?” Red (Red Riding Hood) Red keeps her hands folded in her lap, eyes fixed on Lucien’s as she refuses the tea, her posture tense but unyielding. Red kept her hands folded firmly in her lap, her knuckles pale against the worn fabric of her skirt. Her eyes didn’t waver from Lucien’s as he set the porcelain cup gently before her, steam curling from its rim. Though the tea’s fragrance drifted between them, she made no move toward it. Her posture was tense, every line of her body quietly defiant.

Lucien’s gaze lingered, steady and expectant, urging her to accept the offer. But Red only drew a breath, her voice low and resolute as she finally spoke. “Perhaps silence is safer, Lucien—sometimes what’s left unspoken is more telling than any shared cup.”

She watched the flicker of understanding cross his face, the words hanging in the charged space between them, more meaningful than any ritual of hospitality. The conversation turns tense and personal as Lucien abandons his disguise, confessing his deep feelings for Red in a passionate outpouring.

Elias circles the room, his fingers trailing along the edge of the window frame. His eyes flick toward the muddy boots by the hearth, then linger on the half-drawn curtains, as if measuring the shadows that spill into the room. Elias moved quietly around the small room, his calloused fingers idly tracing the worn edge of the window frame. He paused, gaze flickering to the muddy boots left by the hearth, then to the half-drawn curtains where shadows spilled across the floor.

When Lucien offered, Elias shook his head with a soft, apologetic smile. “No, thank you, Lucien. I can’t seem to settle tonight.” The words were gentle but firm, underscored by the restless way he kept circling, always half-watching the darkness beyond the glass. Lucien WolfLucien studies Elias intently, his eyes flickering from the boots to the restless pacing. Lucien watched Elias with a predator’s patience, eyes tracing each restless step across the battered floorboards. He noted the way Elias’s gaze snagged on the half-drawn curtains, the muddy boots by the door. Lucien’s voice slipped into the space between them, low and coaxing, as if he could draw truth out of shadows. “Is something troubling you, Elias,” he murmured, careful to keep his tone soft, persuasive, “or is it the weather seeping in through those half-open curtains?” The question lingered, heavy with implication, while Lucien’s gaze refused to let Elias go. Elias pauses by the muddy boots, his hand hovering above them as if expecting them to move of their own accord. Elias paused by the muddy boots, his hand hovering above them as if half-expecting they might twitch or shift of their own accord. He didn’t sit, declining Lucien’s silent offer with a subtle shake of his head, and instead began to circle the small room. His gaze lingered on the half-drawn curtains, then drifted over the patch of mud smeared across the floorboards—signs of intrusion that gnawed at his practical mind.

“It’s not the weather, Lucien,” he said quietly, voice earnest and edged with concern as he finally looked up, loyalty and unease flickering in his eyes. “It’s what we let in without noticing.” The words hung in the dusky air, a warning woven into the fabric of his protective nature. Lucien WolfLucien gestures toward the hearth, his eyes narrowing as he studies Elias’s restless pacing. Lucien leaned against the mantel, his gesture casual but his eyes sharp as they tracked Elias’s restless movement. The firelight cast flickering shadows on his face, sharpening the suspicion in his narrowed gaze. “Those boots by the fire weren’t there this afternoon, Elias,” he noted, voice low and edged with curiosity. “Are you expecting someone, or did you bring something in with you?” His words slid into the room as smoothly as a knife, probing for answers as Elias’s attention lingered uneasily on the muddy footprints and the half-drawn curtains. Elias pauses by the hearth, his hand hovering uncertainly above the boots, eyes flicking toward the shadowed corners of the room. Elias paused by the hearth, his hand hovering uncertainly above the battered boots. His eyes swept the room, lingering on the half-drawn curtains and the muddy footprints tracking across the floorboards. “I found them outside,” he said quietly, his voice low and earnest as if sharing a secret best kept from the shadows pooling in the corners. “Half-buried in the mire—someone left in a hurry, or...” His gaze flickered back to the boots, troubled, “...or hoped they wouldn’t be found.” Lucien WolfLucien steps closer to the hearth, his eyes narrowing as he studies Elias’s restless pacing and the dark space beyond the curtains. Lucien stepped closer to the hearth, letting the glow of the fire catch sharp angles in his face as he studied Elias’s restless pacing. His eyes narrowed, tracking the other man’s gaze as it lingered on the half-drawn curtains and the trail of muddy footprints across the floorboards. A sly, knowing smile curled at the edge of Lucien’s mouth. “You seem more concerned about what lingers in the shadows than the mud on the floor, Elias,” he remarked quietly, his tone silk-wrapped steel, “Should I be worried for both our sakes?” Elias pauses near the hearth, his eyes fixed on the boots as if expecting them to move of their own accord. Elias paused near the hearth, his gaze fixed on the pair of boots by the door, as if half-expecting them to twitch or shift on their own. He didn’t sit, though the invitation lingered in the room; instead, he circled quietly, eyes drifting over the half-drawn curtains and the trail of muddy footprints that stained the floorboards. Turning to Lucien with a gentle earnestness, Elias spoke up, voice low but steady. “Perhaps you should,” he suggested, nodding toward the boots. “There are things that cling to us long after we’ve brushed the mud away.” The words hung in

the air—a practical warning, but also something deeper, a protective concern woven into his every movement. Lucien WolfLucien steps closer to the fire, eyeing the boots and glancing at the restless flicker of Elias’s shadow on the wall. Lucien stepped closer to the fire, the warmth licking at his shins as he eyed the boots set haphazardly by the hearth. His gaze flickered, nearly as restless as Elias’s own shadow—stretching and shrinking across the walls as the other man paced. Lucien let his lips curl into a sly, knowing half-smile, tracking Elias’s unease as he circled the room, his attention snagging on the half-drawn curtains and the muddy boots. Then, with a smoothness born of practiced manipulation, Lucien fixed his gaze on Elias and, voice low and edged with meaning, asked, “Tell me, Elias, are we hiding from what’s outside—or from what’s already found its way in?” Red is shocked by this revelation, torn between the two men and the secrets swirling around her.

Lucien WolfLucien’s hands tremble as he pulls off the shawl, his voice raw with emotion. He stands before Red, unmasked, vulnerability etched in every line of his face. Lucien’s hands shook as he tore the shawl from his shoulders, the fabric slipping through his fingers and pooling at his feet. He stepped forward, blocking Red’s escape, every trace of his usual composure stripped away. Vulnerability carved deep lines across his face, and when he finally spoke, his voice was low, urgent, almost raw. “Red, wait—please,” he managed, words tumbling out in desperate haste. “Before you go, there’s something I can’t hide any longer. I—” The confession caught in his throat, but the intensity in his gaze made clear what he could not yet say aloud. Red (Red Riding Hood)Red freezes mid-step, eyes wide as Lucien pulls off the shawl, her fingers clutching her basket in stunned disbelief. Red froze mid-step, her fingers tightening around the wicker handle of her basket as Lucien’s trembling hands pulled away her shawl. His voice—low and urgent—filled the hush between them with words that tumbled like stones, confessions she hadn’t expected. She stared at him, eyes wide, the truth of his affection crashing into her with all the force of a storm. Stunned disbelief rooted her to the spot. “Lucien—your face, I—what are you doing?” The words slipped out, half-whispered, as she tried to read the emotions flickering across his features, searching for the meaning behind his desperate, unguarded gaze. Lucien WolfLucien’s hands tremble as the shawl slips from his shoulders, his eyes searching Red’s face for hope or forgiveness. Lucien’s hands trembled, the shawl slipping from his shoulders and pooling at his feet, unnoticed. His voice, low and raw, broke the charged silence between them. “I can’t pretend anymore—” The words tumbled out, desperate, as his eyes searched Red’s face for some flicker of hope, some sign of forgiveness. “It’s you, Red, it’s always been you, and I couldn’t bear another day hiding what I feel.” The confession hung in the air, as fragile and dangerous as a secret finally revealed, and Lucien clung to it, willing Red to understand the truth behind every syllable. Red (Red Riding Hood)Red takes a step back, heart pounding, her basket nearly slipping from her grasp as she tries to process the truth in Lucien’s eyes. Red took a sharp step back, her heart pounding so hard she almost dropped her basket. She searched Lucien’s face, desperate to make sense of the vulnerability shining in his eyes. The truth in his expression left her breathless, her own words tangled with disbelief and something softer, far more dangerous. “Lucien, I—why didn’t you tell me before?” The question slipped out, raw and trembling, as she tried to steady herself against the onrush of feeling and the new shape their world might take. Lucien WolfLucien’s hands tremble as he clutches the shawl, his eyes searching Red’s face for any sign of hope or forgiveness. Lucien’s hands trembled as he clutched the shawl, knuckles white, his gaze fixed on Red with a desperate intensity. His voice, when it finally broke the silence, was low and urgent, every word tumbling out as if he feared they might be snatched away. “Every time I tried,” he confessed, the words heavy with longing and regret, “the fear of losing you was stronger than the hope you might feel

the same.” The admission hung between them, raw and unguarded, Lucien’s eyes searching Red’s face for any flicker of hope or forgiveness. Red (Red Riding Hood) Red’s voice trembles as she steps closer, searching Lucien’s eyes for the truth, her heart pounding with confusion and something like hope. Red’s voice trembled as she stepped closer, her gaze searching Lucien’s eyes for a truth she both dreaded and longed to find. Her heart pounded with confusion and something that might have been hope, raw and unfamiliar. She drew in a shaky breath, her words barely more than a whisper as she confessed, “Lucien, you’ve been right beside me all this time—and I never saw it, not really.” Lucien Wolf Lucien’s hands tremble as he lets the shawl fall completely, his eyes searching Red’s for any sign of hope or rejection. Lucien’s hands trembled as the shawl slipped from his grasp, pooling at his feet without a sound. He stood before Red, every muscle taut with desperation, his eyes searching hers as if hoping to catch a flicker of mercy or a trace of hope—or perhaps, dreading the shadow of rejection. His voice was low, urgent, thick with longing he could no longer restrain. “Red,” he murmured, the words tumbling out before caution could intervene, “I would rather stand before you bare and risk everything than spend another moment in the shadows of my own heart.” The confession hung between them, raw and unfinished, as Lucien’s breath caught, waiting to see if his vulnerability would be met with solace or a shattering silence. Red (Red Riding Hood) Red steps back, her hands trembling, eyes locked on Lucien’s unveiled face, torn between shock and a dawning warmth. Red stepped back, her hands trembling as she stared at Lucien’s unveiled face. Her heart pounded so fiercely she could almost hear it echoing between them. Shock warred with something warmer, something she hadn’t expected to feel. She drew a shaky breath, voice barely above a whisper as she admitted, “I never imagined you felt this way.” Her gaze didn’t waver—if anything, it grew more searching, more vulnerable. “But now that I see you, truly see you, I don’t know if I can ever look at you the same again.” Lucien Wolf Lucien steps closer, his eyes searching Red’s face for hope, vulnerability laid bare in the trembling of his hands. Lucien stepped closer, the dim light catching the tremor in his hands. His eyes searched Red’s face, desperate for some flicker of hope or understanding. His voice, low and urgent, slipped between them as if he couldn’t hold the words back any longer. “Red, I need you to see me, all of me—because every part of me has loved you, even the ones I tried to hide.” The confession tumbled out, raw and unguarded, leaving him exposed in a vulnerability he rarely allowed anyone to witness. Red (Red Riding Hood) Red steps closer, her gaze searching Lucien’s face, her breath unsteady as she reaches for his trembling hand. Red stepped closer, her gaze searching Lucien’s face as if she might find the truth written there, her breath catching in her throat. She reached for his trembling hand, her own fingers just as unsteady, and for a moment, the world seemed to narrow to the space between them. “Lucien,” she whispered, her voice trembling with a mixture of fear and wonder, “I—I see you now, and it’s terrifying and wonderful all at once.” Lucien then reveals that he was never at the cottage by accident: he was sent by a mysterious Council to protect Red from a greater threat—the Wolf—and that Lucien himself is the Wolf’s son.

Lucien Wolf Lucien steps out from the shadows, gaze locked on Red, voice low and charged with urgency. He glances at Elias, the challenge clear, then fixes his eyes on Red, awaiting her answer. Lucien slipped from the shadows, his movements deliberate, eyes glinting with a cunning that belied his urgency. He fixed his gaze on Red, the intensity in his voice sharpening the air between them. “You think you know your grandmother,” he murmured, tone low and charged, “but I’ve seen what she hides from you.” His glance flickered briefly toward Elias, a silent challenge passing between them, before he returned his full attention to Red. “There’s a secret buried beneath her floorboards—the one you never dared to ask about.” He stepped closer, each word laced with both promise and threat. “I know the truth, Red. I can share it with you, but only if you

choose me.” Lucien’s voice dropped almost to a whisper, desperate and persuasive. “You must decide: trust me and learn everything, or stay with Elias and keep living in the dark.” And then he waited, every muscle tense, watching her for the answer that would shape all their fates. Red (Red Riding Hood) Red glances anxiously between Lucien and Elias, her fists clenched at her sides, heart pounding with fear and longing for answers. Red’s fists trembled at her sides, her knuckles whitening as she darted anxious glances between Lucien and Elias. The uncertainty pressed down on her chest, her heartbeat echoing with both fear and a desperate need for the truth. She swallowed, voice barely steady as she fixed Lucien with a determined stare. If he truly knew what Grandmother was hiding, why was he forcing her into this cruel choice? Why not simply help her? The question hung between them, raw and pleading, a reflection of everything she’d been taught to distrust—and everything she longed to understand. Elias meets Lucien’s eyes, protective, while Red glances between them, torn and uncertain. Elias stepped forward, placing himself squarely between Red and Lucien, his protective stance unmistakable. He met Lucien’s eyes with steady resolve, then turned to Red, his voice firm but earnest. “Because, Red,” he said, the words weighted with both warning and care, “Lucien doesn’t offer truth—he offers control.” Elias’s gaze softened as he looked at her, making sure she understood. “I’d never make you choose between love and answers.” Lucien Wolf Red squeezes Elias’s hand, torn between the hunger for truth and loyalty, while Elias’s jaw tightens, bracing for her decision. Lucien leaned in, the sharpness in his eyes betraying the hunger beneath his polished words. “But answers come at a price, Red,” he murmured, voice low and coaxing, each syllable calculated to unsettle. Red’s fingers tightened around Elias’s hand, torn between the ache for truth and the pull of loyalty, while Elias’s jaw clenched, bracing himself for whatever choice she’d make. Lucien’s gaze flickered to her grip, a subtle smile unfurling as he pressed his advantage. “Choose me,” he promised, his tone slipping into something almost tender, “and you’ll finally understand what your grandmother feared most.” Red (Red Riding Hood) Red clasps her cloak tightly, torn between Lucien’s tempting offer and Elias’s unwavering support, her breath shallow as the weight of the decision threatens to overwhelm her. Red clasped her cloak more tightly around her shoulders, fingers digging into the familiar fabric as she struggled to catch her breath. Lucien’s voice lingered, coaxing and dangerous with the promise of forbidden knowledge, while Elias stood silent beside her, a steady presence she could lean on—if only her heart weren’t so divided. Her eyes darted between them, searching their faces for answers and finding only the same uncertainty reflected back at her. The weight of the choice pressed down until her voice cracked with the strain, her words barely emerging as more than a whisper: “I can’t—how am I supposed to choose when the truth might destroy everything I love?” Elias gently takes Red’s hand, standing protectively at her side, while Lucien’s smile sharpens, eyes daring Red to break away. Elias stepped quietly to Red’s side, his presence a steady reassurance against the tension radiating from Lucien. Without hesitation, he reached for her hand, his grip gentle but certain, anchoring her in the moment. His voice, low yet unwavering, threaded through the charged silence. “Red, whatever the truth is, we’ll face it together,” he promised, the earnestness in his eyes grounding her despite Lucien’s sharp, taunting smile. “Don’t let him turn your fear into his weapon.” His words lingered between them, a shield of quiet resolve as he stood protectively at her side. Lucien Wolf Lucien steps closer, casting a long shadow between Red and Elias, the tension tightening like a drawn bowstring. Lucien let his feet carry him a step closer, the firelight catching the sharp planes of his face as his shadow stretched, a dark wedge driving between Red and Elias. The air between them grew taut, every heartbeat thrumming with unspoken threats. His voice slipped out low, nearly tender, as if his words were meant for Red alone. “Or perhaps, Red, you’re afraid that the truth will force you to see Elias—and yourself—for who you really are.” The challenge in his gaze was unmistakable, his cunning masked by an intimacy

that threatened to unravel everything Red thought she knew. Red (Red Riding Hood) Red's hands tremble at her sides, her gaze flickering desperately between Lucien's unyielding stare and Elias's steady, pleading eyes. Red's hands trembled at her sides, her breath shallow as she stood caught between Lucien's unyielding stare and the silent plea in Elias's eyes. The weight of Lucien's words pressed against her chest—a promise of truth, shadowed and dangerous. Her voice, barely more than a whisper, slipped out before she could stop it. "If I choose you, Lucien, and the truth is as dark as you promise—will I ever be able to go back?" The question hung in the air, laced with both fear and the quiet steel of her determination. Lucien Wolf Lucien holds out his hand, his gaze never leaving Red's, while Elias clenches his fists at her side, silent but unwavering. Lucien extended his hand toward her, his fingers steady and inviting, every inch of his posture designed to entice. His gaze held Red's—deep, searching, and unyielding—while a slow, velvet smile curled on his lips. "Once secrets are unearthed, Red, there is no returning—only living with what you now know." The words slipped from him like a caress and a warning, all at once. Beside her, Elias stood rigid, fists clenched at his sides, his silence as resolute as his stance, but Lucien's attention never faltered, his challenge clear and electric in the charged air between them. Elias gently reaches for Red's hand, holding it steady as Lucien watches, silent and expectant. Elias reached out gently, his calloused fingers closing around Red's hand, steadying her as if he could anchor her to the earth itself. Lucien lingered nearby, watching with a silent, expectant intensity. Meeting Red's gaze, Elias's voice held steady, earnest and unwavering. "If you leap into darkness with him, Red," he said quietly, his thumb brushing comfortingly over her knuckles, "remember who offered you the light to find your way back." He declares Red is the last heir to a bloodline capable of ending the Wolf, and that Grandmother orchestrated the entire situation, manipulating every choice and danger they've faced.

Red (Red Riding Hood) Red's hands tremble as she shoves the teacup across the table, her eyes wide with fear and anger. She stands abruptly, heart racing, glaring at Lucien, demanding answers. Red's hands trembled as she shoved the teacup across the table, porcelain scraping sharply against the wood. Her eyes, wide with fear and anger, locked onto Lucien's face. She shot to her feet, heart pounding in her chest, her voice raw and urgent. "Lucien, stop—just stop!" The words tumbled out, fierce and unsteady. "I know something's wrong. Don't lie to me." She glared at him, demanding the truth with every inch of her posture. "What are you really doing here? Why have you been following me?" Lucien Wolf Lucien sets his own teacup down with trembling hands, his eyes meeting Red's, conflicted but resolute. Lucien set his teacup down, the porcelain rattling faintly against the saucer as his hands betrayed him with a tremor he could not conceal. His eyes found Red's across the table—wide, wary, demanding answers. For a moment, conflicting emotions warred behind his gaze: jealousy, desperation, a fierce longing to be understood. Yet resolution won out, and he leaned forward, voice low but urgent. "Red, please—it's not what you think, but you deserve the truth." Lucien Wolf Red's hands tremble as she grips the edge of the table, her eyes blazing with hurt and suspicion. Red's knuckles whitened as she gripped the edge of the table, the tremor in her hands betraying the storm of emotion she fought to contain. Her eyes, luminous with hurt and suspicion, never wavered from Lucien's face. With a sudden, sharp movement, she shoved the teacup away, porcelain scraping across wood—a barrier between herself and the man before her. Her voice, raw and demanding, cut through the charged silence: "Then tell me—right now—why should I trust a single word you say?" Lucien Wolf Lucien leans in, voice low and urgent, his eyes flickering with conflicted emotion. Lucien leaned in, the lamplight catching the sharp flicker of uncertainty in his eyes. His voice dropped to a low, urgent whisper, colored by something desperate and dark. "Red, I never wanted to hurt you," he began, words trembling with

the weight of unspoken thoughts. “But if you really want the truth—” He hesitated, searching Red’s startled face, as if hoping to find forgiveness before the confession was even made. “I’m not here by accident; I was sent to watch over you, and there’s more danger than you know.” The air between them seemed to pulse with the secret finally breaking free, and Lucien’s gaze lingered on Red, torn between longing and guilt. Red (Red Riding Hood) Red’s hands tremble as she shoves the teacup further away, eyes blazing with accusation and fear. Red’s hands trembled as she shoved the teacup farther across the table, the porcelain scraping sharply against the wood. Her eyes, usually so gentle, now blazed with a fierce accusation and a flicker of fear. “Sent to watch over me?” she demanded, her voice tight. “By who, Lucien?” She leaned in, searching his face for any crack in his composure. “And what danger—what aren’t you telling me?” Lucien Wolf She shoves the teacup aside, the porcelain clattering, her eyes burning with betrayal and fear. Red’s hand trembled as she shoved the teacup aside, the porcelain clattering against the edge of the table. Her eyes blazed, wounded and wild, as she fixed Lucien with a stare that cut deeper than any accusation. “Enough riddles—tell me everything, now, or I swear I’ll never trust you again.” The words came out sharp, her voice barely steady, trembling at the edge of fear and fury. Lucien Wolf Lucien lowers his gaze, voice low and urgent, as he pushes the teacup aside to meet Red’s eyes directly, the weight of his confession heavy between them. Lucien lowered his gaze, fingers trembling as he pushed the teacup aside, the porcelain scraping quietly against the table’s worn surface. For a moment, he hesitated, the words heavy on his tongue. Then, with a low, urgent voice, he forced himself to meet Red’s startled eyes, desperation flickering in his own. “The Council sent me because they’re afraid,” he confessed, each syllable weighted with something dangerously close to pleading. “The Wolf is hunting you, and I’m the only one who can keep you alive.” The admission hung between them, thickening the air with a mixture of dread and something far more personal. Red (Red Riding Hood) Red stands up abruptly, her chair scraping against the floor, fists clenched at her sides as she glares at Lucien, demanding an answer. Red’s chair scraped harshly against the wooden floor as she stood, the sudden movement sending her untouched teacup skittering away from her. Her fists clenched at her sides, knuckles pale, and she fixed Lucien with a glare sharp enough to pierce through his carefully composed mask. The words tumbled out, fierce and demanding—she refused to be placated. “You expect me to believe that after all your lies?” Her voice trembled with controlled fury. “What exactly is the Council so afraid of, Lucien, and why am I the target?” Lucien Wolf Lucien leans forward, his eyes pleading, as Red recoils further, her knuckles white against the table. Lucien leaned forward, desperation flickering in his eyes as he tried to close the distance Red had carved between them. She shrank back, knuckles whitening against the edge of the table, her breath coming in short, sharp bursts. He held her gaze, voice low and urgent, as if sheer will might anchor her to him. “Because, Red, you’re not just a girl in the woods—you’re the last heir to the bloodline the Wolf fears most.” The words hung in the air, heavy and irrevocable, as he searched her face for understanding, for any sign that she might still trust him. Red (Red Riding Hood) Red leans forward, eyes blazing with urgency, her voice trembling between anger and fear as she grips the edge of the table. Red’s hand shot out, shoving the teacup away so hard it rattled against the saucer. She leaned forward over the table, urgency burning in her eyes—eyes that seemed to flicker with both anger and fear. Her fingers tightened around the table’s edge, knuckles white. “Heir to what, Lucien?” Her words trembled in the tight space between them, each syllable edged with frustration. “Stop hiding behind secrets—if you want me to trust you, tell me what the Wolf really wants and why my life is worth risking yours.” Lucien Wolf Lucien leans forward, voice low and urgent, eyes pleading for Red to believe him as thunder rumbles outside the cottage. Lucien leaned forward, the flickering lamplight catching the desperate gleam in his eyes as thunder rattled the cottage’s windows. His voice dropped to a low, urgent rasp—a sound

that seemed to vibrate with both passion and fear. “Red,” he pleaded, eyes searching her face for a sign of understanding, “the Wolf hunts the blood that can end him—and you carry the legacy to destroy everything he’s built.” As Red recoiled, her trembling hand pushing the teacup away, Lucien’s words hung between them, heavy and inescapable, echoing with the promise of danger and the weight of secrets long kept. Red (Red Riding Hood)Red’s eyes fill with hurt and fury as she pushes her chair back, fists clenched on the table. Red’s eyes burned with a mix of hurt and fury as she shoved her chair back, the legs scraping harshly against the wooden floor. Her fists, white-knuckled, pressed into the edge of the table. The teacup rattled as she pushed it aside, unable to stomach another polite sip. The ache in her voice trembled through the room as she demanded, “So all this time, you’ve been lying to me—watching me like I’m some weapon, not a person?” The words hung heavy, her gaze unwavering and desperate for the truth she’d been denied. Lucien WolfLucien’s voice breaks with guilt as he meets Red’s eyes, his hands clenched tight on the table, bracing for her response. Lucien’s voice faltered, raw with guilt, as he finally met Red’s eyes. His knuckles whitened against the tabletop, as if bracing himself for the blow of her reaction. “Red,” he began, the words trembling out between clenched teeth, “I never wanted you to feel like a pawn—every choice I made was to protect you from a threat you couldn’t see.” The confession hung in the air, heavy as the tension swirling between them, while Red, startled and wary, pushed her teacup away, the porcelain scraping sharply against the wood. Lucien’s gaze didn’t waver, desperate and pleading, hoping his words could pierce through the shock and distrust now etched across her face. Red (Red Riding Hood)Red shoves her chair back, her eyes blazing as she stands, fists clenched and voice trembling with hurt and anger. Red’s chair scraped sharply against the worn wooden floor as she shoved it back, the force of her movement betraying the storm roiling inside her. Her eyes, usually so steady and observant, blazed with a raw mix of hurt and fury as she stood, fists clenched at her sides. The delicate teacup trembled under her hand before she pushed it away, porcelain rattling in the sudden silence. Her voice, though trembling, rang out, each word heavy with accusation and pain. “Protect me? Lucien, you call this protection—lying, hiding the truth, making me feel like I’m just a piece in your game?” The question hung in the air, demanding an answer she suspected she wouldn’t like. Lucien WolfLucien’s voice cracks as he leans forward, eyes pleading, hands open on the table in surrender. Lucien’s voice cracked as he leaned forward, the desperate gleam in his eyes belying any hope of composure. Hands splayed open on the table in a gesture of surrender, he pleaded, “Red, I swear—you were never a game to me.” The words tumbled out, raw and urgent, as if speaking them might change the course of everything. “But if you want the whole truth, I’ll give it, even if it means you hate me.” The confession hung between them, fragile and trembling, as Red, startled, pushed the teacup away, demanding what he’d kept hidden for so long. Red (Red Riding Hood)Red leans in, her voice trembling with anger and fear, fists clenched on the table as she fixes Lucien with an unwavering, desperate stare. Red’s hands trembled as she gripped the edge of the table, knuckles blanching with the force of her anger and fear. The teacup clattered as she shoved it aside, her gaze locking onto Lucien with a fierce, desperate intensity. Voice tight but unwavering, she leaned forward until the shadows between them vanished, demanding, “Then prove it, Lucien—look me in the eyes and tell me everything. No more riddles, no more half-truths. I want the real reason you’re here, right now.” Lucien WolfLucien’s voice shakes as he meets Red’s gaze, bracing himself for her reaction, hands clenched tight on the table. Lucien’s knuckles whitened as he gripped the edge of the table, his breath ragged. Red’s teacup clattered across the wood, her eyes narrowing in demand. He met her gaze, voice trembling despite his effort to steady it. “Red,” he confessed, each word drawn out by desperation and longing, “the truth is—I was sent to protect you.” He hesitated, the next words catching in his throat as jealousy and fear warred within him. “Because I am the Wolf’s son.” The

revelation hung heavy in the air between them. Lucien swallowed, gaze pleading, knowing there was no turning back. “If anyone finds out, both our lives are forfeit.” Red (Red Riding Hood) Red’s voice cracks as her eyes widen in disbelief, her hands clenched tight around the edge of the table, knuckles white. Red’s hands tightened around the edge of the table, her knuckles blanching as shock rippled through her. Her breath hitched, voice cracking as she stared wide-eyed across the room. The teacup rattled as she shoved it away, porcelain scraping against wood. Disbelief sharpened her words. “You—you’re his son?” The question tumbled out, raw and incredulous, as if the truth itself might shatter at her feet. All this time, the secret had lived in the shadows between them, and now Red’s demand for honesty rang out, her determination burning through the haze of betrayal. “All this time, you’ve been hiding that from me?” Lucien Wolf Lucien’s voice trembles as he meets Red’s gaze, his hands curling into fists on the table, bracing for her reaction. Lucien’s voice trembled as he met Red’s gaze, his hands curling into fists on the table, knuckles whitening as though bracing himself for the blow of her reaction. He couldn’t look away, not now—not when the truth pressed so hot and desperate behind his ribs. “Yes, Red—I am,” he confessed, the words slipping out raw and unguarded, “and every day I’ve fought between the blood in my veins and the promise I made to keep you safe.” Red (Red Riding Hood) Red’s voice cracks as she backs away, eyes wide and brimming with hurt, fists clenched at her sides. Red’s hand trembled as she shoved the teacup away, porcelain scraping harshly against the table’s edge. Her voice cracked—thin and sharp, betraying all the hurt she tried to swallow—as she backed away, eyes wide and shining. Fists clenched at her sides, she stared at the one person she thought she could trust. “So everything—the Council, the danger, your secrets—was because you’re torn between me and him?” The words tumbled out, raw and accusing, her determination barely holding back the tide of confusion and betrayal swirling inside her. Lucien Wolf Lucien’s voice cracks as he finally meets her eyes, guilt and desperation raw on his face. Lucien’s voice cracked as he finally forced himself to meet Red’s gaze, his eyes dark with guilt and desperation. Gnarled fingers trembled on the table between them, betraying the storm behind his composed facade. “Yes, Red—every moment with you has been a battle between the loyalty I was born into and the loyalty I chose.” The confession slipped out raw and unguarded, as if he hoped honesty might buy him a sliver of forgiveness he knew he didn’t deserve. Red reels from these revelations, feeling betrayed by Lucien’s secrecy and Grandmother’s machinations.

Lucien Wolf Lucien’s voice cracks as he lowers his eyes, shoulders hunched. The firelight flickers across his pale face, and the room hangs in stunned silence. Red’s mouth falls open in disbelief, her hands clenching tight in her lap. Elias stares into the flames, jaw working wordlessly as the distant caw of crows echoes, the weight of betrayal settling around them like a shroud. Lucien paced the cramped room, shadows flickering across his sharp features as the candlelight trembled with each restless step. His voice broke the uneasy silence, low and fervent, almost pleading. “It was never just the woods, or the wolves,” he said, his eyes darting to Red as if searching for understanding—or forgiveness. “Grandmother—she planned it all. Every path we followed, every warning she whispered—it was her hand guiding us, watching us.” He paused, a tremor of desperation in his breath, hands curling into fists at his sides. “I didn’t want to believe it, but the signs were there.” His gaze dropped, the admission heavy between them. “I’m so sorry. We were never in control.” Red (Red Riding Hood) Red’s voice breaks as she steps back, her eyes wide with disbelief, fists clenching at her sides while Elias stares into the fire, jaw set and silent. Red’s breath caught in her throat as the truth unfurled before her, cold and sharp. She shook her head, voice trembling even as her eyes narrowed with determination. “No—no, that can’t be true,” she insisted, searching the shadows of the room for some sign that she’d misunderstood. Her fists clenched at her sides,

the weight of a thousand whispered warnings pressing down on her. “Grandmother wouldn’t—she couldn’t have lied to us, not like this.” The words were more than protest; they were a plea, a desperate grasp for the trust she had always carried in her heart. Elias stares into the fire, his hands clenched tight, searching Red’s face for answers neither of them have. Elias stared into the fire, the flickering light carving deep shadows across his face. His hands were clenched so tightly that his knuckles blanched, but still he searched Red’s face, desperate for answers neither of them possessed. Lucien’s voice trembled behind them, brittle with revelation. “But if she shaped every danger and every choice,” Lucien said, as if the words might shatter in his mouth, “then who are we to her—pawns, or family?” The question hung in the smoke-laced air, and Elias’s jaw worked silently, caught between the need to protect and the sting of betrayal, as the truth threatened to unravel everything they thought they knew. Elias supports Red, vowing to help her face the truth together.

The chapter ends with Red and Elias confronting the enormity of the secrets revealed, questioning their roles as pawns or family, as the crackle of the hearth and distant caws of crows echo the uncertainty ahead.

As the night deepened and the revelations settled between them like ash, Red and Elias lingered in the flickering glow, uncertain of what steps to take next. Outside, the wind carried whispers through the trees, unsettling the silence that had fallen over the cottage. Just as Red began to gather her thoughts, a soft thud at the door signaled that their journey was far from over.

Chapter 1: Red Receives a Mysterious Letter

Red slices rye bread as her mother discovers a wax-sealed letter on the doorstep, its pine-resin scent raising suspicion.

Her mother, anxious, asks Red to fetch the lamp so they can examine the letter together.

Red, however, asserts her determination to read the letter herself, emphasizing her need to face whatever truths or warnings it contains.

Red’s MotherShe holds the parchment away from her face, eyes narrowing as she turns it over in her hands, the lines of suspicion deepening around her mouth. Red’s mother held the parchment away from her face, her eyes narrowing as she turned it over, suspicion deepening in the lines around her mouth. She sniffed at the seal, lips pressed tightly together. Pine resin, and at this time of year—she knew that wasn’t by chance. Letters didn’t arrive after dusk, not when decent folk had already barred their doors against the dark. Her unease grew; nothing good ever came with the scent of the old woods clinging to it. Setting the letter down, she glanced at Red, her voice low but steady. “Fetch me the lamp,” she said, her practical mind already working. They’d need to see exactly what was being asked of them this time. Despite her mother’s pleas to be cautious and reminders of past troubles, Red insists on uncovering the truth, expressing compassion for her mother’s fears but refusing to let them hold her back.

Red (Red Riding Hood)Red takes a careful breath, breaks the wax seal with deliberate precision, and smooths the letter open on her lap, her eyes scanning the first lines with a mix of apprehension and quiet strength. Red drew a careful breath, her fingers steady as she broke the wax seal with deliberate precision. She smoothed the letter open on her lap, letting her eyes linger on the first

lines. Though her hands trembled slightly, her voice was low but unwavering as she insisted on reading the letter herself. Whatever these words contained—answers, warnings, or memories—she knew she had to be the one to face them. Despite the uncertainty threading through her, Red’s heart remained certain, her resolve clear as she prepared to meet whatever truths awaited her within the delicate folds of paper. Red (Red Riding Hood)Red inhales deeply, her fingers lingering for a moment on the cracked wax seal before she unfolds the letter, her gaze unwavering despite the flicker of nerves in her eyes. Red drew a slow, steady breath, her fingers hesitating on the cracked wax seal before she let them slip away. The letter felt heavier than it should in her hand, its secrets pressing against her palm. A flicker of nerves danced in her eyes, but her gaze did not waver. She unfolded the brittle paper with deliberate care, her voice low but resolute as she insisted, more to herself than anyone else, that no matter what these pages revealed, she needed to know the truth with her own eyes. Red (Red Riding Hood)Red draws a slow breath, steadying her nerves as she unfolds the letter, her eyes scanning the first line. Red drew a slow breath, steadying her nerves as she unfolded the letter, her fingers trembling only slightly. She scanned the first line, determination flickering in her eyes. She refused anyone’s offer to read it aloud for her, her voice low but unwavering as she insisted on handling it herself. She owed it to herself—and to everyone waiting for answers—to read every word, no matter how heavy they might be. With resolve clear in every careful movement, Red let her gaze travel down the page, prepared to carry whatever truths lay hidden within the ink. Red’s mother warns of the dangers of family secrets, but Red, resolute, states that hiding from them would only make things worse.

Red’s MotherHer mother tightens her grip on Red’s wrist, her fingers trembling with the memory of the last letter’s consequences. Her eyes search Red’s face, desperate to protect her from the shadows of their family’s past. Red’s mother’s grip tightened on her wrist, her knuckles pale with the effort—not just of holding her daughter back, but of holding back the flood of memories that the envelope in Red’s hand threatened to unleash. Her fingers trembled, the echo of the last letter’s devastation still raw beneath her careful composure. Eyes darting anxiously over Red’s face, she whispered, voice thick with caution and love, “Remember what the last letter did to us.” The words hovered between them, heavy and pleading. “It tore through our lives, Red. I can’t let you walk into danger again—not after everything that happened.” Her gaze flickered to the envelope, as if it might leap open and spill secrets. “Grandmother’s warnings aren’t just words on paper; they’re a shield.” She pressed Red’s wrist, desperate to anchor her. “Promise me you’ll think twice before opening that envelope.” Red (Red Riding Hood)Red gently frees her wrist, her eyes steady and searching her mother’s face for reassurance as she reaches for the envelope. Red’s fingers curled around the edge of the envelope, but her mother’s grip tightened on her wrist, a wordless plea for caution. Red paused, feeling the tremor of fear in her mother’s hand. She met her gaze, her own eyes steady, searching for a flicker of reassurance. With gentle resolve, she freed herself, her touch lingering with unspoken comfort. “I know you’re scared, Mama,” she said softly, her voice threaded with compassion and determination as she reached again for the letter. “But I have to understand what Grandmother meant—secrets left in shadows only grow darker.” Red’s MotherHer mother’s grip tightens, voice trembling as she searches Red’s eyes for hesitation, old fear flickering beneath her worry. Her mother’s grip tightened around Red’s wrist, the lines of worry etched deep across her brow. She searched Red’s eyes, voice trembling as she spoke, old fears flickering beneath her concern. “Secrets can swallow a family whole, Red,” she warned, her words weighted by memories neither of them wished to revisit. “Don’t let your curiosity blind you to the pain we barely survived last time.” Red (Red Riding Hood)Red gently frees her wrist from her mother’s grasp, her eyes steady with resolve even as her mother’s hand trembles in the air between

them. Red's fingers curled gently around her mother's wrist, easing herself free from the anxious grasp. The air between them quivered with her mother's unspoken worry, but Red's gaze remained unwavering—steady, resolute. "I hear your fear, Mama," she said softly, her voice carrying the weight of compassion and something firmer beneath, "but I can't let it chain me to silence when the truth is calling." She drew a careful breath, the memory of her grandmother's trembling hands flickering behind her eyes. "I need to know what Grandmother was so afraid of." With trembling hands but a steady heart, Red opens the letter, determined to discover Grandmother's cryptic message, while her mother remains anxious but unable to dissuade her.

As Red steps beyond the safety of her cottage, the familiar path through the woods seems different—charged with the weight of her grandmother's words and her own determination. Shadows stretch between the trees, and with each careful step, Red feels the forest watching, its silence thick with secrets. Unbeknownst to her, a far more cunning presence lurks in the dappled gloom, preparing to intercept her journey and twist it toward a dangerous game of deception.

Chapter 3: Wolf's Interception and Deception

Red and Elias move carefully along the forest path toward Grandmother's cottage, with Red alert for any sign of danger.

As they cross the mossy bridge, Lucien Wolf appears, emerging from the shadows in a mud-spattered cloak.

He introduces himself as a lost traveler, but Red immediately challenges his intentions, pressing him to reveal his true purpose in the woods.

Lucien admits he seeks something that was taken from him and hints at the woods' hidden secrets, suggesting his motives are more personal and urgent than he first claimed.

Lucien Wolf Lucien blocks their path with a graceful, deliberate bow, his eyes shining with polite curiosity as he measures their reaction. With a movement as fluid as a shadow, Lucien stepped into their path and dipped into a low, graceful bow, the gesture both courtly and exquisitely deliberate. His eyes, bright with a polite curiosity that barely veiled a sharp, measuring intent, flicked over their faces—searching, perhaps, for a flicker of recognition or advantage.

"Forgive my intrusion," he began, his voice a smooth, unfamiliar melody, each word carefully chosen as if testing the air for its effect. "Permit me but a moment of your time." Rising from his bow, Lucien kept his posture deferential, yet there was something in the angle of his head—a subtle confidence, a predator's patience.

"I am a traveler, rather shamefully astray in these parts," he continued, the faintest hint of self-deprecation curling at the edge of his mouth, "and it appears my sense of direction has failed me yet again." His gaze lingered a heartbeat too long on Red, a flicker of something unspoken in his eyes, before turning to address the group as a whole. "Might I trouble you for some guidance toward the nearest crossroads, or perhaps an inn? The roads here are unfamiliar, and I would rather not wander where I am not welcome."

Every word slipped from him with the ease of practiced charm, but beneath the silken tones was a restless, desperate hunger—an outsider's longing to belong, a cunning mind already calculating

the possibilities their slightest reaction might reveal. Tension escalates as Elias steps protectively between Red and Lucien, warning him to stay back.

Red (Red Riding Hood) Red angles her body between Lucien and Elias, basket clutched tight to her chest. Her eyes narrow, flickering from Lucien's unreadable gaze to Elias' white-knuckled grip on his axe. Red angled herself protectively between Lucien and Elias, her fingers tightening around the basket pressed to her chest. She kept her gaze steady, flicking from Lucien's inscrutable expression to the way Elias' knuckles whitened around the haft of his axe. Determined not to be intimidated, Red met Lucien's eyes and, voice low but unwavering, demanded, "You keep saying you mean no harm, but you won't tell us what you're really doing in these woods." The words hung in the cool air, edged with suspicion and resolve. Elias edged closer, the tension palpable. Red didn't falter, her stance unyielding as she pressed further, "If you want us to trust you, you'd better start talking—now." Lucien Wolf Lucien's gaze flickers between Red and Elias, a faint, unsettling smile playing at his lips as Elias plants his feet, body tense and ready to spring. Lucien's gaze darted between Red and Elias, his smile a thin, unsettling crescent that never quite reached his eyes. Elias, picking up on the tension, planted his feet firmly in the moss, like a wolf bracing for a fight. Red's fingers whitened around the basket's handle as she fixed Lucien with a wary stare and demanded to know his purpose here.

He tilted his head, voice smooth as velvet, as if he were sharing a secret with only her. "Perhaps I wander," he murmured, letting his words linger in the thickening dusk, "because these woods hold secrets not meant to be kept—secrets I need, whether you trust me or not." The confession hung between them, almost intimate, while Elias edged closer, shoulders squared, suspicion sharpening his gaze. Elias steps forward, placing himself slightly between Red and Lucien, knuckles white on his axe as his eyes lock onto Lucien's every move. Elias stepped forward, his broad shoulders casting a protective shadow over Red as he subtly positioned himself between her and Lucien. The muscles in his forearm tensed, knuckles whitening around the handle of his axe, but his gaze never wavered from Lucien's every movement. "Red, just say the word and I'll make sure he doesn't get any closer," he murmured, his voice low and steady—an earnest promise lingering in the charged space between them. Red (Red Riding Hood) Red steps in front of Elias, blocking Lucien's path, her eyes narrowed with warning. Red moved swiftly, placing herself squarely between Elias and Lucien, her stance unyielding. The wicker handle of her basket creaked beneath her tightening grip, but her voice was steady, laced with warning. "Stay back, Lucien," she said, her eyes narrowed with the weight of old caution. "I've seen what happens to those who chase secrets in these woods, and I won't let you drag us into it." Behind her, Elias edged closer, uncertainty flickering across his face, while Red held her ground, gaze never wavering from Lucien's. Lucien Wolf Lucien's gaze sharpens, voice lowering as he steps just close enough for tension to crackle between them, while Elias plants his feet, knuckles white on his axe. Lucien's gaze grew sharper, a dangerous glint flickering in his eyes as he closed the distance between them, just enough for tension to crackle in the narrow space. Red's fingers tightened around the basket, her knuckles paling, while Elias shifted closer behind her, his grip on the axe turning white with strain. Lucien's voice dropped, silk over steel, as he let his words slide between them: caution, not malice, was what Red mistook in him, he insisted. He was searching only for what had been stolen—nothing more. But as his eyes pinned hers, the implication was clear, his tone edged with threat and longing; if she chose to stand in his way, there would be no promise she'd remain untouched by what would come next. Red (Red Riding Hood) Red shifts in front of Elias, chin lifted defiantly, her gaze locked on Lucien as Elias's axe glints in the fading light. Red stepped in front of Elias, her chin lifted in quiet defiance as she tightened her grip on the woven basket. The evening light caught the edge of Elias's axe, sending a

quick glimmer across Lucien's face. Red's eyes didn't waver from him, her voice steady but edged with something sharper than fear. "If what was taken belongs to the darkness in these woods," she said, the words deliberate, "then maybe it's better you never find it." Elias shifted closer, the protective motion underscoring the tension that hung between them, but Red stood firm, curiosity flickering beneath her determination. Lucien Wolf Elias positions himself protectively in front of Red, eyes locked on Lucien, muscles tensed for a fight. Elias moved without hesitation, placing himself squarely between Red and Lucien, his axe lifting in a silent warning. His eyes, sharp and unwavering, never left Lucien's face. Muscles coiled beneath his shirt, ready for whatever might come. "If your search threatens Red, you'll answer to me first," he said, his voice low and steady, echoing through the tense hush that had settled over the woods. Lucien Wolf He takes a measured step back, hands open but tension crackling in the air like a storm about to break. Lucien took a measured step back, hands splayed in a gesture that seemed almost placating, though the tension in the air crackled around him like a storm barely held at bay. His eyes narrowed, a flicker of something wild and feral glinting beneath his composed exterior as he regarded Elias. "Then let us hope, Elias, that your loyalty is not misplaced," he murmured, his voice smooth but edged with warning, "for not all monsters wear claws." Lucien, unfazed, shares a story of once being lost in the woods and proposes a shortcut through the undergrowth, claiming it might reveal important truths.

Lucien Wolf Lucien lets his gaze linger on Red, a faint, knowing smile tugging at the corner of his mouth. His gesture toward the undergrowth is casual, yet deliberate, his eyes glinting with a mix of invitation and challenge. "You know, once—years ago—I lost my way in these woods. The forest has a habit of swallowing up those who aren't careful, masking the familiar with shadows and whispers. I wandered for hours, but then I found a path almost hidden by brambles, a shortcut, if you will. It saved me. or perhaps, it changed me. If we slip through here—just beyond that thicket—we can reach our destination much faster. Of course, the main road is safe, but sometimes the safest path isn't the most enlightening, wouldn't you agree, Red?" —Lucien Wolf

Red (Red Riding Hood) Red tilts her head, eyes narrowing thoughtfully on the tangled undergrowth Lucien gestures toward, her hand tightening ever so slightly around the basket she carries. Red tilted her head, eyes narrowing thoughtfully as she studied the tangled undergrowth Lucien had just gestured toward. Her hand tightened almost imperceptibly around the worn handle of her basket, the familiar weight grounding her amidst the uncertainty. Watching Lucien's lingering gaze, she allowed a wry, knowing smile to touch her lips. "Enlightening, perhaps," she murmured, her voice carrying a quiet conviction, "but sometimes the shadows teach harsher lessons than the light ever could." Elias steps slightly in front of Red, eyes narrowed at Lucien, his tone edged with warning as he glances toward the tangled undergrowth. Elias moved instinctively, placing himself a fraction ahead of Red, his stance quietly protective. The forest's hush pressed in, but his narrowed gaze never strayed from Lucien, who seemed all too comfortable letting his attention linger on Red. Elias's tone sharpened with warning as he glanced at the tangled undergrowth nearby. Shadows could be treacherous, he reminded, not trusting them so easily—even if Lucien claimed he did. "I'd rather we stick to what we can see," Elias stated, the edge in his voice clear. "Unless you have a reason for us to risk it," he added, not bothering to hide his skepticism. Lucien Wolf Lucien's eyes glint as he gestures subtly toward the tangled shortcut, his voice low and inviting, while his gaze flickers between Red and Elias, gauging their resolve. Lucien's eyes glinted with something sharp and secretive as he gestured, almost imperceptibly, toward the tangled shortcut that wound through the undergrowth. His voice dropped to a velvet murmur, coaxing and dangerous, as he leaned just slightly into Red's space. "Ah, but isn't it in the unknown—where roots twist and

secrets lie—that true stories are found, Red?” he said, letting the words hang in the hush of the woods. His gaze lingered on her, searching her face for a flicker of agreement, while at the edge of his vision, he kept careful watch on Elias, measuring every subtle shift in their stances. Red (Red Riding Hood)Red glances toward the tangled undergrowth, her fingers tightening around her basket as she studies Lucien’s shadowed expression. Red’s gaze flickered toward the tangled undergrowth, the thick shadows pooling beneath brambles where secrets might nest. Her fingers curled tighter around the woven handle of her basket as she studied Lucien’s expression, half-lit, half-obscured by the shifting canopy. He spoke of being lost, voice soft and inviting, but there was something in the way his eyes lingered on her—a subtle attempt to pull her off the familiar path.

She hesitated, weighing caution against curiosity, and finally met his gaze with quiet determination. “Stories found in the dark often come with teeth,” she murmured, her voice steady despite the prickle of unease at her nape. “What is it you hope we discover off the path?” Lucien WolfLucien’s lips curl into a sly smile as his eyes glint, glancing between Red and the shadowed thicket, inviting yet unreadable. Lucien’s lips curled into a sly smile, his eyes glinting as he glanced between Red and the shadowed thicket. He lingered a moment too long on her, inviting yet unreadable. “Why, only what the forest wishes to reveal,” he murmured, voice low and coaxing, as if the words themselves held secrets. “Sometimes treasures, sometimes truths best left sleeping.” Each syllable seemed calculated, a subtle attempt to draw Red’s attention away from whatever else might be lurking in the gloom, his desperation veiled beneath that persuasive charm. Elias narrows his eyes, stepping slightly in front of Red, his posture guarded and voice edged with challenge. Elias narrowed his eyes, instinctively stepping just enough in front of Red to shield her from Lucien’s lingering gaze. His stance was guarded, every line of his body telegraphing a quiet warning. “If your shortcut is so enlightening, Lucien,” he said, voice edged with challenge, “why do you hesitate to walk it alone?” Lucien WolfLucien’s smile sharpens as he glances between Red and Elias, his hand gesturing invitingly toward the shadowed thicket, eyes glinting with unspoken challenge. Lucien’s smile sharpened as he glanced between Red and Elias, something sly flickering in his expression. With a languid, almost theatrical sweep of his hand, he gestured invitingly toward the shadowed thicket. “Ah, Elias,” he murmured, the words curling with a hint of challenge, “company lends courage—and, perhaps, ensures the tales we bring back are not just my own.” His gaze lingered on Red just a moment too long, the unspoken implication hanging in the air, as if daring Elias to follow and subtly shifting the balance of their little gathering. Red (Red Riding Hood)Red glances at the tangled undergrowth, her fingers tightening around her basket as she studies Lucien’s expression for any flicker of intent. Red’s gaze swept over the tangled undergrowth, fingers closing tightly around the basket’s worn handle. She watched Lucien carefully, searching his face for any flicker of intent beneath the story he spun about being lost. The hush of the forest pressed in, thick with secrets. With a steady resolve, she finally spoke, her voice gentle but unwavering. “Some tales aren’t meant to be faced alone, Lucien—especially when the forest seems to hold its breath as we choose our way.” Red and Elias refuse the offer, debating the risks of venturing off the safe path.

Elias stands his ground, folding his arms and blocking the way forward, his voice steady but resolute. Elias shifted his weight, planting his boots firmly in the soft, mossy earth as he folded his arms across his chest and blocked the narrow way forward. With an unwavering gaze, he looked at Red, his voice steady and resolute. “I’m not going any farther off the path,” he said, making it clear by the set of his jaw that he meant every word. “We don’t know what’s waiting beyond those trees, and I won’t risk it just because you think there’s a shortcut.” Without waiting for protest, Elias gently but firmly guided Red back toward the safety of the marked trail, every line of his posture speaking of both care and determination. Red (Red Riding Hood)Red steps firmly

in front of Elias, blocking his way and guiding him back toward the path. Red planted herself squarely in front of Elias, her boots crunching in the underbrush as she intercepted his stubborn advance. Reaching out, she took his arm with gentle insistence and steered him back toward the ribbon of marked trail winding through the woods. “The shortcut isn’t worth the danger, Elias,” she told him, her voice steady but urgent as she met his eyes. “I need you to trust me and stay on the marked trail, now.” Her tone left little room for argument, but beneath her determination was a glimmer of concern—she couldn’t let anything happen to him, not here, not today. Red firmly chooses the marked trail, asserting her agency and asking Elias to trust her judgment.

Lucien, denied, watches them with narrowed eyes, his motives and past with the woods left ambiguous as he disappears into the shadows, the air thick with secrets and unspoken threats.

As Red and Elias continue along the winding path, the uneasy feeling left by Lucien’s presence lingers in the hush of the woods. Shadows lengthen and the forest grows quieter, each step toward Grandmother’s house heavy with anticipation. Unbeknownst to them, danger is already afoot, and by the time the cottage comes into view, something vital has shifted—an ominous absence waiting to be discovered.

Chapter 4: Grandmother’s Disappearance

Red approaches the cottage door, gripping her basket tightly.

She brushes aside a hanging sprig of rosemary as she knocks twice, the hollow sound echoing inside.

Elias paces a short distance behind her, scanning the shadowed tree line, his axe resting on his shoulder.

When no answer comes, Red pushes the door open;

it creaks, revealing an unlit interior.

She steps inside, running her fingers over the cold hearthstones, noting the untouched teacup and the absence of Grandmother’s shawl.

Elias follows, sniffing the air for unfamiliar scents, then inspects muddy footprints near the back window.

Red quietly calls for her grandmother, her voice low and deliberate, while Elias checks the pantry for signs of recent use.

Red (Red Riding Hood) Red stands just inside the doorway, her hand resting on the frame as she peers into the dimly lit room. Her voice trembles slightly, betraying her unease, as she scans the shadows for any sign of her grandmother. Red stepped softly into the dim cottage, the basket on her arm swaying with each careful step. The familiar scent of herbs and baked bread lingered in the air, but an uneasy stillness made her heart quicken. She paused in the doorway, searching the shadows for any sign of movement. “Grandmother? It’s me, Red. Are you here?” Her voice, though steady, carried both hope and a flicker of worry, echoing through the quiet room as she strained to catch any reply. Elias runs his finger along the dusty shelf, frowning as he glances back toward Red. Elias ran his finger along the dusty shelf, his brow furrowing as he glanced back toward Red. The silence of the pantry pressed in around them, broken only by the faint sound of

Red calling softly for her grandmother in the next room. Elias's voice was low, practical, edged with concern as he took in the neglected tins and untouched flour. There were no fresh crumbs, he noted, and the flour tin looked as if it hadn't been disturbed in days—it was as though no one had baked here for some time. Red (Red Riding Hood)Red edges closer to the bedroom door, her hand trembling as she rests it on the old brass knob, her eyes darting to Elias for reassurance. Red hovered in the doorway, her fingers tightening around the basket's handle. The hush inside her grandmother's cottage felt heavier than the shadows pooling in the corners. She took a hesitant step forward, voice trembling between hope and worry as she called out, "Grandmother, can you hear me?" The silence pressed back, thick and unnerving, and she tried again, her words edged with urgency. "Please answer, it's so quiet in here." Elias kneels to inspect a set of faint footprints in the flour on the floor, his brow furrowed with worry. Elias knelt beside the pale dusting of flour, his calloused fingers tracing the faint outlines of footprints as worry creased his brow. He glanced over his shoulder at Red, who quietly called out for her grandmother, her voice barely above a whisper, the uncertainty heavy in the air. Straightening, Elias reached for the stale loaf left uncovered on the table, his practical mind cataloging every detail. "Red," he said gently, his tone protective, "the bread's gone hard and there's dust thick on the shelves." He paused, meeting her apprehensive gaze. "If your grandmother's been here, she hasn't eaten in a long while." Red (Red Riding Hood)Red clutches her basket tighter, glancing nervously at the shadowy hallway beyond the kitchen. Red tightened her grip on the basket, her knuckles whitening as she hovered at the threshold of the kitchen. The usual warmth of her grandmother's cottage felt strangely absent, replaced by a hush that prickled the hairs at the back of her neck. She peered into the shadowy hallway, calling out softly, careful not to startle Elias as he rummaged through the pantry behind her. It was unlike Grandmother to be so silent; normally, Red would be greeted with a cheerful hello before she even reached the door. The quiet unsettled her, sharpening her senses as she strained to catch any familiar sound in the gloom. Elias runs his fingers along the pantry doorframe, frowning as he studies a faint, unfamiliar footprint in the dust. Elias ran his fingers along the pantry doorframe, his eyes narrowing as he paused over a faint, unfamiliar footprint pressed into the dust. The boards creaked softly beneath his boots, and he glanced over his shoulder, watching as Red called out for her grandmother, her voice low and careful in the dim kitchen. The silence that followed felt thick, unnatural. Elias straightened, his brow furrowed, and murmured, almost to himself, "Maybe she's resting, but something feels wrong—the air's heavy, like someone's been hiding here." The words lingered between them, edged with a practical concern that seemed to settle into the shadows around them. Red (Red Riding Hood)Red steps forward, her hand trembling as she clutches her basket, eyes scanning the dim corners of the room. Red stepped forward, her grip tightening around the worn handle of her basket as she peered into the shadowed corners of the room. The air was thick with silence, broken only by Elias's muffled movements as he rifled through the pantry. Red's voice was barely above a whisper, steady but edged with uncertainty. "Grandmother, if you're here, please say something—" she called, her words lingering in the gloom, "I'm starting to get scared." Her heart thudded in her chest, but she forced herself to stand tall, determined not to let fear get the better of her. Elias crouches beside the print, tracing its outline with a tense finger as he glances back at Red. Elias crouched low beside the fresh print, his practical fingers tracing the muddy outline with a tense precision. The shape was unmistakable—far too large to belong to the frail woman Red was calling for in the next room. Elias glanced over his shoulder, eyes meeting Red's with quiet urgency, and nodded toward the back door. The print stood out stark against the worn wooden floor, a silent warning. Without raising his voice, he let his concern show in the way he lingered at the threshold. That footprint, he knew, was not her grandmother's. Red (Red Riding Hood)Red edges closer to Elias,

her voice trembling, as she glances anxiously toward the shadowy corners of the room. Red edged closer to Elias, her steps careful, the hush of her movement barely stirring the dust motes dancing in the dim light. Her fingers trembled as she clutched the edge of her cloak, eyes darting to the shadowy corners where uncertainty seemed to gather. Still, she forced her voice to steady, lowering it to a deliberate hush as she called out for her grandmother. Then, glancing back at Elias, she asked, "Then who could it belong to, Elias?" The question hung in the air, heavy with worry and the quiet urgency that had always driven her to seek the truth, no matter how fearful the answer might be. Elias lowers his voice, motioning for Red to stay behind him as he steps cautiously toward the hallway. Elias moved with quiet precision, his boots barely making a sound against the worn wooden floorboards. He caught Red's arm, gently urging her to stay behind him. Turning his head, he lowered his voice, the protective edge unmistakable. "I don't know," he admitted, eyes scanning the dim hallway for any sign of movement. "But we need to be careful—someone else might be inside." His broad shoulders blocked Red from view as he advanced, every step deliberate, his loyalty and practical caution guiding them deeper into the uncertain stillness of the house. Red (Red Riding Hood) Red edges closer to the bedroom door, her hand trembling as she reaches for the handle, while Elias scans the shadows behind her, tense and alert. Red edged closer to the bedroom door, her breath shallow, each step deliberate despite the tremor in her hand as she reached for the handle. Behind her, Elias scanned the gloom, his eyes flicking toward the pantry, every muscle taut with anticipation. Red's voice, low and steady despite the fear tightening in her chest, slipped into the silence. "Grandmother, if you're in trouble," she called softly, careful not to betray her anxiety, "make a sound—anything—so we know you're safe." The words hung in the air, the only break in the hush, as she pressed her ear closer, straining for the faintest reply. Elias quietly steps toward the dim hallway, his hand hovering near the old lantern as he listens for any movement. Elias moved quietly, his boots barely creaking against the worn floorboards as he stepped toward the dim hallway. The lantern's flicker cast long, uneasy shadows, and he paused, listening for any hint of movement beyond the pantry door. Red's voice called out softly for her grandmother, each syllable deliberate and careful. Elias glanced back at her, his expression protective yet earnest. "Stay close," he murmured, the words low but firm as he reached for the bedroom door. "I'll check in here, but keep your eyes open for anything out of place." He waited a heartbeat, making sure she understood, before pushing the door open, alert for whatever might be lurking in the quiet gloom. Red (Red Riding Hood) Red clutches her basket tighter, her gaze darting anxiously around the dimly lit room. Red clutched her basket a little tighter, her knuckles white against the woven handle. The hush of the dimly lit room pressed in around her, and her gaze flickered anxiously from the shadowed corners to the bed. The sheets were rumpled, twisted as if someone had left in a hurry, but there was no sign of her grandmother anywhere—not even the slightest trace. She swallowed, forcing her voice to remain steady as she called across to Elias, who was busy searching the pantry. "Elias," she said quietly, her words deliberate, "the sheets are rumpled, but there's no sign of her. It's like she vanished." Elias Red edges toward the window, her hand trembling as she reaches for the piece of fabric. Red edged cautiously toward the window, her hand trembling as she reached for the fluttering piece of fabric. Her voice was nearly a whisper, strained and deliberate. "Elias, the window's open just a crack—and I think I see a scrap of her shawl caught on the latch." Behind her, Elias paused in his careful search of the pantry, his protective instincts sharpening at her words, every sense tuned to the uncertain quiet that pressed in around them. Red (Red Riding Hood) Red clutches the scrap of shawl, her hands trembling, and peers anxiously out the window into the shadowy yard. Red's fingers tightened around the scrap of her grandmother's shawl, the worn fabric trembling along with her hands. She pressed herself closer to the window, her breath fogging the glass as she searched the moonlit yard for any

sign of movement. The shawl—her grandmother would never have left it behind unless she'd been forced to leave in a hurry. Red's voice was barely more than a whisper, careful and measured as she called into the hush, "Elias, what if she's trying to signal us?" The question hung in the air between them, laced with worry and the dawning suspicion that something was terribly wrong. EliasRed clutches the edge of the shawl, her voice trembling as she scans the shadows of the room. Red clutched the edge of her shawl, her knuckles whitening as her eyes darted anxiously over the dim corners of the room. Her voice trembled, barely louder than a whisper, as she called out for her grandmother. Meanwhile, Elias moved with quiet purpose, methodically checking the pantry for any sign of disturbance. Red's gaze lingered on the shifting shadows, fear edging her words. "Elias," she asked, her voice low and deliberate, "what if she's hiding somewhere close, waiting for us to find her?" Red (Red Riding Hood)Red kneels beside the bed, her hands trembling as she lifts the quilt, searching for another sign of her grandmother. Red knelt beside the bed, her hands trembling as she carefully lifted the edge of the quilt, her eyes scanning the dim space beneath. The familiar scent of lavender and old linen filled her nose, but no reassuring silhouette greeted her. With a determined breath, she whispered into the hush, more to herself than to Elias rummaging in the pantry, "I'll check under the bed—maybe she dropped something else, something to help us find her." Driven by a mix of hope and dread, Red pressed her cheek to the floorboards, searching for any clue her grandmother might have left behind. EliasRed kneels beside the bed, holding up the button with trembling fingers, her eyes searching Elias's face for reassurance. Red knelt beside the bed, the faint light picking out the tremble in her fingers as she lifted a small, round button from the floor. Her eyes flickered toward Elias, searching his face for any sign of reassurance, her voice barely above a whisper. "Elias, there's a button here on the floor—it's from her cardigan, I'm sure of it." The words seemed to hang between them, heavy with worry. Elias paused in his search of the pantry, turning to look at Red with concern softening the lines of his face. He stepped closer, careful not to disturb the fragile hope in her expression, and reached out as if to steady her with his presence. Red (Red Riding Hood)Red clutches the button tightly in her fist, her eyes darting nervously around the shadowy corners of the room. Red's fingers curled protectively around the smooth button, her knuckles whitening in the dim light. She scanned the shadowy corners, searching for any movement that might betray another presence. The air felt heavier now, a sudden chill settling over the room. Quietly, she called out for her grandmother, but her voice barely rose above a whisper, deliberate and restrained. As Elias rummaged through the pantry, Red edged closer to him, her curiosity edged with unease. "Elias," she murmured, her tone low and steady, "does the room feel colder to you all of a sudden? Do you think someone else might still be here, watching us?" Her words lingered in the silence, their weight magnified by the uncertainty pressing in around them. Elias steps protectively in front of Red, his hand tightening around the handle of a nearby fire iron as he listens intently toward the hallway. Elias moved instinctively, his broad frame sliding between Red and the darkened hallway. His fingers tightened around the iron poker he'd plucked from beside the hearth, knuckles whitening as he fixed his gaze on the shadows beyond the door. "Stay behind me, Red," he murmured, voice low but unyielding. There was a tension in him, a woodsman's alertness drawn taut. He tilted his head, listening—the faint, unmistakable creak of a floorboard echoed from the hall. Elias's jaw set. "I hear a floorboard creaking in the hallway," he continued, barely above a whisper, "and we're not alone." Red (Red Riding Hood)Red clutches her basket closer, her eyes wide as she strains to hear any movement beyond the door. Red clutched her basket tighter, knuckles whitening as she pressed her back to the cold wall. Her eyes, wide and searching, flicked toward the faint crack beneath the door, straining for any sign of movement on the other side. The silence in her grandmother's cottage felt heavy, as if it pressed against her chest, making her heart pound louder with every passing second.

She glanced at Elias, who was methodically checking the pantry for any sign of disturbance. Voice low and deliberate, Red murmured, “Elias, my heart’s pounding—should we call out again, or stay quiet and listen?” Even as she spoke, her gaze never left the door, torn between the instinct to act and the lessons in caution her mother had instilled in her since childhood. Their coordinated search reveals no sign of Grandmother, only a faint musky odor lingering near her bed.

Red exchanges a wary glance with Elias, both now alert to the peculiar silence and the sense of intrusion.

As the uneasy silence pressed in around them, Red and Elias realized they needed to widen their search beyond the cottage walls. The absence of Grandmother and the unsettling clues left behind compelled them to venture outside, their apprehension growing with every cautious step. Determined to uncover the truth, Red led the way toward the shadowed edge of the forest, unaware that someone—or something—awaited them among the tangled trees.

Chapter 2: Red Encounters the Woodsman

Red steps carefully along the muddy path, her basket swinging from one arm as she scans the undergrowth for movement.

She pauses at the sound of chopping wood and sees Elias, the woodsman, splitting logs with steady precision, his boots sunk into the soft earth.

Intent on reaching her grandmother’s cottage, Red approaches and greets him with cautious politeness.

Red (Red Riding Hood)Red pauses a few paces away, her grip tightening on her basket as she glances at the gleaming edge of Elias’s axe, keeping her tone pleasant but her stance ready to move. Red paused a few paces back, her grip tightening around the wicker handle of her basket as the late sunlight caught the gleam of Elias’s axe. Though she kept her voice pleasant, her eyes measured the distance between them and the underbrush, always ready for flight if necessary. “Good afternoon, sir,” she offered, careful not to let her wariness show. “I didn’t expect to meet anyone on the path—are you heading into the woods as well?” Elias leans the axe casually against his shoulder, offering a guarded smile while watching Red’s reaction closely. Elias leaned his axe against his shoulder with a casual ease, though his eyes never left Red’s face, measuring her wariness with a gentle, guarded smile. “Afternoon, miss,” he offered, voice low but earnest, the timbre of someone used to these woods and their secrets. “These woods aren’t always safe for wandering alone.” His gaze flicked to the axe, then back to her, as if to reassure. “This is just for my work, but it can be comforting to keep close.” The words hung between them, protective and practical, as if he hoped she might sense the steady reliability he carried along with the tool. Red (Red Riding Hood)Red shifts her basket from one arm to the other, subtly stepping back to keep a careful distance from Elias and his axe. Red shifted her basket from one arm to the other, her gaze lingering on the gleam of Elias’s axe as she subtly eased a step back, careful not to provoke suspicion. “I see,” she said, her tone polite but edged with wariness, “well, I suppose it’s wise to be prepared out here.” Her eyes flicked past him to the shadowed path ahead, determination settling in her features. “I’m just passing through to visit my grandmother.” The words were simple, but each syllable carried the careful caution her mother had taught her, and

the unwavering resolve that was entirely her own. Elias rests the axe on his shoulder, offering a measured, almost reassuring smile, yet his steady gaze remains fixed on Red, gauging her reaction. Elias rested the axe on his shoulder, the gesture practiced and easy, as if it weighed nothing at all. He offered Red a measured, almost reassuring smile, but his steady gaze remained fixed on her, carefully gauging the caution in her eyes. “If you’d like, I can walk you part of the way—just to make sure nothing troublesome crosses your path,” he offered, his tone earnest but unassuming, as though it were the most practical thing in the world. Red (Red Riding Hood)Red offers a polite smile, but her grip tightens subtly on her basket as her gaze lingers on the gleaming edge of the axe. Red offered the woodsman a polite smile, careful not to let her wariness show. As her fingers tightened around the wicker handle of her basket, her eyes lingered on the gleaming edge of his axe—an unconscious caution born of her mother’s warnings. “That’s thoughtful of you,” she said, her voice measured and pleasant, but she drew herself a fraction taller, determined not to seem vulnerable. “I wouldn’t want to trouble you, or delay your work.” The words sounded light enough, but beneath them lay a quiet insistence on her independence, shaped by years of family secrets and whispered warnings. Elias straightens, wipes the sweat from his brow, and expresses concern for Red’s safety, mentioning rumors of wolves nearby.

Elias straightens up, wipes the sweat from his brow with the back of his hand, and glances warily at the thickening shadows between the trees before turning his concerned gaze back to Red. Elias straightened, the labor of the day written in the sheen of sweat he wiped from his brow with the back of his hand. His gaze drifted toward the thickening shadows gathering between the trees, a wary edge sharpening his features. When he looked back at Red, concern softened his eyes. “You know, Red, it’s not safe to be alone out here,” he said, his voice low but earnest. “There’s been talk in the village—wolves wandering these woods lately.” He hesitated, shifting his weight before offering, “If you don’t mind, I’d feel better if I walked with you a while.” Red (Red Riding Hood)Red glances nervously over her shoulder, clutching her basket a little tighter as a chill wind rustles the leaves. Red glanced nervously over her shoulder, the chill wind rustling the leaves and making the shadows around her seem to shift and stir. She tightened her grip on the basket, heart thudding, as Elias straightened beside her, wiping the sweat from his brow and offering to accompany her through the forest. Gratefully, but with a trace of unease, she nodded. “Thank you, Elias—honestly, I did hear something strange in the trees just now.” Her voice was low, laced with the caution her mother had taught her, and her eyes flickered warily to the tangled undergrowth, always alert to secrets hidden in the woods. Elias scans the shadowy undergrowth, his hand hovering near the sturdy walking stick at his side. Elias scanned the shadowy undergrowth, every muscle taut as his hand hovered near the sturdy walking stick at his side. He straightened, wiping the sweat from his brow with the back of his hand before glancing at Red, his eyes earnest beneath the brim of his battered hat. “Let’s keep our voices low and stay close,” he murmured, his tone both gentle and practical. “If there really are wolves, we don’t want to draw attention.” The quiet authority in his words was underscored by the way he positioned himself just a step ahead, clearly unwilling to let anything—or anyone—catch them off guard. Red (Red Riding Hood)Red adjusts her cloak, glancing warily between the gnarled trunks as she matches Elias’s cautious pace. Red adjusted her cloak, the scarlet fabric catching on a bramble as she moved. Her gaze flickered warily between the gnarled trunks, each shadow a potential trick of the forest. Matching Elias’s cautious pace, she offered him a small, resolute nod. “All right, Elias—I’ll stay close,” she said quietly, her voice steady despite the unease prickling beneath her skin. Still, she kept her eyes sharp, scanning the shifting darkness around them. “But let me keep an eye out; sometimes the shadows play tricks, but I’d rather be safe than sorry.” Red initially hesitates, not wanting to trouble him or

delay his work, but admits to hearing something strange in the trees.

Elias insists on accompanying her, reassuring Red with his practical advice and protective presence.

Elias gestures to a narrow trail veering away from tangled underbrush, his hand steady and his gaze scanning ahead for any sign of danger. Elias motioned toward a slender trail that twisted away from the tangle of underbrush, his hand steady in the dappled light. He kept his gaze trained on the path ahead, every sense alert for the subtle signs of trouble that only a woodsman would notice. As Red stepped forward, he murmured a quiet warning, voice low and earnest, making sure she stayed close. He pointed out the way the ground dipped just beyond a patch of ferns, cautioning her about the roots hidden beneath the leaves that could easily catch an unwary ankle. Elias moved with the easy assurance of someone who had walked these woods a hundred times, his presence both protective and reassuring as they began their journey together. As they set off together, Elias points out safe trails and warns her of hidden roots, his voice low and practical.

The mist thickens as they walk, the forest closing in, and Red remains alert, her wariness gradually softening as Elias gently steadies her when she stumbles on a mossy stone.

Their footsteps blend with the rhythm of the woods, the path ahead opening just enough to promise safety if they move together.

As the woodsman's presence eases Red's uncertainty, the forest begins to shift around them, signaling that their journey is leading to a pivotal crossroads. With every careful step, Red senses that the decisions she makes now will echo beyond the trees, carrying her closer to the secrets that await at her grandmother's cottage. As the path narrows and the mist thickens, Red finds herself contemplating not just the woodsman's intentions, but the responsibilities she must face once she reaches the heart of the forest—and the possibility of her grandmother's unexpected return.

Chapter 6: Red's Choice and Grandmother's Return

Red enters the cottage, her boots damp with forest dew, carrying a basket of wildflowers.

She finds Grandmother mending a crimson cloak by the hearth.

Grandmother presents her with two sealed letters—one from Elias, one from Lucien Wolf—and tells Red she may open only one, warning her that the unopened letter will remain a silence she must carry.

Grandmother places the two sealed envelopes on the table, her eyes glinting with both challenge and concern. She pushes them forward, her hands steady but her voice laced with gravity, waiting for Red's response. Without a word, Grandmother produced two envelopes—one embossed in deep blue, the other in stark ivory—and placed them carefully on the table between them. Her eyes glinted, not just with mischief but with something weightier, a challenge layered beneath concern. She nudged the envelopes forward, the gesture deliberate, her hands steady and her voice low with gravity.

“Red, my dear,” she said, almost playfully, though the seriousness threaded through her tone was unmistakable, “before you lies a fork in your path.” Her gaze flickered from one envelope to the other, lingering on Red's face. “One is from Elias, the other from Lucien Wolf. Each carries a

truth, a promise, perhaps even a secret.” She paused just long enough for the weight of her words to settle between them, the air thick with possibility. “But you may open only one. Choose wisely,” she urged, her lips curling in a knowing half-smile, “for the words within will shape what comes next.”

Grandmother leaned back, her expression inscrutable, hands folded now as she waited for Red’s choice, her playful yet calculating spirit alive in the silent challenge she’d orchestrated. Red (Red Riding Hood)Red draws a shaky breath, closes her eyes for a heartbeat, and finally reaches for Lucien Wolf’s letter, her hand settling on the envelope as if it might burn. Red drew a shaky breath, gathering her resolve as she closed her eyes for a heartbeat. When she opened them, Grandmother’s face remained unreadable, the old woman’s gaze steady but betraying nothing. On the table, two envelopes waited—one marked with Elias’s gentle, familiar hand, the other with Lucien Wolf’s precise, elegant script. Red’s fingers hovered, trembling, caught between the pull of the names inked before her. Love, loyalty, and danger pressed down on her, heavy as stones, as she weighed her choice. It was as if the decision itself could ignite her skin. At last, with a quiet determination, she reached for Lucien Wolf’s letter, her hand settling on the envelope as if it might burn her, her heart pounding with questions she wasn’t sure she wanted answered. Red (Red Riding Hood)Her hand hovers over the letter bearing Lucien’s name, while her other hand clutches the edge of the table, knuckles white with tension. Red’s hand hovered uncertainly above the letter bearing Lucien’s name, her other gripping the edge of the table so tightly her knuckles blanched white. The two envelopes lay before her, silent and heavy—one from Elias, one from Lucien Wolf—Grandmother’s eyes watchful and unreadable across the polished wood. Red swallowed hard, a tremor in her breath betraying her resolve. In a voice scarcely more than a whisper, she finally managed, “Grandmother... if I choose Elias, am I forsaking Lucien forever—or is there still a way back from the letter I leave unopened?” The question lingered in the hush between them, as if the answer might be tucked inside the sealed paper, waiting to shape the future she was about to claim or abandon. GrandmotherShe folds her hands atop the table, watching Red’s face for any flicker of resolve or regret. Grandmother folded her hands atop the table, her fingers laced with deliberate calm, and watched Red’s face with the same careful scrutiny she reserved for storm clouds gathering at the edge of the woods. Without preamble, she drew two letters from the folds of her shawl—one bearing Elias’s familiar script, the other stamped with Lucien Wolf’s crest—and slid them across the polished surface, their weight palpable in the hush that followed.

Her eyes softened, though her voice held the gravity of old secrets. “Once the seal is broken, Red,” she murmured, her gaze never wavering, “the path you walk will close behind you.” Grandmother’s words lingered in the air like incense, and she let them settle before adding, “The letter unopened becomes a silence you must carry.” It was both warning and invitation, and with a subtle, almost playful tilt of her head, Grandmother waited for the flicker of resolve—or regret—she knew would soon cross her granddaughter’s face. Red (Red Riding Hood)Her fingers brush the envelope, committing to the choice as her heart thunders in her chest. Red’s fingers hovered over the envelope, trembling slightly as she tried to steady her breath. Grandmother’s hands were unyielding, offering the choice without a word. Red’s gaze lingered on Lucien’s name, the ink bold and familiar, but it was Elias’s letter she found herself reaching for—slowly, deliberately, as if the act itself were a declaration. Her heart thundered in her chest, each beat echoing her uncertainty, yet she pressed on. As her fingertips brushed the paper, she whispered into the silence, the words barely more than a hush: let truth be spoken, even if it meant leaving some shadows unlit. Red hesitates, torn by the gravity of the choice.

She asks if choosing one means forsaking the other forever, and Grandmother confirms that the path she chooses is final.

Red (Red Riding Hood) Red tears a letter in half and lets the pieces fall into the glowing embers, watching them curl and blacken. Red tore the letter cleanly in half, her fingers steady as she let the pieces drift onto the glowing embers. She watched in silence as the paper curled and blackened, the words vanishing into smoke. Heat flushed her cheeks, but her voice was cool and unwavering. She turned to her grandmother, meeting her gaze with quiet resolve. “My life is not a puzzle to be solved with suitors and letters,” she said, the remnants of the letter crackling beneath her feet. “I will choose my own way, in my own time—and no one else will decide for me.” Grandmother folds her hands tightly in her lap, her gaze steady but shadowed with worry. Grandmother sat with her hands folded tightly in her lap, the knuckles white against the faded fabric of her dress. Her gaze, unwavering but edged with shadows of worry, settled on Red. “I will decide my future myself,” she declared, her voice carefully measured, neither sharp nor pleading—a tone she reserved for moments when her word was law. Then, a flicker of her old playfulness surfaced, almost a secret smile at the corner of her mouth, as she added, “Child, stubbornness runs in our blood, but remember—the world is less forgiving of young women who stray from its plans.” Red (Red Riding Hood) Red meets Grandmother’s gaze steadily, her hands clenched with resolve at her sides. Red met her grandmother’s gaze without flinching, her hands clenched in quiet defiance at her sides. The room brimmed with unspoken warnings and all the old, well-intentioned fears, but Red’s resolve held firm. Her voice was measured, almost gentle, but every word landed with unmistakable conviction. “Then let the world be less forgiving, Grandmother,” she said, the words forging a path through the silence. “I would rather face its storms on my own terms than live quietly in a cage built by others.” After a moment of internal struggle, Red chooses Elias’s letter, accepting the consequences, but then asserts her independence: she declares she will not let letters or matchmaking schemes define her fate, and vows to forge her own path, regardless of the world’s expectations.

Grandmother acknowledges Red’s resolve with a mixture of concern and respect, marking a shift in their relationship toward mutual understanding.

As dawn broke beyond the cottage window, Red stood tall in the soft morning light, the past behind her and her chosen future ahead, ready at last to walk her own untamed path.