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## Chapter 5: The Final Stand in the Cabin

Red stands pressed against the cabin door, breath sharp and shallow, as she watches the Wolf—a hulking, broad-shouldered figure cloaked in her grandmother's nightgown—prowl toward Grandmother's bed.

Grandmother, gaunt but alert, clutches a heavy iron poker, her knuckles white.

The Wolf lets out a low, guttural growl, lips curling to reveal sharp teeth as he advances.

Red snatches a kitchen knife from the table, the cold handle slick in her palm, and shouts, 'Stay away from her!'

' The Wolf whips around, meeting Red's gaze, and feints toward her, claws scraping gouges in the floor.

Grandmother seizes the moment to jam the hot poker against the Wolf's leg, sending up a hiss of singed fur.

The Wolf howls and staggers back, smashing the lamp.

Glass shatters, oil spills, and smoke rises as the fire catches the edge of a blanket.

Red grabs her grandmother's arm, hauling her toward the back door as flames lick up the wall.

Rain-wind blasts their faces as they burst outside.

Behind them, the Wolf's silhouette looms, snarling in the orange glow.

Red drags Grandmother into the darkness of the trees, heart pounding, the taste of smoke and fear sharp in her mouth.

They run, leaving the cabin burning and the Wolf's fury echoing in the night, their escape marked by the uncertainty of what comes next.

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Smoke and terror still clinging to their skin, Red and her grandmother press deeper into the woods, desperate to put as much distance as possible between themselves and the horrors behind them. With dawn still hours away and the path home blocked by ruin, they have no choice but to seek another way—one whispered about in fearful tones, a narrow trail winding through the heart of

the forbidden forest. As they stumble forward, the shadows seem to close in, forcing them toward the shortcut they vowed never to take.

## Chapter 2: The Forbidden Shortcut

Red kept her basket close, tightening her grip on the handle as she stepped carefully over a tangle of exposed roots.

Her eyes scanned the shadowed undergrowth ahead, alert for any sign of movement.

Suddenly, a figure emerged from behind a leaning birch: tall, broad-shouldered, with a dark coat blending into the shadows.

The Wolf inclined his head in greeting, flashing a too-wide smile that revealed sharp, white teeth.

'Good evening, miss.

Traveling alone?

' he asked, his voice smooth but edged with hunger.

Red paused, keeping a cautious distance.

She shifted her weight, evaluating her options, her other hand slipping to the knife at her belt.

But this time, Red met his gaze with open defiance.

'I know why you're here, Wolf.

But you won't find what you're hunting on this path—not today.

' The Wolf's smile widened, intrigued by her boldness.

'Perhaps not, Red—but every path has forks, and every traveler leaves a trail, even you.

' Red narrowed her eyes, her stance unyielding.

Red squares her shoulders, eyes narrowed, hand resting lightly near her satchel as she blocks the narrow trail, every muscle taut with readiness. Red squared her shoulders, planting herself firmly across the narrow trail, her eyes narrowed and alert. She let her hand hover near her satchel, every muscle taut with readiness—a clear warning to anyone who dared approach. The hush beneath the trees sharpened her awareness, and she felt the familiar tension that came with danger, a sensation she'd come to recognize all too well since the disappearances began.

She met the Wolf's gaze, voice steady but edged with determination. "I know why you're here, Wolf," she said, letting each word fall with deliberate weight. "But you won't find what you're hunting on this path—not today." Her resolve was unmistakable, born from love and caution and the scars of recent traumas, and she stood ready to face whatever threat might lurk in the shadows. The Wolf circles just beyond arm's reach, eyes glinting, testing the air for any hint of hesitation in Red's stance. The Wolf paced in a slow arc just beyond Red's reach, his shadow spilling across the leaf-littered ground. Every step was deliberate, predatory, a silent test to see if she would flinch. His amber eyes glinted as he inhaled the scent of her resolve, searching for the faintest whiff of doubt. "Perhaps not, Red," he murmured, voice smooth as velvet and edged with threat, "but every path has forks, and every traveler leaves a trail, even you." His words slithered through the

hush of the forest, a warning and a promise entwined, as he continued his circling dance, waiting for her to slip. Red narrows her eyes, shifting her stance subtly to block the narrowest part of the trail, her hand inching towards the satchel at her side. Red narrowed her eyes, her body shifting just enough to block the narrowest part of the trail. The forest's hush seemed to press closer, but she stood her ground, her hand inching toward the satchel at her side—a motion as calculated as it was cautious. Though her voice was steady, it carried the weight of too many recent disappearances, of nights spent listening for footsteps on the path. “Maybe,” she said, her gaze never wavering, “but I’ve learned to cover my tracks—and I won’t let you lead me astray.” ‘Maybe, but I’ve learned to cover my tracks—and I won’t let you lead me astray.

The Wolf steps out from behind a tree, blocking the path with a menacing grin and unblinking eyes fixed on his target. A low, mocking chuckle rippled through the shadows as the Wolf emerged from between the twisted trunks, his imposing form blocking the narrow path ahead. He prowled forward, each measured step exuding dangerous confidence. “Well, well,” he drawled, his eyes glinting with predatory amusement as they raked over his startled visitor. “Walking alone through my forest, are we?” The words slithered from his lips, half-taunt, half-threat. He tilted his head, a sharp smile revealing the edge of his teeth. “Not the wisest choice.” The Wolf’s voice softened, almost coaxing, as he leaned in, his presence pressing like a cold mist. “Tell me, little one—where exactly do you think you’re headed?” ‘ The Wolf began to circle, his tone turning more predatory.

‘Well, well. walking alone through my forest, are we?

Not the wisest choice.

Tell me, little one—where exactly do you think you’re headed?

‘ Red refused to answer directly, her attention fixed on the nearest escape through the ferns, determined not to let him dictate her route.

The Wolf’s ears twitched, his attention sharpening as he assessed her wariness.

Each measured movement revealed their mutual awareness: Red, determined to protect her route and mission;

the Wolf, intent on intimidation and learning her destination.

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As the dense forest swallowed Red’s footsteps, her resolve hardened with each branch she pushed aside, determined to outpace the Wolf’s cunning. Meanwhile, the shortcut’s tangled shadows concealed more than Red realized; as she pressed forward, the Wolf’s own path unfolded swiftly and silently. Unbeknownst to Red, while she raced against suspicion and time, the Wolf’s intentions led him directly toward a frail cottage nestled at the forest’s edge—her grandmother’s cabin—where the true danger was about to begin.

## Chapter 3: Wolf Arrives at Grandmother’s Cabin

The Wolf, hulking beneath a sodden black cloak, circles the cabin’s rear, brushing against slick tree trunks and leaving muddy prints in the moss.

He probes the window frames with clawed fingers, testing for weakness, then wedges a shoulder beneath the kitchen window and heaves it open with a low, guttural grunt.

Inside, Grandmother, tending a simmering pot, hears the pane rattle.

She snatches her iron poker from the hearth, stepping back as heavy footfalls thud against the warped floorboards.

The Wolf, looming in the doorway, bares his teeth and advances, blocking the exit.

Grandmother brandishes the poker, voice trembling but loud: 'You'll not frighten me out, beast.

Grandmother tightens her grip on the poker, planting her feet firmly as she faces the shadow in the doorway, her eyes flashing with fierce resolve despite the tremor in her hands. Grandmother tightened her grip on the iron poker, planting her feet squarely on the worn wooden floor. Despite the tremor running through her fingers, her eyes blazed with unyielding resolve as she faced the shadow looming in the doorway. Her voice, though shaking, rang out boldly through the quiet cabin. "You think you can barge in here and terrify an old woman?" she declared, the words fired like warnings into the dark. "Well, you've picked the wrong house, beast." Her breath caught, but she stood her ground, refusing to let fear chase her from the place she had called home for decades. "I may shake, but I won't run," she promised, lifting the poker a fraction higher. "This is my home, and I'll defend it with every ounce I have." ' The Wolf feints a lunge, sending the poker clattering aside, then seizes Grandmother's wrists and shoves her into the corner, scanning the room for threats.

Driven by the need to silence her quickly, he wraps her in a moth-eaten blanket, muffling her cries, and drags her behind the bed, scanning for Red's imminent arrival.

Rain beats harder against the window as the Wolf scans the cabin, preparing to set his trap.

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Outside, the forest grows darker, and the rain intensifies, masking the Wolf's hurried preparations within the cabin. Meanwhile, several miles away, Red remains unaware of the danger awaiting her, focused instead on the weight of the task her mother has entrusted to her. As the Wolf sets his trap, Red's own journey is about to take a fateful turn, bringing her ever closer to the peril that now lurks in her grandmother's home.

## Chapter 1: Red Receives a Dangerous Mission

Red sits at the kitchen table, slicing bread and placing it on a chipped plate, her fingers brushing crumbs onto the floorboards.

Her mother stands by the window, peering into the fog-shrouded woods, then turns and places a folded letter beside Red's bowl with a decisive gesture.

She speaks in a low, urgent tone, instructing Red to deliver medicine and supplies to Grandmother, whose illness has worsened.

Red's MotherShe places a small basket into Red's hands, her expression grave and worried, glancing anxiously toward the forest path. Red's mother pressed the small basket into her daughter's hands, her knuckles white around the handle as she held on a moment longer than necessary. Worry sharpened her features, and her eyes flickered anxiously toward the looming forest path just beyond their gate. "Your grandmother's fever worsened overnight," she murmured, her voice low and urgent. "I've packed fresh bread and soup, and the medicine the doctor gave us. Take these

straight to her cottage—no delays, and don't stray from the path." She squeezed Red's hand, her gaze filled with both love and fear. "She needs you now more than ever." Red takes the basket, her face etched with worry and determination. Red took the basket from her mother, the weight of it grounding her against the tight coil of worry in her chest. Determination flickered in her eyes, masking the fear that had become second nature in these uncertain times. She met her mother's gaze, voice low but steady with urgency. "I'll go right away," she promised, her grip tightening on the worn handle. "I'll stay on the path—always. Is there anything else I should watch out for?" The question was sharp-edged, born from hard lessons and the memory of recent disappearances, but beneath it ran the current of love that tethered her to home. Red's MotherShe gently hands Red the basket, her eyes filled with worry and urgency. Red's mother pressed the wicker basket into her daughter's hands, her fingers lingering a moment longer as if they could shield Red from every unseen threat. Her eyes, wide with worry, searched Red's face for some sign of caution. "Be wary of strangers in the woods," she murmured, her voice low and urgent. "Don't speak to anyone you don't know—just keep your mind on Grandmother and hurry along." With a gentle touch, she brushed a loose curl from Red's forehead, her gaze betraying the anxious love she carried, the practical fears that haunted her every time Red stepped beyond the safety of home. As Red ties her cloak and packs the basket, her mother presses a cool hand to her shoulder, warning her to stay strictly on the path and avoid strangers.

Red's MotherShe gently rests her hand on Red's shoulder, her eyes searching Red's face for understanding and reassurance. As Red tightened the knot on her crimson cloak and carefully nestled fresh bread into the basket, her mother approached quietly and laid a cool, steadying hand on her shoulder. The gesture lingered, gentle but firm, as her mother's gaze searched Red's face, seeking reassurance—a silent plea for caution. "Remember what I always tell you," she said softly, her voice edged with worry yet threaded with love. "Stay on the path, no matter what happens, and don't speak to any strangers." She paused, her grip tightening ever so slightly. "The woods can be dangerous for a young girl on her own." Red gives her mother a quick, confident smile, cinching her cloak tighter around her shoulders. Red cinched her cloak tighter around her shoulders, the familiar red fabric a comforting weight. As she tucked the last loaf of bread into the basket, her mother's cool hand settled gently on her shoulder—a silent, anxious plea. Red met her mother's eyes and managed a quick, confident smile, letting her determination show through the lingering shadows of worry. "I promise, Mama—I'll go straight to Grandma's and talk to no one." Her words were steady, spoken with the cautious resolve she'd learned from years of living on the forest's edge, where every promise carried the weight of real danger. The clink of glass vials and the rough weave of the cloak's fabric emphasize the careful preparations.

Red nods, her resolve clear, shouldering the basket and stepping onto the dew-slick porch, the chill air biting her cheeks as she sets out toward the shadowed forest.

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The forest looms ahead, shrouded in mist and whispers, each step drawing Red further from the safety of home and deeper into uncertainty. As she navigates the winding path, the warnings echo in her mind, mingling with the distant sounds of unseen creatures. The familiar trail begins to twist, shadows lengthen, and Red senses she is no longer alone—something unknown is waiting within the deepening gloom, ready to challenge her resolve.

## Chapter 4: Red Confronts the Impostor

Red pauses at the threshold, brushing droplets from her cloak and steadying the basket of supplies on her hip.

She knocks twice, listening to the muffled shuffle of feet inside and the scrape of a chair against the wooden floor.

The Wolf, hidden beneath Grandmother's shawl, clears his throat and calls out in a rasping, unfamiliar tone for Red to enter.

The Wolf tugs the shawl closer around his snout, casting his shadow across the dimly lit room. He forces a quavering softness into his growl, careful to muffle his deeper tones, and fixes his eyes on the latch as footsteps approach. Standing in the shadowed doorway, the Wolf let the flickering lamplight catch his broad shoulders, crafting a silhouette both inviting and intimidating. His voice curled through the cold air, velvet-soft and edged with something darker. "Come in, dear child," he coaxed, gesturing toward the open door with a languid sweep of his hand. The latch hung loose, as if it had been waiting for small, trembling fingers. "The door is unlatched for you." A calculating smile tugged at his lips as he watched her hesitate on the threshold, shivering beneath her red cloak. "Don't linger in the cold—Grandmother is waiting." The words, gentle on the surface, pressed against her with an urgency that seemed to close the distance between them, drawing her, step by reluctant step, into the Wolf's den. Red steps inside, her eyes quickly scanning the dimly lit room: the curtains drawn tight, a faint iron tang in the air, and a steaming mug left untouched on the table.

She sets the basket down, her fingers lingering on the handle as she studies the figure in the bed—broad-shouldered beneath the patchwork quilt, hands tucked carefully out of sight.

Red moves closer, offering the bread and soup, her tone measured and increasingly suspicious as she repeatedly remarks on Grandmother's odd voice, the size and shape of her hands, her teeth, and her eyes.

Red steps forward, setting the bread and soup gently on the bedside table, her eyes lingering on Grandmother's hands as she tries to mask her growing unease with a polite smile. Red lingered at the foot of her grandmother's bed, her basket of bread and herbs dangling loosely from one hand. She studied the dim shape beneath the heavy quilt, a knot of unease tightening in her chest. The familiar, gentle voice she remembered was gone, replaced by something rougher, rasping—a sound that scraped against her memories. "Grandmother, your voice sounds so different today," she said, her words careful, almost tentative. She edged closer, bracing herself, her eyes falling to the hands folded atop the blanket. They seemed much larger than she remembered, the knuckles broad and sharp beneath the faded skin. Her brow furrowed, caution prickling along her spine. "Are you feeling alright?" she asked softly. Red reached for one of those hands, her own trembling just slightly, the weight of recent disappearances heavy in her mind. "And your hands—they seem much larger than I remember." Red's caution and quick-wittedness prompt her to voice these concerns directly, signaling her growing suspicion and wariness.

The Wolf shifts under the covers, clawed fingers flexing quietly beneath the blanket. He forces a smile, tilting his head in a mock gesture of affection, eyes glinting with a hungry anticipation as he beckons Red forward. The Wolf shifted beneath the heavy quilt, clawed fingers curling and uncurling in slow anticipation. Forcing a smile, he tilted his massive head in a parody of

grandmotherly affection, the sharp glint in his eyes betraying a hunger that simmered just below the surface. “Come closer, my dear,” he coaxed softly, voice thick with false warmth, “so your poor old grandmother can see you better.”

He let the words linger, layering them with practiced longing. “It’s been ever so long, hasn’t it?” he continued, the ache in his hands feigned as he flexed them beneath the covers. “These eyes aren’t what they used to be, and my hands—well, they ache terribly.” His gaze locked onto Red, inviting, predatory. “But I do so long for a hug from my sweet Red. Don’t be shy, child.” With a subtle beckon, he summoned her forward, the invitation heavy with unspoken intent. “Come, let me feel your warmth.” The Wolf, maintaining his disguise but growing more insistent, responds with forced warmth and manipulative pleas for closeness, urging Red to sit beside him to facilitate his attack.

Red hovers at the edge of the bed, hands twisting nervously in her cloak. Her eyes dart over ‘Grandmother’s’ features, searching for any familiar sign, while she inches back a step, uncertain whether she should stay or run. Red paused in the doorway, the basket she carried trembling slightly in her grip. Her grandmother sat propped up in bed, half-shrouded by patchwork quilts, but something was off—a wrongness she couldn’t shake. Red’s gaze lingered on her grandmother’s eyes, wide and unblinking, so much larger than she remembered. The unease tightened in her chest, but she steadied her voice, keeping it gentle. “Grandmother,” she ventured, edging closer with caution bred from years of danger, “is something wrong?” She searched the familiar face for reassurance, but the voice that answered seemed different, rougher somehow. Red’s brow furrowed, concern growing. “Your eyes—they look so much bigger than I remember. And your voice sounds different, too. Are you feeling alright?” The words slipped out, a blend of love and suspicion, as she fought the urge to retreat, determined to protect her family yet haunted by the shadows of what she’d seen in the woods. Red inches closer, her voice wavering as she glances nervously at the covers, her fingers tightening around the basket handle. Red inched closer, her heart pounding, every muscle in her body taut and ready to spring away at the faintest hint of danger. Her gaze flicked nervously to the covers, where gnarled hands rested atop the quilt—hands that looked nothing like the gentle ones she remembered. She tightened her grip on the basket, knuckles whitening, her voice thin and wavering as she managed, “And your hands—they seem so much larger, almost like claws—have you been ill, Grandmother?” Even as she spoke, her eyes never left those strange, contorted fingers, her mind racing through every story her mother had ever told her about things that lurked in the woods. Red inches back slightly, her eyes darting between ‘Grandmother’s’ mouth and the door, her voice trembling as suspicion overtakes her courtesy. Red’s fingers tightened around the wicker basket as she peered closer, her heart pounding in her chest. The firelight flickered across her grandmother’s face—yet something about that face was wrong, terribly wrong. Her gaze dropped, catching on the mouth, on the glinting teeth that seemed sharper than she remembered—far too sharp for any kindly old woman. Swallowing, she forced herself to sound steady as she whispered, half-pleading, half-accusing, “And your teeth—I’ve never seen them so sharp before. Are you sure you’re my grandmother?” The question hung in the air, thick with dread and the ghost of hope. Red, however, remains firmly out of reach, her suspicions mounting as she studies the shadowed face beneath the bonnet and refuses to approach, her body tensed for escape.

The Wolf pats the seat next to him, his eyes glinting with a predatory gleam beneath the guise of a welcoming smile. The Wolf patted the seat beside him, the gesture casual, almost inviting, but there was a gleam in his eyes that spoke of something far darker than hospitality. His smile

curled at the edges, disguising sharp intent beneath a veneer of warmth. “Come now, my dear,” he coaxed, voice smooth as velvet, “don’t stand so far away.” The firelight flickered over his imposing frame, casting shadows that danced across the cabin’s walls. “The fire’s warmth is ever so much sweeter up close—and I do enjoy good company on a chilly evening.” His gaze fixed on Red, hungry and unblinking, as he added, “Won’t you sit beside me, just for a little while?” The scene ends with a heightened sense of tension: Red is actively questioning ‘Grandmother’s’ identity, and the Wolf is struggling to maintain his ruse while luring her closer.

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But as the fire crackled and shadows danced along the walls, Red stood her ground, courage blazing in her eyes, and in that moment the Wolf’s deception unraveled, the night yielding to the certainty that danger could be faced—and survived—when met with wit and unwavering resolve.