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Chapter 1: Red Receives a Warning and a Basket

Red’s Mother stands in the garden, placing a heavy woven basket filled with warm bread, jars of broth, and herbs onto the stone bench.

She tightens the red cape around Red’s shoulders, her fingers brushing crumbs from the fabric.

Red tucks a folded note between the jars, determined to deliver it to Grandmother herself.

Before Red departs, her mother becomes especially insistent, repeating her warnings several times with growing urgency.

She warns Red not only of the dangers in the woods but emphasizes that wit and bravery may not be enough to keep her safe, making Red promise explicitly to keep to the path.

Red’s MotherShe kneels down to adjust Red’s cloak, her eyes filled with concern as she holds Red’s hands firmly, emphasizing the gravity of her words. Red’s mother knelt before her, fingers deftly tugging the crimson cloak into place. Her grip lingered on Red’s hands, firm and warm, as if to anchor her daughter to safety for just a moment longer. Concern flickered in her eyes—an old, familiar worry born from years of knowing the woods too well. “No matter what you see or hear,” she said, voice low and unwavering, “you must not stray from the path.” She squeezed Red’s hands

to make sure the warning landed. “These woods are treacherous, my dear. Danger waits where you least expect it.” Red’s MotherShe gently places her hands on Red’s shoulders, looking deep into her eyes with concern. Red’s mother placed her hands gently on her daughter’s shoulders, her grip both grounding and protective. Leaning in so their eyes met, she searched Red’s face, anxiety flickering behind her firm, loving gaze. “Do not stray from the path,” she warned, voice low but unwavering. “Promise me you’ll listen, for it’s not just your basket that needs protecting—it’s your very self.” Red listens to her mother’s anxious, repeated pleas and—while still determined to help her grandmother—feels the weight of her mother’s concern more keenly.

Red’s MotherShe places her hands firmly on Red’s shoulders, her eyes serious and full of worry. Red’s mother placed her hands firmly on Red’s shoulders, her grip steady but trembling ever so slightly with worry. Her eyes, usually warm and gentle, were now serious and dark as the forest at twilight. “Red,” she said, her voice low and urgent, “promise me you’ll remember this.” She glanced toward the shadowy edge of the woods beyond their cottage window, her brow creased with old fears. “The forest holds dangers you cannot outwit. No matter how clever or brave you think you are, there are things among those trees that do not play by our rules.” She squeezed Red’s shoulders, as if trying to impress the gravity of her words through touch alone. “Experience alone will not keep you safe—sometimes, caution is the only thing that stands between you and harm.” Red’s MotherShe gently grasps Red’s shoulders, her eyes searching Red’s face for understanding. Red’s mother knelt before her, firm hands resting gently on Red’s shoulders. The familiar lines of worry etched her brow as she searched Red’s face, eyes both tender and anxious. “Listen well, my child,” she said, her voice low but unwavering. “Keep to the path. Even a single misstep can lead you where neither wit nor courage can bring you back.” The words lingered in the hush between them, heavy with the weight of her own memories—of dangers lurking beneath tangled branches and shadows that didn’t belong. She squeezed Red’s shoulders once, as if imprinting her warning upon them. As Red’s Mother closes the garden gate behind her daughter, she watches Red step onto the leaf-strewn path, the basket swinging by her side as she disappears into the mist.

The early morning mist clings to the forest floor as Red ventures deeper beneath the towering trees, each step echoing her mother’s warnings in her mind. The path ahead narrows, twisting between ancient trunks and tangled roots, and with every heartbeat, the woods seem to hush in anticipation. Just as Red rounds a bend, the shadows shift—and her journey is suddenly interrupted by a looming figure blocking her way.

Chapter 2: The Wolf Blocks the Path

Red steps carefully along the uneven path, her boots crunching on fallen leaves as she balances a wicker basket laden with bread and wildflowers.

She pauses to adjust her red cloak, scanning the undergrowth for any sign of movement.

Suddenly, a large gray Wolf pads onto the path ahead, blocking her way with a low growl.

The Wolf’s yellow eyes fix on Red, his nose twitching as he sniffs the aroma of bread from the basket.

Red tightens her grip on the basket and stands her ground, recalling her mother’s warnings.

The Wolf cocks his head and speaks in a silky voice, 'Where are you going, little one, so deep in the woods?

The Wolf steps from behind a tree, eyes glinting with curiosity, his tone warm yet edged with something sharper as he blocks the narrow path with his sleek, imposing form. The Wolf stepped out from behind a gnarled oak, his sleek form sliding silently into the narrow path until it was fully blocked. His eyes glittered with a strange curiosity, as if he'd stumbled upon a rare and delicate prize. Tilting his head, he regarded the traveler with a warmth that was too smooth, too practiced—like honey hiding a sting. "Where are you going, little one, so deep in the woods?" he purred, voice silky and inviting, yet edged with something razor-sharp. He let his gaze linger, almost appraisingly, before continuing, "These shadows are no place for someone so small and sweet." The words slithered from his lips as he leaned in slightly, feigning concern. "Tell me—are you lost, or is it something you seek?" ' Red keeps her distance, replying, 'To my grandmother's cottage, to bring her food.

Red steps back slightly, clutching her basket a little tighter and keeping a careful eye on her surroundings. Red stepped back slightly, her fingers tightening around the handle of her basket as she cast a cautious glance at the tangled shadows of the forest. She kept her voice steady, determined not to show any fear. "I'm just on my way to my grandmother's cottage," she explained, the words carrying both her concern and resolve. "She hasn't been feeling well lately, so I'm bringing her some food." The thought of her grandmother's pale face spurred her onward, even as she remained wary of every rustle and whisper among the trees. ' The Wolf circles closer, paws silent on the moss, angling to intercept her route.

Red, wary, shifts sideways, keeping herself between the Wolf and the basket.

The Wolf's tail flicks as he considers his next move, eyes narrowing with hunger and calculation.

Red's determination to reach her grandmother safely drives her to step off the main path, searching for a safer route through the underbrush.

The Wolf watches, memorizing her direction, then melts into the shadows, planning to get ahead.

The encounter leaves Red alert and pushes her to quicken her pace through the increasingly tangled woods.

Unseen by Red, the Wolf slips swiftly between the trees, guided by the knowledge he has gleaned. As Red weaves her way through brambles, the Wolf's cunning leads him along a shortcut, his mind set on reaching the cottage before her. The forest seems to close in around Red, but at its edge, another scene is unfolding—one where the Wolf's plans begin to take shape at the doorstep of Grandmother's house.

Chapter 3: The Wolf Arrives at Grandmother's House

The Wolf, his coarse fur slicked with rain, slinks through the dripping undergrowth and pauses behind a gnarled yew tree, nostrils flaring to catch the scent of baking bread.

Driven by hunger, he pads silently to the cottage door and raps his heavy paw against the wood.

Grandmother, weakened but alert, wraps her shawl tighter and squints through the foggy window before shuffling to the door, cane tapping against uneven floorboards.

The Wolf, disguising his voice in a thin, wavering tone, calls out, 'Grandmother, it's Red with your supper.

' Grandmother, sensing something amiss from the rough cadence, hesitates, her fingers hovering over the latch.

The Wolf, impatient, presses his snout closer to the crack in the door and sniffs, eyes darting for any sign of movement inside.

Grandmother, unwilling to risk a direct confrontation, slowly backs away from the door and begins searching her kitchen for something to defend herself with.

The Wolf, realizing his ruse may not last, shoves the door with his shoulder, splintering the wood, and forces his way into the dim, smoky cottage.

Outside, the afternoon sun filters through the trees as Red Riding Hood approaches the familiar cottage, unaware of the danger lurking within. Meanwhile, the Wolf, now unrecognizable in Grandmother's nightgown, composes himself and listens carefully for approaching footsteps. As Red's silhouette appears at the garden gate, a strange tension settles over the house—one that Red cannot quite name, but will soon be forced to face.

Chapter 4: Red Confronts Suspicion in the Cottage

Red enters the dim cottage, her basket in hand and boots echoing on the floorboards.

She immediately notices the strange way 'Grandmother' is covered and the odd, guttural tone of her voice.

Red, cautious and clever, places the basket on the table and approaches the bed, feigning concern while subtly investigating the figure.

Instead of only asking about physical features, Red also probes with layered questions, implying suspicion—she asks about the ears, eyes, and teeth but attaches meaning to each: listening for someone, watching for someone, and questioning the intent behind the teeth.

The Wolf shifts beneath the quilt, his sharp gaze fixed on Red, voice trembling with a hunger he strains to mask. One paw tenses under the covers, claws barely contained as he beckons her forward with a crooked finger. Beneath the heavy quilt, the Wolf shifted, his yellow gaze never leaving Red. He forced his voice into a low, wavering cadence, trembling with a hunger he struggled to hide. One paw tensed beneath the covers, claws curled tight, as he crooked a finger toward her, beckoning her nearer. "Come closer, dear child," he urged, the words slipping out soft and coaxing. "The light in here is so dim, and my eyes are not what they once were. I can hardly see your sweet face from where you stand." His gaze flickered, watching for the slightest hesitation as he added, "Step nearer, let me get a better look at you." The Wolf, slightly unsettled by Red's perceptiveness, tries to maintain his disguise but shifts the conversation, asking why Red is alone in the woods and attempting to unsettle her with references to danger.

Red steps forward slowly, tightening her grip on the basket, her eyes searching the shadows of the room as she studies the figure in the bed. Red stepped softly into her grandmother's cottage, the hush of the forest still clinging to her. As she approached the bed, her eyes lingered on the figure beneath the quilt. Something was different—those ears, so much larger and more pointed than she remembered. Red's brow furrowed in concern, but her voice remained gentle as she leaned in, curiosity nudging her caution aside. "Grandmother, what big ears you have," she said, searching the shadowed face for reassurance. Was her grandmother listening for something? Or someone? The question hovered in the air, echoing Red's determination to prove she was mature enough to notice even the smallest details. Red hesitates at the foot of the bed, her knuckles white around the basket handle, eyes scanning the shadows for any sign of movement. Red hesitated at the threshold, her heart fluttering with both excitement and unease. The flickering light from the hearth cast strange shadows across Grandmother's face, making her features seem unfamiliar, almost exaggerated. With a cautious step closer, Red's gaze lingered on those unusually large eyes glinting in the half-dark. "Grandmother," she ventured softly, her voice edged with curiosity and concern, "what big eyes you have." For a fleeting moment, she wondered if Grandmother, like herself, was waiting and watching for someone else to arrive in the quiet cottage. Red takes a careful step closer, her grip on the basket tightening as she studies the shadowed face before her, heart pounding in her chest. Red lingered at her grandmother's bedside, heart fluttering between caution and curiosity. Shadows from the dusky room flickered across the old woman's face, accentuating features that seemed—different, somehow. Red's gaze settled on the mouth, where teeth gleamed longer, sharper than she remembered. She tightened her grip on the basket, summoning her courage. "Grandmother," she ventured softly, her voice trembling with both compassion and clever suspicion, "what big teeth you have. Are they for smiling at me, or something else?" Red remains alert, her suspicion mounting as she notices fur beneath the blanket and prepares to act, determined to uncover the truth and defend her grandmother.

The Wolf grins, his teeth just barely concealed, eyes glinting with keen interest as he circles Red, voice smooth and gentle, masking a ravenous intent. The Wolf grinned, lips barely concealing the edge of his sharp teeth, as he circled Red with calculated ease. His eyes sparkled with hungry curiosity, though his voice, when he finally spoke, was smooth as velvet—so gentle it nearly disguised the hunger simmering beneath. “Well, well, Little Red,” he purred, feigning innocent surprise at her presence, “what brings you so deep into these tangled woods?” His gaze flickered over her basket, lingering just long enough to suggest he already knew the answer. “Surely you must be on a very important errand, wandering all alone.” He tilted his head, the gesture almost tender, yet his words pressed in closer, softer and more insistent. “Are you not afraid of what lurks beneath the branches?” Each syllable was carefully chosen, rehearsed, designed to unsettle, and his smile never quite reached his eyes.

Red’s grip tightened on the object she’d found, her heart pounding as the Wolf’s words echoed in the cramped room. The atmosphere thickened, every shadow seeming to stretch and flicker with menace. As the Wolf’s posture shifted from feigned warmth to predatory intent, Red realized hesitation was no longer an option. The moment between suspicion and danger snapped, propelling her into the fight she had desperately tried to avoid.

Chapter 5: The Wolf Attacks and Red Fights Back

Red steps cautiously along the worn dirt path, gripping the wicker basket as she scans the shadows for movement.

The Wolf, fur bristling and eyes gleaming with hunger, emerges silently behind a thicket, blocking the way with his massive frame.

He lowers his head, sniffing the basket and the air between them.

Red plants her feet, raises a sturdy branch she found earlier, and calls out, ‘Stay back!’

Red grips the branch tightly, her knuckles white. Her voice trembles with fear, but her stance remains firm, body tense and ready to swing if the threat advances. Red gripped the branch so tightly her knuckles blanched, the rough bark biting into her palm. Her voice wavered on the edge of fear, yet she stood her ground, feet rooted firmly in the earth, shoulders squared despite the tremor in her words. “I mean it—don’t come any closer!” she called, heart pounding in her chest as she brandished the branch before her like a sword. Uncertainty flickered in her eyes, but her resolve did not falter. “I don’t know who or what you are,” she continued, her tone rising with determination, “but I swear I’ll fight if I have to!” Every muscle in her body was poised, ready to swing if the shadow lurking beneath the trees dared to advance. I won’t let you hurt her.

Red steps forward, planting themselves firmly between the threat and the person they’re protecting, eyes blazing with unwavering resolve. Red stepped forward, her small frame planted firmly between

the looming threat and her trembling grandmother. Though fear flickered in her chest, her eyes burned with a fierce, unwavering resolve. “If you want to get to her,” she declared, voice steady despite the tremor in her hands, “you’ll have to go through me first—and I promise, I won’t let that happen.” Compassion urged her forward, but it was determination that kept her rooted to the spot, refusing to let anyone she loved come to harm. Red steps forward, eyes narrowed, placing themselves squarely between the threat and the girl, unflinching. Red stepped forward, her eyes narrowed with resolve as she planted herself firmly between the looming threat and the trembling girl behind her. There was no hesitation in her stance, no flicker of fear—only the fierce determination that always burned brightest when someone she loved was in danger. “You should know by now—I don’t back down, not when it matters,” she said, voice steady and unwavering, the words ringing out as both promise and challenge in the shadowed hush of the forest. ’ The Wolf snarls, circling Red with measured steps, his tail lashing.

He lunges, snapping at the basket, but Red swings the branch, striking his muzzle and driving him back.

Leaves scatter and a sharp yelp echoes through the clearing.

The Wolf retreats, licking his wound, while Red darts past him toward the cottage, determined to reach her grandmother.

As Red bursts into the cottage, the tension between predator and prey hangs thick in the air, neither willing to surrender. The desperate energy of the fight courses through her as she races to her grandmother’s side, knowing that the Wolf is far from defeated. Outside, the creature’s wounded pride fuels his rage, and the threat grows more dangerous with each passing moment. Inside, Red and her grandmother brace themselves, aware that the struggle is not yet over and that the ultimate test of courage and cunning still awaits.

Chapter 6: The Final Confrontation and Escape

Red enters the dim cottage, calling out for her grandmother amidst unsettling silence.

Red steps cautiously inside, her eyes adjusting to the gloom. She hesitates on the threshold, her voice trembling slightly as she calls out, her grip tightening on the basket. Red hesitated at the threshold, pressing her palm against the worn wooden door. The familiar scent of wildflowers mingled with something strange in the air, and her heart thudded with both caution and hope. She stepped inside, peering through the dim light toward the shadowed bed. “Grandmother? Are you here?” she called softly, her voice trembling with concern yet firm with determination. “It’s me, Red.” Red steps hesitantly inside, her footsteps echoing as she peers into the shadowy corners, searching for any sign of movement. Red hesitated at the threshold, her hand tightening around the handle of her basket as she pushed open the creaking cottage door. The familiar scent of herbs lingered, but the room was shrouded in uneasy silence, shadows pooling in every corner. Taking cautious steps inside, her boots echoed softly across the worn floorboards. She peered into the gloom, searching for any flicker of movement—any hint that her grandmother was awake and well. Voice trembling just above a whisper, Red called out, “It’s so quiet—are you feeling alright?” The words hung in the air, blending with the hush, as her heart thudded with worry and determination. Red steps further inside, her eyes darting nervously to the shadows as she hugs the basket closer to

her chest. Red hesitated on the threshold, the creak of the old door echoing in her ears as she edged into the cottage. Shadows pooled in the corners, thick and uncertain, making her heart thud a little faster. Clutching her basket—a precious delivery meant to prove her care—she stepped further inside, eyes searching anxiously for any movement. “I brought your favorite soup,” she called out, her voice small but determined as she hugged the basket to her chest. Silence pressed in around her, and a tremor of worry threaded through her words. “Please say something,” she added, her gaze flicking nervously between the dark corners. “I’m getting worried.” Red steps further inside, her eyes darting to the shadowy corners as she hesitates by the foot of the bed. Red edged further into the cottage, the worn floorboards creaking beneath her careful steps. Shadows clung to the corners and the shape beneath the quilt was barely discernible in the gloom. She hesitated at the foot of the bed, her fingers tightening around the handle of her basket. With a tremor of worry threading through her voice, she called out, “Grandmother, please answer—it’s so dark in here, and I can’t see you.” Red hesitates on the threshold, her voice trembling as she peers deeper into the shadows, clutching her basket even tighter. Red paused just inside her grandmother’s cottage, the basket of bread and honey trembling slightly in her grasp. The familiar creak of the floorboards beneath her feet was conspicuously absent; even the usual flutter and chirp of the birds outside seemed to have stilled. Frowning, she stepped further into the dim room, her voice barely above a whisper as she tried to reassure herself, “Maybe you’re resting, but it’s never this quiet when I visit.” Each word carried her concern and curiosity, her determination to prove she was no longer a child battling with her cautious heart. Red steps further into the cottage, her grip on the basket tightening as she peers anxiously into the shadows. Red hesitated on the threshold, the old door groaning as she pushed it open. Shadows clung to the corners of her grandmother’s cottage, thick and unmoving, and the silence pressed in around her like a heavy blanket. She stepped further inside, her knuckles whitening around the wicker handle of her basket. Peering anxiously into the gloom, she tried to steady her breath. “Grandmother, if you can hear me, just give me a sign—anything—because this silence is scaring me,” she called softly, her voice trembling just enough to betray her courage’s limits. The words seemed to vanish into the hush, leaving her heart pounding louder than ever as she searched the darkness for any reassuring movement. She grows increasingly suspicious as she observes her ‘grandmother’ exhibiting strange features and mannerisms, questioning each oddity—eyes, ears, teeth, shoulders, voice, hands, breath, skin, nails, and scent—while the Wolf, disguised as Grandmother, concocts plausible excuses for each.

The Wolf pats the coverlet beside him, voice raspy but gentle, watching Red with a hungry gleam barely concealed by the shadow of Grandmother’s cap. Shadows deepened as the Wolf lounged in the gloom, its muzzle half-hidden by the quilt’s edge. Fixing its gaze on the trembling child at the doorway, the creature’s voice twisted with feigned frailty. “Come closer, dear child,” it coaxed, one paw gesturing with apparent weariness. “The light is so dim, and my old eyes can barely see you.” The Wolf’s words slithered through the dark room, beckoning with practiced sweetness, all the while its sharp gaze missed nothing. Red hesitates at the foot of the bed, clutching her basket tightly, peering uncertainly at the figure beneath the quilt. Red hesitated at the foot of the bed, fingers tightening around the wicker handle of her basket. The room was shrouded in a hush, broken only by the soft rasp of her own breath. She peered uncertainly at the figure nestled beneath the quilt—the familiar shawl draped over narrow shoulders, but something felt wrong, unsettling. Grandmother’s face, usually gentle and wise, seemed oddly changed, the eyes gleaming larger and rounder than she remembered. A chill pricked at Red’s skin as she drew a step closer, her voice barely above a whisper, betraying both her caution and curiosity: “Grandmother, what big eyes you have—much bigger than I remember.” The Wolf tilts its head, the eyes glinting

hungrily in the flickering light. The Wolf reclined languidly on the bed, its massive frame swathed in Grandmother's shawl, one paw cunningly tucked beneath the faded quilt. In the wavering candlelight, its eyes glittered with a predatory hunger as it tilted its head ever so slightly, the motion calculated yet deceptively gentle. Fixing its gaze on the trembling girl at the bedside, the Wolf let a sly smile play on its lips and murmured, "All the better to see you with, my dear," each word dripping with false affection and concealed intent, the phrase hovering in the air like a warning unheeded. Red hesitates at the foot of the bed, clutching her basket tightly, her gaze fixed on the wolf's furry ears poking out from beneath the shawl. Red paused at the foot of the bed, her fingers tightening around the handle of her basket as she studied the figure nestled under the patchwork quilt. Something was off—the curve of the shawl over the pillow revealed ears that looked unusually long and sharply pointed. Anxiety fluttered in her chest, but her concern for Grandmother won out over her caution. "Grandmother," she ventured softly, a tremor in her voice, "your ears seem so long and pointed today; are you feeling well?" The Wolf shifts slightly under the quilt, keeping his snout low and paw hidden, watching Red with a hungry glint in his eye. The Wolf shifted slightly beneath the patchwork quilt, careful to keep his snout low and one massive paw tucked out of sight. His yellow eyes, gleaming with hunger, followed Red's every innocent gesture. Forcing his voice into a silken, trembling mimicry, he let a slow, deceitful smile curl at the corners of his mouth. "All the better to hear your sweet voice, my child," he murmured, feigning frailty even as his ears strained for her every word. Red hesitates at the foot of the bed, her hand tightening around the basket as her eyes search the shadowed face beneath the shawl. Red paused at the foot of the bed, knuckles whitening around the handle of her basket. Something was wrong—her heart thudded against her ribs as she studied the figure lying beneath the faded shawl. Shadows masked the face, but nothing could disguise those unnaturally prominent teeth glinting between parted lips. Swallowing, determined to keep her voice steady, Red ventured, "But Grandmother, what large, sharp teeth you have—I've never noticed them before." The Wolf throws off the quilt, revealing his true form, and lunges toward Red with a wicked grin. With a sudden, savage motion, the Wolf flung off the quilt, casting aside all pretense. His fur bristled in the dim light, yellow eyes gleaming with hunger and cunning as his wicked grin widened. He lunged from the bed, looming over Red, and his voice curled through the air like a dark promise: "All the better to eat you with, my dear!" Red remains cautious, probing further rather than immediately resorting to distraction or physical action.

Red sets the basket down with a soft thud, knocking over a tin cup so it clatters to the floor, her gaze never leaving the odd, lumpy form in the bed. She takes a cautious step closer, her fingers grazing the rough wood of the bedpost, eyes narrowing as she tries to make out the features beneath the covers. Red set the basket down with a soft thud, deliberately nudging the tin cup until it toppled and clattered onto the floor. The sharp sound echoed in the hush, but her gaze never wavered from the odd, lumpy form beneath the quilt. She inched closer, her fingertips brushing the rough wood of the bedpost for reassurance. Narrowing her eyes, she tried to make sense of the shadows that disguised her grandmother's familiar features. Voice gentle but edged with suspicion, Red remarked, "My, Grandmother, what big shoulders you have today. Are you feeling quite yourself?" The question hung in the air, careful and probing, as she studied the figure, her heart pounding with a mix of dread and determination. The Wolf shifts beneath the quilt, drawing it tighter around himself as his eyes narrow, watching Red's every move. The Wolf shifted beneath the thick quilt, clawed fingers curling tighter around the fabric as his eyes tracked Red's every motion. When she set the basket down, the sharp clang of a tin cup tipping onto the wooden table scattered through the room—a distraction, perhaps, but the Wolf gave no sign he noticed. Instead,

his voice slithered out, soft and plaintive, as he forced a tremor into his words. “Oh, child,” he said, the corners of his mouth twitching in a mockery of frailty, “the better to carry my many worries—these old bones ache more than they used to.” His gaze lingered, appraising, never quite leaving her face. Red edged closer, her gaze narrowing as she studies the Wolf’s face in the dim light. Red edged closer, careful to keep her movements steady as she set the basket down on the rickety table. With a flick of her wrist, she knocked over a tin cup, its clatter echoing through the cramped cottage and drawing the Wolf’s gleaming eyes. She kept her gaze fixed on the shadows shifting across his face, her curiosity battling with caution. “And your voice—” she observed, her words gentle but probing as she studied the strange, gruff timbre that didn’t quite belong, “it’s so rough tonight, almost as if you caught a chill in the woods.” The Wolf shifts beneath the blankets, pulling them higher to obscure his face, eyes glinting from the shadowy folds. The Wolf shifted beneath the heavy blankets, pulling them higher until only the glint of his eyes was visible from within the shadowy folds. As Red set the basket on the table, deliberately sending a tin cup clattering to the floor in an attempt to distract him, he hardly flinched. Instead, his voice rasped out from the depths of the bed, smoothly layered with feigned frailty. “It’s merely the draft, dear—the wind rattles these shutters and makes my throat rasp; you know how this cottage sits at the edge of the wild.” The words flowed from him with practiced ease, every syllable designed to disarm, even as his gaze tracked her every move from beneath the covers. Red inches closer, her gaze fixed on the gnarled hands peeking from beneath the quilt, her own hands clenched behind her back. Red set the basket down on the edge of the table, her movements precise as she brushed a tin cup with her elbow, sending it clattering to the floor. The sound echoed through the dim room, but her true attention remained fixed on the bed. Inch by inch, she crept closer, her gaze drawn to the gnarled hands clutching the blanket. They seemed larger than she remembered, the knuckles pale and strained beneath the quilt. Red’s own hands curled into fists behind her back, nerves prickling at her skin. “And your hands, Grandmother—how large they look, gripping the blanket so tightly,” she murmured, her voice steady even as her heart thudded with wary curiosity. The Wolf shifts beneath the covers, tucking his hands further out of sight, eyes narrowing as he watches Red’s every move. The Wolf shifted beneath the lumpy covers, tucking his clawed hands deeper out of sight as his predatory gaze followed every one of Red’s careful movements. When she set the basket down and knocked over a tin cup—clearly hoping to divert his attention—he let the faintest hint of a smile curl his lips. “They’re just a little swollen, child,” he replied smoothly, voice edged with practiced reassurance. “Age does that to a body, and the cold makes me clutch for warmth.” Even as he spoke, his narrowed eyes never left her, measuring her reactions, searching for any sign of suspicion. Red leans in, her gaze fixed on the shadows beneath the Wolf’s brow, her fingers tightening around the handle of the basket. Red set the basket down on the table with deliberate care, her small hand brushing against a tin cup just enough to send it clattering to the floor. The sharp sound rang through the cottage, momentarily drawing the Wolf’s attention away. Seizing the opportunity, Red edged closer, her gaze never leaving the deep, unsettling shadows beneath the creature’s brow. Her fingers tightened around the basket’s handle, knuckles pale. She tried to steady her voice, though her heart thudded in her chest, and remarked, “But your eyes—Grandmother, they’ve never gleamed quite so brightly, even in candlelight.” The words slipped out softly, threaded with both curiosity and a growing, cautious dread. The Wolf shifts beneath the covers, pulling the quilt higher as his eyes narrow, watching Red’s every movement. The Wolf shifted beneath the heavy quilt, pulling it higher until only his gleaming eyes peered out, sharp and calculating. As Red entered, he watched her every movement—the way she set the basket on the worn oak table with deliberate care, the soft clang of a tin cup knocked over in what seemed a casual accident. He let a tremor of longing color his voice, shaping his words

to draw her closer. “It’s only that I’ve missed you, dear,” he murmured, each syllable honeyed with false warmth. “Seeing you so close fills me with joy.” The words floated between them, thick with a sweetness that concealed his predatory intent, his gaze never leaving her as she bent to pick up the fallen cup. Red edged closer, her hand tightening around the handle of the basket as she leans in, her gaze fixed on the Wolf’s mouth. Red edged closer, her fingers tightening around the handle of her basket as she set it gently on the table. The tin cup rattled and tipped over, clattering against the wood—a deliberate distraction. She leaned in, heart thrumming, her eyes never leaving the Wolf’s mouth. “And yet, Grandmother,” she murmured, her voice steady despite the tremor beneath, “your teeth—how sharp they seem, even when you smile at me.” The words slipped out as both observation and challenge, her curiosity battling with caution as she searched the creature’s face for any flicker of the truth. The Wolf shifts beneath the covers, pulling the blanket higher to shadow his face, his gaze never leaving Red as his lips curl into a strained imitation of a grandmother’s smile. The Wolf shifted beneath the covers, the coarse blanket pulled higher to obscure the sharp gleam of his eyes, though he never once let Red slip from his gaze. His lips twisted upward, stretching into a strained parody of a grandmother’s smile. Spotting Red’s deliberate nudge that sent the tin cup clattering to the floor, he let out a soft, raspy chuckle, as if amused by some private joke. “Oh, my dear,” he murmured, the words honeyed but edged with something sharper, “they’re just old teeth—worn to points by years of hard bread and tougher times. Nothing to fear from them.” Red leans in, her hand hovering just above the blanket, her gaze unwavering, searching the Wolf’s face for a flicker of truth. Red placed the basket on the edge of the table with deliberate care, letting her fingers brush against a tin cup and sending it clattering to the floor—a calculated distraction. She leaned in closer, her hand hovering just above the worn blanket, eyes narrowing as she focused on the Wolf’s face, searching for any sign of truth or deception. The familiar scents of her grandmother’s cottage—peppermint and dried herbs—seemed absent, replaced by something wild and unfamiliar. With a soft but steady voice, Red remarked that Grandmother’s breath no longer carried the comforting aroma of peppermint and herbs, but instead held the unmistakable scent of the wild wood itself. The Wolf shifts beneath the covers, pulling the quilt higher to shadow his face, his eyes never leaving Red as she inches closer. The Wolf shifted beneath the covers, drawing the quilt higher so that the shadows deepened across his angular face, yet his eyes remained fixed on Red with an unblinking intensity. As she set the basket down and let her hand “accidentally” knock over a tin cup, the Wolf did not so much as flinch. Instead, his voice slipped out, smooth and reassuring, weaving through the tense air between them. “Ah, child,” he murmured, “I brewed a new tisane from fresh forest leaves this morning—perhaps the aroma lingers more than I realized.” The words unfurled with practiced ease, meant to lull, to distract, as he watched her every movement with a predator’s patience. Red reaches for the oil lamp, her gaze fixed on the shadowed face beneath the covers, watching for any sign of unease. Red set the basket down on the table, her fingers brushing deliberately against a tin cup and sending it clattering to the floor. The sharp sound echoed through the small cottage, drawing the shadowed figure’s attention for a brief, precious moment. Seizing the opportunity, Red reached for the oil lamp, her hand steady despite the rapid beat of her heart. She fixed her gaze on the face half-hidden beneath the covers, searching for any flicker of unease. “Grandmother,” she said gently, her voice threaded with concern and careful curiosity, “would you mind if I brought the lamp closer, so I might see you better?” The words were a blend of caution and resolve, her desire to prove her maturity shining through as she inched the light nearer, watching every subtle shift in the shadows. The Wolf pats the quilted edge of the bed with a clawed hand barely hidden beneath the covers, his gaze fixed on Red, a nervous flicker behind his practiced smile. With a slow, deliberate motion, the Wolf patted the quilted edge of the bed, his clawed hand barely concealed

beneath the worn covers. His yellow gaze lingered on Red, a nervous flicker betraying itself behind his practiced, inviting smile. “No need, child,” he murmured, his voice velvet-soft as he watched her set the basket down and purposefully jostle a tin cup, the metal ringing faintly on the tabletop. “The light is harsh on my old eyes; come, sit here beside me instead, where it’s warm.” His words slithered through the room, coaxing, persuading, as he gestured to the empty space at his side. Red hesitates just out of arm’s reach, her fingers tightening around the basket handle as she leans in, eyes narrowed in the dim glow. Red paused just out of reach, her grip tightening around the basket handle as she leaned forward, the dim glow from the hearth casting uncertain shadows across the room. She set the basket on the table, letting her hand slip deliberately, so that a tin cup clattered to the floor—a small, calculated distraction. Her gaze lingered on the figure in bed, noticing how the pale skin seemed rough and bristly in the half-light, almost as if her grandmother had carried a piece of the forest indoors with her. Red’s voice was low and cautious, threading through her concern. Her words slipped out almost unconsciously: the texture of Grandmother’s skin unsettled her, uncanny in its resemblance to the wild woods just beyond their door. The Wolf shifts beneath the covers, pulling them higher over his chin, his eyes never leaving Red as the lamplight flickers between them. The Wolf shifted beneath the covers, pulling the frayed wool higher over his chin, eyes glinting with predatory patience as he watched Red. The lamplight flickered, casting uncertain shadows across his angular face. As Red set her basket on the table, she deliberately knocked over a tin cup, its clang echoing through the quiet room—a calculated distraction. The Wolf’s lips curled in a semblance of a smile, voice slipping easily into feigned innocence. “The better to keep me warm, child,” he murmured, fingers absently plucking at a stray bit of fuzz clinging to the blanket. “These old woolen blankets shed terribly, and I must have picked up some while resting.” His gaze never wavered from her, measuring each of her movements with sly intent beneath the guise of frailty. Red hesitates, her gaze fixed on the Wolf’s hands as she edges just a little closer, her voice trembling between curiosity and fear. Red hesitated at the edge of the rug, her fingers tightening around the basket’s handle before she set it on the table. The tin cup clattered deliberately to the floor, its metallic ring echoing in the close air—a small shield between her and the strange figure in her grandmother’s bed. She glanced at the Wolf’s hands, unable to ignore how the nails curved, dark and menacing, so unlike the gentle hands that once braided ribbons into her hair. A tremor threaded her voice as she edged closer, curiosity and fear wrestling in her chest. “Grandmother, your nails—they’re so dark and curved, not like the gentle hands that used to braid my hair.” The Wolf tucks his hands deeper beneath the covers, his gaze flickering to the lamp, wary. The Wolf tucked his hands even further beneath the covers, narrow eyes flickering to the lamp’s trembling flame with calculated wariness. When Red set the basket on the table and deliberately knocked over a tin cup, the Wolf didn’t flinch; instead, he offered a thin, almost reassuring smile. “Ah, child,” he murmured, voice as smooth as velvet, “perhaps it’s just the soot from the hearth.” He shifted slightly, letting the shadows fall across his features. “I was tending the fire before you arrived, and it clings to everything these days.” The words came easily, cloaked in concern, but beneath the surface lingered a predatory patience. Red edges closer to the bed, her voice low, eyes searching the shadows for any sign of the familiar old woman. Red set the basket on the rickety table, careful to make just enough noise as she nudged the tin cup with her elbow. The cup clattered to the floor, and for a heartbeat, the shadows seemed to ripple. She edged closer to the bed, her heart thudding, her gaze flicking over the quilted mound where her grandmother should have rested. The air was thick—no trace of the comforting lavender her grandmother always wore. Instead, there was a wild, musky scent, unsettling and unfamiliar. Red’s voice was barely above a whisper, brave yet cautious, as she searched the gloom for any sign of the old woman. “Grandmother,” she murmured, “your scent—it’s not the lavender you always wore,

but something wild and musky.” The Wolf shifts beneath the covers, drawing them tighter around his body as his eyes narrow, watching Red’s every hesitant step. The Wolf shifted beneath the heavy quilts, pulling the covers tighter around his sinewy frame. His eyes, sharp and calculating, followed Red’s every cautious footfall. When she set the basket down and deliberately knocked over a tin cup, its metallic clatter echoed through the dim room—a clear attempt to distract him. But the Wolf’s lips curled into a soft, deceptive smile as he beckoned her closer, voice syrupy and coaxing. He assured her, “Oh, sweet child, the wind must have muddled my perfumes—come closer and you’ll see it’s still me beneath it all.” The words slithered through the thick air, each syllable designed to disarm her and draw her nearer, despite the uncertainty flickering in Red’s eyes. Red steps forward, her hand outstretched but her eyes narrowed, watching every flicker of movement beneath the covers. Red set the basket carefully on the table, letting her fingers slip just enough to send a tin cup tumbling with a clatter. As the Wolf’s strange eyes darted toward the noise, she seized her chance. She stepped forward, her heart thudding, one hand outstretched but her gaze sharp and wary, following every subtle twitch beneath the patchwork quilt. Summoning the tone she’d once used in gentler times, she said softly, “Then, Grandmother, if it is truly you, let me hold your hand as I used to—so I might be sure.” Her words were gentle, but beneath them ran a current of determination, her clever mind weighing every detail, every possibility, as she edged closer to the truth hidden under the covers. As the tense exchange builds, the real Grandmother suddenly knocks and calls out from the closet, revealing her presence and the Wolf’s deception before the Wolf can attack.

Grandmother rattles the broom handle louder against the closet door, her voice trembling with worry. Grandmother’s frail hands clutched the broom, rattling its handle louder against the closet door as anxiety crept into her trembling voice. She strained to make herself heard, hoping that someone—perhaps Red—was close enough to catch her signal. “It’s me—Grandmother,” she called out, the words quivering with both relief and worry. She explained, breathless, that she’d hidden away when unfamiliar voices echoed from downstairs, and now she knocked so anyone searching would know she was safe. But time pressed in on her, and her plea grew urgent as she admitted, “I can’t stay in here much longer.” With each tap of the broom, she prayed for help to arrive before her strength gave way. With Grandmother’s voice breaking the pretense, Red and Grandmother quickly attempt to escape together, the Wolf dropping his disguise to pursue them as they flee into the forest.

Smoke curling behind them and the echoes of the Wolf’s rage still ringing in their ears, Red and her grandmother race through the shadowed trees, desperate to put distance between themselves and the smoldering cottage. The safety of escape is short-lived, however, as Red knows their ordeal is far from over. Ahead lies another reckoning—one that awaits her at home, where Red must finally confront her mother and reveal the truth about everything that happened in the woods.

Chapter 7: Red Faces Her Mother with the Truth

Red wipes mud from her boots on the braided rug, sets the basket on the table, and faces her mother, who stands chopping roots by the window.

Red draws the Wolf’s bloodied tooth from her cloak pocket and lays it beside the basket.

Her mother, alarmed, demands an explanation.

Red's Mother Her hand trembles slightly, holding the knife above the cutting board, gaze fixed on the strange, jagged tooth. Red's mother stood at the kitchen counter, her hand trembling slightly as the knife hovered above the cutting board. She didn't move, her eyes locked on the strange, jagged tooth lying among the carrot peels. The sharp edge of her worry pressed harder as she reached out and nudged the tooth with the tip of the knife, as if expecting it to bite back. "Red," she said, voice tight with concern, "what is this?" The question lingered in the air, heavy and demanding. "Why on earth was a tooth—this tooth—hidden in your basket?" Her gaze flicked up, searching Red's face for answers, her tone growing firmer. "Look at it. Tell me the truth, right now. Where did you get it?" Red vividly describes sneaking through the forest, her fear, and the tense confrontation with the Wolf in Grandmother's bed.

Red sneaks through the underbrush, enters the cottage cautiously, and upon seeing the Wolf in Grandmother's bed, grabs the fire iron and confronts the Wolf. "The woods felt darker than ever as I crept closer to Grandmother's cottage, every rustle in the underbrush sending chills down my spine. My heart hammered in my chest as I pushed open the door, calling softly—but only silence answered. That's when I saw the Wolf, lying in Grandmother's bed, its eyes gleaming with hunger. For a moment, I was frozen with fear. But then, I spotted the fire iron by the hearth. Gritting my teeth, I grabbed it, holding it out between us. 'Get away from her!' I shouted, my voice trembling but determined." —Red

Red steps forward, brandishing the fire iron defensively as she faces the Wolf, her stance steady despite the tremor in her hands. Red hesitated only a moment before stepping forward, the fire iron held firmly in her trembling hands. The Wolf snarled, lips curling to reveal a row of jagged teeth, its yellow eyes glinting with cold hunger. But Red refused to let her fear betray her. She tightened her grip, steadying herself, and edged closer to the bed where her grandmother should have been. The scent of musk and menace filled the room, but she forced herself onward, determined not to give the Wolf the satisfaction of seeing her falter. Red raises the fire iron higher, her knuckles white, and slowly steps between the Wolf and the bed, determined to protect her Grandmother. Red's legs trembled beneath her, but she gripped the fire iron tighter, forcing herself to stand firm. With every cautious step between the Wolf and the bed, she lifted her chin and met the creature's gaze, pouring every ounce of courage she could muster into that silent challenge. Red lunges forward, brandishing the fire iron with a desperate strength, her eyes locked on the Wolf as she fights to protect her Grandmother. Red pressed herself low to the ground, the brambles tugging at her cloak as she crept closer to the cottage. Her heart thudded in her ears, but she forced herself onward, determined to prove her courage. Through the cracked door, she glimpsed the Wolf stretched out in Grandmother's bed, its jaws parted in a ghastly grin.

She lunged forward before fear could paralyze her, fingers curled tight around the fire iron's handle. Terror clawed at her chest, but her arms remained steady as she swung the iron at the Wolf, every muscle tensed with desperate strength and resolve. She recounts grabbing the fire iron, standing her ground despite her terror, and using it to drive the Wolf away.

Red's Mother Her mother slams the knife onto the chopping block, the sharp sound echoing her frustration, eyes blazing with worry and anger as she faces Red across the kitchen. Her mother's hand came down hard, the knife's blade biting into the chopping block with a sharp, accusing crack. She fixed Red with a blazing look—equal parts worry and anger flickering in her eyes. "You should have bolted straight for help the moment you saw danger!" The words tumbled out, fierce and trembling. "What if something had happened to you, too?" She shook her head, voice low but unyielding, her love sharpening every syllable. "You can't just throw yourself in harm's way." Red

clenches her fists, her voice trembling with both fear and determination. Red's fists curled tight at her sides, knuckles whitening, as her mother's knife slammed down on the chopping block with a sharp, final crack. The kitchen was heavy with the scent of onions and the unspoken fear that lingered between them. Red's voice trembled—part fear, part fierce determination—as she met her mother's gaze. She could barely keep her words steady, but she forced them out anyway, her chest tight with urgency. If she hadn't stepped in, Grandmother might have died right in front of her. The thought of just standing by, watching helplessly, was unbearable—she simply couldn't have done it. Red's MotherShe wipes her hands on her apron, voice trembling with fear and frustration as she meets Red's eyes. Red's mother wiped her hands on her apron, the fabric already stained with flour and worry. Her voice trembled as she met Red's eyes, the fear and frustration in her gaze impossible to hide. The knife clattered against the chopping block—a sharp punctuation to the moment. “And what if I'd lost you both?” she said, her words spilling out, edged with anguish. She drew a shaky breath, shoulders squared in the familiar armor of motherhood. “Sometimes protecting the ones we love means knowing when to call for help, not just rushing in alone.” It was less admonishment than plea, the kind that comes from loving fiercely and living with the weight of every risk. Red's voice trembles as she clenches her fists, her eyes darting between her mother's stern face and the bloodied chopping block. Red's fists tightened at her sides, her knuckles paling as she tried to steady her voice. Her mother's stern gaze felt as sharp as the blood-spattered knife now resting beside the chopping block. Red's eyes flicked between the steel and her mother's trembling hands, but she refused to look away. “I know you were scared for me,” she said, her words trembling but determined, “but in that moment, all I could think about was not letting Grandmother slip away.” The memory of her grandmother's fading breath lingered in her mind, fueling her resolve even as fear threatened to overtake her. Red's MotherHer mother wipes her hands on her apron, voice trembling with worry and relief as she glances between Red and the empty chair where Grandmother usually sits. Red's mother wiped her hands on her apron, her gaze flickering uneasily between Red and the empty chair where Grandmother usually sat. The knife hit the chopping block with a sharp, decisive thud, echoing her anxiety. Her voice trembled—equal parts relief and worry—when she finally spoke, eyes glistening with unshed tears. Her confession slipped out, honest and firm: her heart had pounded so fiercely she could barely think. She wished Red had remembered that courage wasn't always about facing danger alone; sometimes, it meant trusting others to help, too. Red's mother, deeply anxious, insists Red should have run for help, fearing for her daughter's safety.

Red counters that immediate action was the only way to save Grandmother.

The conversation grows emotional as both share their fears and reasons.

Red's MotherShe places a comforting hand on Red's shoulder as they begin stacking the plates, her eyes scanning the darkening forest through the window, watchful yet determined. As the last rays of daylight slipped behind the tangled trees, Red's mother set a steadying hand on her daughter's shoulder. Together, they began stacking the plates, the clink of ceramic echoing in the quiet kitchen. Her gaze lingered on the deepening shadows outside, vigilant, heart racing with memories of dangers she'd once faced herself. She drew in a breath, squeezing Red's shoulder just enough to reassure. “I'm proud of how brave you were today,” she murmured, her voice warm but edged with a firm resolve. “From now on, I'll teach you everything I know about keeping yourself safe.” The words were a promise—one born from love and the hard-earned lessons of the woods. Her eyes didn't waver from the darkness beyond the glass. “The Wolf may come back,” she added, her tone unwavering, “but next time, we'll be ready. Together.” Red gathers the dishes, glancing at the dark

window, then meets her mother's steady gaze with a determined nod. Red gathered the dishes, her hands steady despite the lingering tremor of uncertainty. She glanced toward the darkened window, the forest beyond pressing its silent mystery against the glass. As her mother's steady gaze met hers, Red straightened her shoulders and nodded with resolve. "Thank you, Mama," she said, her voice gentle but firm. "I want to learn, so next time, I won't be afraid." The weight of her promise settled between them, but Red felt a spark of courage—a determination to prove she was ready for whatever shadows might come. Red's mother, her hands trembling, acknowledges Red's bravery and determination, but stresses the importance of asking for help.

Overcome with emotion, she embraces Red and promises to teach her how to defend herself properly.

They agree to prepare together for the Wolf's possible return, clearing the table side by side, united by newfound understanding.

As night settled over the cottage and the forest beyond, Red and her mother moved quietly through the warm glow of their kitchen, their hearts steadied by the promise that, whatever darkness might come, they would face it together.