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Chapter 5: Red Arrives and Senses Something Wrong

Red steps cautiously along the muddy path, clutching a basket wrapped in cloth, and scans the uneven clearing where her grandmother’s cabin sits.

She pauses to listen, noting the absence of her grandmother’s usual humming and the strange creak of the front door swinging slightly ajar.

Driven by her responsibility to deliver medicine, Red approaches and knocks lightly, her knuckles brushing against rough wood.

From inside, a voice—unusually deep and raspy—calls out for her to enter, claiming to be her grandmother.

The WolfThe wolf clears its throat, trying to soften the gravelly tone, but the deep rasp lingers, echoing strangely through the small cottage. The Wolf lounged behind the half-closed door, its massive frame draped in the borrowed scent of lavender and old linen. Its voice slithered through the wood, soft and tremulous, imitating the quaver of an ailing grandmother. “Come in, my dear,” it called, each syllable dipped in false warmth. “It’s your grandmother, waiting for you.” The wolf’s yellow eyes never left the shadowy outline on the threshold, watching for hesitation, delighting in the uncertainty. “Don’t be shy, child,” it coaxed, lips curling into a smile just shy of human. The door, left invitingly ajar, creaked as the wolf’s paw nudged it wider, the gesture gentle but loaded with predatory anticipation. Red hesitates, peering through the half-open door, and notices thick, coarse fur tangled around the doorknob and muddy footprints trailing toward the bed.

Determined to help, Red steps into the cabin, setting the basket on the table as she glances warily toward the shadowed figure beneath the quilt.

The wolf, hidden in the bed and motivated by hunger and deception, mimics the grandmother's speech, urging Red to come closer to 'see her better.

The WolfThe wolf nestles deeper into the bed, pulling the covers up to his chin and softening his voice to mimic the grandmother, his eyes glinting hungrily as he watches Red hesitate at the doorway. The wolf nestled deeper into the bed, the coarse blanket pulled snug beneath his pale chin. His voice, expertly softened to sound frail and affectionate, drifted across the shadowed room with a deceptively gentle tremor. "Come closer, my dear," he urged, eyes glinting with predatory anticipation as he watched Red linger uncertainly at the threshold. He let the dimness of the cottage work in his favor, feigning helplessness. "The light is so dim—I can hardly see your sweet face," he coaxed, his tone laced with false yearning. "Let Grandmother have a better look at you." ' Red moves slowly, her eyes flicking between the unfamiliar shape beneath the covers and the remnants of a broken teacup on the floor, piecing together the oddities as she inches forward.

A tense silence hangs in the air as Red's instincts scream at her to turn back, but something deeper urges her to uncover the truth. Each cautious step brings her closer to the bed—and to the unsettling certainty that the figure lying there is not her grandmother. With her grip tightening on the poker, Red steels herself for what comes next, knowing she can no longer ignore the danger that lurks beneath the familiar quilts.

Chapter 6: Red Confronts the Impostor

Red enters the cabin and immediately senses something is amiss, voicing her suspicions aloud and questioning the figure in the bed with increasing directness.

Instead of simply hesitating and stalling for time, Red actively interrogates the disguised Wolf, noting not just physical oddities but also strange odors, gestures, and behaviors.

Red hesitates at the foot of the bed, her fingers clutching the basket as she peers at the shrouded figure, her voice edged with uncertainty. Red hesitated on the threshold, clutching the basket more tightly as her eyes struggled to adjust to the gloom inside her grandmother's cottage. The air felt thick, heavy with the scent of unfamiliar herbs, and a strange unease prickled along her arms. "Grandmother?" she called out softly, her voice uncertain. She stepped closer, peering at the figure half-swallowed by shadow on the bed. Worry creased her brow. "Are you feeling alright?" The room seemed so much darker than she remembered, and something about her grandmother's silhouette was... off. Red's gaze settled on the bonnet, pulled so low it nearly hid the woman's face. Fighting the urge to retreat, she forced herself to ask, her tone gentle but tinged with suspicion, "Why are you wearing your bonnet so low over your face?" The WolfThe figure's voice is rougher than Red remembers, muffled beneath the covers, and a clawed hand pats the bed invitingly. Red hesitated at the edge of the room, her gaze flickering to the massive shape hunched beneath a mound of blankets. The figure's voice, rougher and more guttural than she remembered, slipped out from under the covers—a strange mimicry of concern. A clawed hand, thick-furred and trembling just enough to suggest frailty, patted the bed with a slow, deliberate invitation. "The better to keep the drafts off my poor old head, dear child," the wolf crooned, coaxing her closer.

"Come closer so I can see you more clearly." The words hung in the air, shrouded in a warmth that belied the glint of hunger in the shadowed eyes barely visible beneath the sheets, drawing Red step by careful step toward the waiting jaws. Red hesitates at the foot of the bed, squinting into the shadows, her hands twisting nervously in her apron. Red lingered at the foot of the bed, her fingers twisting the edge of her apron as she peered through the dimness at the shape swaddled in blankets. Something about the figure unsettled her—the way the covers were tucked, the way the face seemed hidden in the gloom. She edged closer, her heart thudding, voice tentative and laced with concern. "Your voice sounds raspy, Grandmother—have you caught a cold, or is something else the matter?" The words slipped out softly, betraying both her worry and her uncertainty as she searched the shadowed features for any sign of the woman she loved. The Wolf pats the edge of the bed with a trembling, oddly large hand hidden beneath the covers, eyes glinting from beneath the bonnet's shadow. The Wolf's hand—far too large and trembling beneath the covers—patted the edge of the bed in invitation, its claws just hidden by the quilt's frayed seam. From beneath the shadow of the borrowed bonnet, its eyes gleamed with a feverish intensity. "It's merely a touch of the chill, my dear," it murmured, voice thick with false frailty, each word a silken lure. "Nothing that a visit from you won't cure." The Wolf's gaze tracked her every hesitant step, the edge of its lip curling in anticipation. "Come, sit by my side," it coaxed, the invitation stretching thin and sweet between them, "so I can hold your hand." Red hesitates, squinting at the shadowy figure, her hand hovering uncertainly above the blankets. Red hesitated at the threshold, the basket of medicine and food pressed protectively against her chest. The cottage was dim, heavy with the scent of unfamiliar herbs and something darker beneath. She stepped closer to the bed, her eyes searching the shadowed figure half-buried under the covers. Something prickled at the edge of her nerves. With a cautious breath, she forced herself to look directly at the hands folded atop the quilt—so large, so oddly furry. Uncertainty gnawed at her, but concern for her grandmother propelled her forward. "Your hands look so large and... furry, Grandmother—are you sure you're alright?" she managed, her voice trembling just enough to betray her unease. The Wolf shifts beneath the blankets, extending a paw-like hand toward Red, the clawed fingers barely concealed by the fraying edge of the sleeve. Beneath the mound of blankets, the Wolf shifted, the broad, furred shape unsettling in its size. From the edge of a fraying sleeve, a paw—almost hand-like, but tipped with sharp, half-hidden claws—extended toward Red as she hesitated at the bedside. "The better to embrace you with, my sweet," the Wolf soothed, its voice a silken purr that curled around the dim room. The words dripped with reassurance, but behind them lurked a shadowy cunning. "Don't be frightened," it continued, drawing her closer with the gentle promise of comfort, "it's only the shadows playing tricks on your eyes." Red hesitates at the foot of the bed, her grip tightening on her basket as she peers anxiously at the bonneted figure, heart pounding with dread. Red lingered at the foot of the bed, her fingers digging anxiously into the wicker of her basket. The figure beneath the pile of blankets seemed to shrink and swell with each uneven breath, the familiar silhouette warped by shadows and the odd way the bonnet framed the face. Red's heart hammered against her ribs, dread tightening her throat as she tiptoed closer, searching for any hint of comfort in the gloom. But instead, her gaze caught on the eyes—so unusually large and bright, almost glowing in the dimness. Swallowing her fear, she managed to steady her voice and asked, "Grandmother, why do your eyes look so strange? They seem so big and bright, almost glowing in the gloom." The WolfThe figure shifts beneath the blankets, a sharp glint flickering in the depths where eyes ought to be, as one clawed hand inches closer to the edge of the bed. The figure beneath the blankets shifted, a subtle motion that sent a ripple through the mound of fabric. From the shadowed hollow where a face should have been, a glimmer flickered—sharp, unblinking, hungry. One clawed hand crept ever closer to the edge of the bed, each talon glinting wickedly in

the gloom. The wolf's voice slithered out, smooth and intimate, as his eyes seemed to widen with unnatural intent. "The better to see you with, my darling," he murmured, each word soaked in false affection. "Old eyes need all the help they can get in such dim light." As he spoke, his gaze never wavered, tracking every subtle movement of his visitor, measuring her caution, savoring the tension that thickened the air. Red hesitates, her fingers tightening around the basket as she edges back, eyes locked on the grin glinting beneath the bonnet. Red hesitated at the edge of the bed, her grip on the basket tightening as she took in the figure swathed in blankets. Something was wrong—she could see it in the way the bonnet sagged oddly, shadowing a grin that seemed almost too wide. Edging back, her voice barely above a whisper, Red's gaze lingered on the sharpness of those teeth, more pointed than she remembered. She swallowed, the words tumbling out despite her caution—she'd never noticed Grandmother's teeth before, never seen her look so hungry. The Wolf lunges forward, casting off the blankets and bonnet in a sudden, predatory movement that reveals his true nature. With a sudden, feral grace, the Wolf lunged forward, flinging off the mound of blankets and the frilly bonnet that had so poorly masked his monstrous form. His eyes gleamed with cruel intelligence as his jaws parted, revealing rows of gleaming teeth. The illusion shattered, and he loomed over her, voice low and silken with menace as he bared his true intentions—not bothering to hide the hunger in his gaze—as he declared, "The better to eat you with, my dear." She voices her doubts repeatedly, referencing her mother's warnings and clearly suspects that the figure before her may not be her grandmother.

As the Wolf grows more insistent and revealing in its responses, Red shifts from passive caution to active strategizing, scanning for makeshift weapons and formulating a plan to defend herself.

Red pauses on the path, glancing nervously over her shoulder, and pulls her red cloak tighter around herself. Red paused on the threshold, her basket balanced carefully on her arm. The moment she entered the cottage, she wrinkled her nose, struck by an unfamiliar scent. Grandma's home usually greeted her with the comforting aroma of rosemary and thyme—soothing, earthy, always the same. But today, something else mingled in the air, something she couldn't quite place. Maybe it was just the wind, she reasoned, carrying strange odors from the deep woods outside. Still, a prickle of caution crept up her spine. She tightened her grip on the basket and stepped inside with deliberate care, reminding herself to stay alert, just in case. Red glances nervously at the door, her grip tightening on the basket as she debates whether to call out or stay silent. Red hovered at the threshold, her fingers digging into the wicker handle until her knuckles whitened. The air inside was tinged with a musky, unfamiliar animal scent that prickled her nose and set her nerves on edge. She glanced at the heavy door, weighing her options—should she call out for her grandmother, or would silence be safer? Uncertainty gnawed at her, and the thought flickered, raw and urgent: But what if Grandma's not alone—what if something's happened? The question echoed in her mind, making her hesitate, heart thumping fast beneath her cloak. Red steadies herself, glancing nervously at the door before taking a cautious step forward, her grip on the basket tightening. Red hesitated on the threshold, the basket pressed tightly to her side, fingertips digging into the woven handle. A faint, musky animal odor lingered in the air, prickling her senses. She wrinkled her nose, uncertain whether the smell signaled danger or merely her imagination running wild. Still, she steadied herself, recalling her mother's warnings and the weight of responsibility she carried. It would be reckless to jump to conclusions—but she knew better than to ignore her instincts. She had to be ready for anything, just in case. Squaring her shoulders, Red took a cautious step forward, determined not to let fear cloud her judgment. The Wolf, feeling its deception slip, becomes alternately defensive and aggressive, attempting to maintain its disguise while letting more predatory intent show through.

Red runs her fingers lightly over the gouged wood, her brow furrowing as she glances at the mug shards glittering on the floor. Red ran her fingers lightly over the gouged wood, her brow knitting as she squatted beside the bedpost. The marks—thin, ragged scratches—stood out sharply against the old timber, and she was certain they hadn’t been there before. Her gaze drifted to the floor, where shards of a blue-glazed mug sparkled in the morning light. Someone had left in a hurry, or else something had frightened them away.

A chill crawled up her spine. Had it come back last night? She strained to recall any noise, any sign—but no, she would have heard. Unless, she thought, pressing her lips together, whatever it was had grown bolder, slinking through the house without a sound. The idea made her fists clench, but she forced herself to stand straighter, determined to find answers for her grandmother’s sake. Red steps back from the bed, scanning the shadows for movement, her hand hovering near the pocket where she keeps her knife. Red took a cautious step back from the bed, her gaze sweeping the dim corners of the room. She kept her hand close to her pocket, fingers brushing the handle of her knife as if its presence alone could ward off what lingered in the shadows. The overturned mug lay beside deep, fresh claw marks carved into the bedpost—a warning, perhaps, or a challenge. Anxiety tightened her chest, but determination steadied her pulse. Something was different this time; the air felt heavier, charged with a boldness she hadn’t sensed before. If whatever haunted her grandmother’s cottage was growing daring, Red knew she had to be prepared for whatever came next. The confrontation escalates into a tense verbal sparring match, with Red openly challenging the Wolf’s explanations and the Wolf growing increasingly impatient and ominous.

The Wolf curls its lips into a crooked smile beneath the covers, one paw—far too large for a frail old woman—trembling as it beckons the girl to the bedside. Beneath the moth-eaten quilt, the Wolf’s lips curled into a crooked, unsettling smile. One massive paw—far too large and clawed for any grandmother—trembled slightly as it emerged from the folds and beckoned the girl closer. “Come nearer, dear,” the Wolf murmured, voice brittle with a practiced frailty, every syllable laced with anticipation. “My eyes aren’t what they used to be, and I have waited all day for your sweet company.” The words slithered between them, coaxing her forward while hunger gleamed in the depths of those yellow eyes. The Wolf pats the bed with a heavy paw, the nails barely hidden beneath the blanket, voice trembling with eager anticipation. The Wolf shifted beneath the thick quilt, its massive paw pressing into the edge of the bed, claws concealed only by the flimsy coverlet. With lips curled in a semblance of a smile, it let its gaze linger on the child standing hesitantly in the gloom. There was a tremor of anticipation in its voice as it beckoned her closer, remarking on how her rosy cheeks seemed to glow in the dim light and inviting her, ever so gently, to come sit right beside it. The Wolf subtly shifts beneath the covers, its paw inching forward with a tremor masked as affection. Beneath the heavy quilt, the Wolf allowed its massive form to settle, the sheets rustling softly as it inched a paw forward—just enough for the gesture to masquerade as an affectionate invitation. Its muzzle, cunningly hidden beneath the folds, curled into a suggestion of a smile. The air between them thickened as the Wolf’s voice, honeyed and low, wove through the room: her scent, he purred, filled the space so warmly. Would she mind leaning in, just a touch closer, so he could bask in the comforting aura she brought with her? The words slipped out, velvet-soft, both a lure and a snare, each syllable coated in predatory intent. The Wolf pats the bed beside it with a trembling paw, teeth barely hidden behind a strained smile as it tries to appear inviting. The Wolf, its hulking form barely disguised beneath the quilt, patted the mattress beside it with a trembling paw—a gesture meant to invite, though the strain in its smile betrayed a barely contained hunger. Its eyes glittered with cunning as it fixed them on her, voice honeyed and persuasive. “And what a lovely basket you carry, my dear—won’t you let me have just a little

taste of what you've brought, to ease my rumbling hunger?" The words slipped from its lips, each syllable carefully weighed, masking predatory intent beneath a mask of polite longing. The Wolf lifts its massive head slightly from the pillow, the covers shifting as its jaws clench in anticipation. The Wolf's massive head lifted just enough from the pillow to send a ripple through the covers, its jaws tightening with the promise of what was to come. Beneath the quilt, lips curled in a sly, hungry invitation as it fixed her with a gaze both patient and predatory. "It's your tender voice I crave most," the Wolf murmured, words dripping with practiced longing, each syllable chosen to draw her closer. "Come—whisper your secrets in my ear, so I may savor every syllable." The hunger in its eyes was masked by a facade of gentle yearning, every movement calculated, every word a carefully baited snare. The chapter sets up an imminent confrontation, with Red more actively on guard and prepared to fight rather than simply stalling or being paralyzed by fear.

Red hesitates, shifting her basket from one arm to the other, her feet planted firmly just beyond the Wolf's reach. Her eyes narrow, wary, as she tries to sound polite while keeping her distance. Red hesitated, clutching the basket closer to her chest as she studied the stranger before her. The woods had always seemed mysterious, and her mother's warnings echoed in her mind: never trust anyone unfamiliar, especially out here. She swallowed, her eyes drawn to the unsettling flash of teeth revealed in the creature's wide smile. Mother always said not to trust strangers in the woods—especially ones with such big teeth. Unease prickled at her skin, and Red tried to sound braver than she felt as she met the stranger's gaze. "Why are you smiling at me like that?" she asked, her voice small but steady, determined not to show her fear. The Wolf tilts his head, widening his grin just enough to flash those teeth, while his eyes remain fixed on Red, unblinking. The Wolf tilted his great head, the motion slow and deliberate, as if weighing Red with each passing moment. His lips curled back just enough to reveal the sharp glint of his teeth—a gesture that might have been a smile, had it not been for the predatory stillness of his gaze, locked unblinking upon her. "My dear," he purred, voice smooth as river stones, "in these lonely woods, isn't it far better to be met with kindness than suspicion?" The words dripped with a honeyed warmth, at odds with the calculating gleam in his eyes, as if generosity and threat might be one and the same thing when spoken from such a maw. Red tightens her grip on her basket, taking an instinctive step back as her eyes flicker warily between the Wolf's face and the shadowy undergrowth. Red tightened her grip on the basket's worn handle, its weight a steadying presence as she eased a cautious step backward. The Wolf's eyes glimmered with an unsettling brightness, and her gaze darted between his face and the tangled shadows at the forest's edge. Her mother's warnings echoed in her mind—be polite, but never careless. She drew a breath, steadying herself, and when she spoke, her voice was quiet but certain. Kindness, perhaps, had guided her this far, but she'd also learned—sometimes the hard way—that not all smiles meant safety. The Wolf tilts his head, letting his tongue flick across his teeth in a gesture meant to seem playful, but his eyes remain fixed and unblinking on Red. The Wolf tilted his great head, letting his tongue flick playfully across his teeth—a gesture meant to appear harmless, even inviting. Yet his gaze never wavered from Red, unblinking and intent, as if measuring every tremor of her resolve. "Well, my dear," he purred, voice as smooth as velvet and just as deceptive, "sometimes caution can blind us to the warmth of genuine company." His words slithered through the air, gentle and coaxing, but beneath their softness lurked a razor's edge. "After all," he continued, the barest hint of a smile curling at his lips, "not every creature with sharp teeth intends to bite." Red tightens her grip on her basket, edging a step backward, her eyes searching the trees for a safe path. Red tightened her grip on the basket, feeling the rough weave press into her palms as she edged a cautious step backward. The trees loomed—silent sentinels, their shadows deepening with every uncertain glance. Her mother's

warnings echoed in her mind, urging caution, reminding her that not everything in the woods was as harmless as it seemed. She inched forward, but stopped just out of reach, wary. It was difficult to believe in kindness, she realized, when warmth was hidden behind a mouth that looked ready to snap shut. —————

The wolf's facade crumbles as Red's suspicion deepens, and the tension between them thickens in the dimly lit room. With his true nature exposed, the wolf abandons any pretense of gentleness, his wounded pride fueling a new, menacing intent. As Red backs away, the wolf's gaze follows her every movement, calculating and cold. The confrontation has shifted—no longer a test of disguises, but a dangerous game of pursuit and interrogation, with Red's every answer and action under the wolf's ruthless scrutiny.

Chapter 2: The Wolf Stalks and Interrogates Red

Red shifted the wicker basket on her arm, her steps cautious as she navigated the dew-slick roots. A sudden rustle in the undergrowth made her pause, but she pressed on until the path curved around a mossy log.

From the shadows, a large gray wolf emerged, blocking her path.

His yellow eyes fixed on her, and he spoke in a low, articulate voice: 'You're wary, and with good reason.

But tell me—what trails do the hunters favor at dawn?

I've smelled their iron on the wind, and I won't be caught unawares.

Speak plainly, or I'll find my answers elsewhere, and you won't like how I ask.

' Red, clutching her basket tighter and recalling her mother's warnings, tried to distract the wolf, speaking evasively: 'If you're looking for something, perhaps you should ask directly.

I have little to give, and less to say that would interest a traveler such as yourself.

' The wolf, feigning curiosity but hiding predatory intent, pressed further about her destination and what she carried, probing with increasingly pointed questions.

Red remained resourceful, offering cryptic answers and hinting at danger while refusing to reveal her true errand or her grandmother's location.

The wolf circled, unsatisfied but intrigued by Red's cleverness and resolve, his hunger sharpening as he plotted his next move.

Red's voice trembles as she takes a cautious step back, clutching her basket tighter, her eyes darting between the wolf's teeth and the dark path behind her. Red stepped softly between tangled roots, clutching her basket so tightly her knuckles turned white. The forest's hush pressed against her, broken only by the distant call of a jay. She caught sight of a shadow shifting beneath the low branches, and her heart thudded, loud in her ears. Hesitant, she cleared her throat and took a cautious step forward, her voice barely more than a whisper as she offered, "I—uh, I didn't mean to disturb you." The words trembled with uncertainty, but her gaze remained steady, determined not to let fear slow her mission. Red clutched her basket tighter, her feet shuffling nervously as she glanced toward the shadowed path behind her. Red paused at the edge of the winding path,

her basket heavy in her arms and her heart pounding a little faster than she liked to admit. The shadows beneath the ancient pines seemed to stretch longer with each uncertain step. She glanced over her shoulder, searching for the familiar clearing she'd left behind. Maybe I should just go back the way I came, she thought, her fingers tightening around the handle. But her mother's words echoed in her mind, reminding her of the medicine and food nestled among the cloths—her grandmother was counting on her. Red drew a slow breath, forcing her trembling feet to hold their ground. She couldn't turn back now, not when someone she loved needed her. Red clutches her basket tighter, her voice wavering as she takes a cautious step backward, eyes never leaving the wolf. Red's fingers tightened around the wicker handle of her basket, heart thudding so loudly she wondered if the wolf could hear it. She took a careful step back, never letting her gaze slip from the creature's gleaming eyes or the tense ripple of muscle beneath its bristling coat. Her voice, though shaky, managed a note of defiant caution as she searched the wolf's face for any hint of mercy. Maybe, she suggested—almost pleading, almost brave—he simply wanted her to walk away and leave him in peace. The encounter left both wary—Red determined to protect her secret, and the wolf more interested than ever in unraveling it.

Red glances around, muscles tensed, her feet angled subtly toward the nearest path away. She keeps her tone light, but her eyes flicker with apprehension, scanning for exits. Red shifted her weight from one foot to the other, her gaze darting over the tangled underbrush and the narrow paths that threaded through the trees. Her muscles coiled, ready to spring away if the situation soured. Forcing an airy tone, she managed, “Oh, I—uh, I was just passing through, really. Didn't expect to run into anyone out here.” The words tumbled out with practiced casualness, but her eyes betrayed her as they flickered from shadow to shadow, searching for a quick escape.

As the wolf melted into the shadows, Red heaved a shaky sigh, trying to convince herself the danger had passed. Yet before she could regain her composure, a sudden rustling in the trees reminded her that the forest held more than one source of unease. Just as the wolf's unsettling presence faded from her thoughts, an unexpected call from her mother would pull her anxieties in a new direction, setting her on a path she could not ignore.

Chapter 1: Red Receives Her Mother's Urgent Request

Red stands at the table, weaving a cloth over the food basket as her mother briskly places the medicine vial inside, her fingers moving with practiced care.

Red's mother points toward the woods visible through the open door, voice low and stern as she instructs Red on the safest path and warns her not to stray.

Red stands in the doorway, glancing from her mother's anxious face to the shadowy line of trees, gripping her basket tightly. Her voice is steady, but her eyes linger on the woods, curiosity flickering just beneath her obedient resolve. Red lingered in the doorway, her small hands clutching the handle of her wicker basket until her knuckles whitened. She glanced back and forth between her

mother's worried eyes and the dark, beckoning fringe of trees beyond the garden gate. Though her voice was calm, her gaze betrayed a flicker of uncertainty as she nodded, drawing a steadying breath. "I understand, Mother," she assured her, her words careful and clear. "I'll follow the path, just like you said—straight to Grandmother's. No stopping, no wandering. I promise." Even as she spoke, Red's curiosity danced at the edges of her resolve, but determination anchored her feet to the threshold, readying her for the journey ahead. Red's MotherShe places a firm, reassuring hand on Red's shoulder, her gaze earnest and unwavering. Red's mother laid a firm, reassuring hand on her daughter's shoulder, her fingers steady with a resolve shaped by years of caution. She looked Red squarely in the eye, her gaze earnest and unwavering, and then nodded toward the woods beyond the open door. Her voice dropped to a low, stern hush, meant to anchor Red like a tether before she stepped out. She reminded her, practical and loving, that the shadows beneath those trees whispered temptations, and no matter how curious she might be, she must not listen; her eyes must stay fixed on the path ahead. Red glances anxiously toward the trees, clutching her basket a little tighter as she steels herself to leave. Red hesitated at the threshold, her gaze flickering nervously toward the tangled shadows beneath the trees. The basket felt heavy in her grip, its rough handle digging into her palm—a small reassurance against the uncertainty outside. She saw her mother's stern expression and heard the warning in her voice, firm and low, as she pointed toward the woods. Red tightened her hold, drawing a shaky breath, and forced herself to nod. "I'll keep my ears closed to the whispers, Mother," she promised softly, determination threading through her anxiety. "I won't let anything draw me away." With that, she stepped into the morning hush, the weight of her promise settling beside the bundle of medicine and bread. Red nods, glancing from her mother's serious face to the shadowy tree line, then tightens the cloak around her shoulders, gripping the basket handle with determination.

As she steps toward the doorway, her mother gently touches her arm, repeating her warnings about the wolf prowling the woods, making Red pause and memorize the instructions.

Red stops at the threshold, her hand tightening around her basket as she looks back at her mother, nodding slowly to show she understands the gravity of the warnings. She takes a deep breath, replaying her mother's words in her mind, her eyes serious and attentive. Red paused at the threshold, her fingers tightening around the wicker handle of her basket. The weight of her mother's caution settled over her shoulders like a shawl. She drew in a steadying breath, replaying every word—stay on the path, don't speak to strangers—with the seriousness of someone who understood just how much depended on her. When her mother's hand touched her arm, gentle but insistent, Red met her gaze and nodded, her eyes earnest. "I'll stay on the path," she promised quietly, conviction threading through her voice, "and I won't talk to anyone I meet." She punctuated her vow with another determined nod before stepping outside, the basket held close, her heart thrumming with resolve and a trace of fear. Red's MotherShe squeezes Red's arm just a little tighter, her eyes searching Red's face for understanding, as Red nods solemnly, the weight of her mother's warning settling deep within her. Red's mother lingered in the doorway, her hand coming to rest on Red's arm with a gentle, protective squeeze. Her eyes, always so keen, searched Red's face for a trace of doubt or distraction, but found only solemn understanding. The warning, repeated yet again, settled between them—a familiar ritual, but never less urgent.

"Remember, Red," she said, her voice low and steady, as if willing each word to carve itself into her daughter's memory. "Wolves are clever, and danger wears many faces; trust no one but your own heart and my words." She held Red a moment longer, her grip firm with love and caution, before finally letting go, watching to be sure the lesson had taken root. Their exchange ends with Red

promising to deliver the supplies quickly and safely, her mother watching her leave, arms crossed tightly in concern.

Red shoulders her satchel firmly, standing tall despite her mother's anxious gaze. Red adjusted the strap of her satchel, feeling the weight of the medicine and food pressing against her side—a small but vital burden. Her mother's anxious eyes followed her every movement, worry etched deep into the lines around her mouth. Red turned to face her, forcing a reassuring smile despite the flutter of nerves in her own chest. “Don't worry, Mom,” she said gently, reaching out to squeeze her mother's hand. “I know how important these supplies are—I'll get them to the village before nightfall, I promise.” The words left her lips with quiet determination, her promise hanging in the air between them as she squared her shoulders and stepped toward the path leading into the woods. Her mother's gaze lingered on her, heavy with both pride and fear, as Red disappeared beneath the shadow of the trees. Red's MotherHer mother's arms tighten around herself, her eyes searching Red's face for any trace of fear. Her mother's arms tightened around herself, as if she might hold back the world if she squeezed hard enough. She searched Red's face for any flicker of hesitation, her voice low and edged with concern. “I just wish you didn't have to go alone, Red,” she admitted, the words weighted with a mother's worry. “The woods are different now, and I worry every time you step out there.” Red squeezes her mother's hand, her eyes steady with determination before turning toward the door. Red tightened her grip on her mother's hand, feeling the warmth and worry in the older woman's palm. She met her mother's gaze squarely, resolve shining in her eyes. “I'll stay on the main path and be careful, I swear—I'll come back before the moon rises, you'll see.” The promise rang with both determination and a hint of youthful bravado. With a final squeeze, Red turned toward the door, her heart pounding not only with nerves but with the fierce conviction to do what needed to be done. Behind her, she could feel her mother's anxious eyes lingering, heavy with unspoken hopes and fears as Red stepped out into the waiting woods.

The heavy door closes behind Red, and her mother's anxious gaze lingers long after she disappears into the morning gloom. The familiar world of hearth and home quickly falls away, replaced by the chill and uncertainty of the forest. As Red's footsteps carry her deeper among the twisted trees and curling mist, each shadow seems to stretch and whisper, hinting at dangers lurking just beyond sight. With every step, she feels the weight of her promise—and the unsettling sense that the woods hold far more than she's been warned to expect.

Chapter 3: Red Faces Terrors in the Woods

Red walks along the forest path, her basket held tightly as she navigates roots and listens to the rustle of undergrowth.

Recalling her mother's warnings, she remains cautious but is notably open and polite when she encounters the Wolf.

Instead of hesitating to reveal her destination, Red responds to the Wolf's inquiries with friendly candor, openly telling him she is going to her grandmother's house, describing its location, and sharing details about her grandmother's habits and the unlocked door.

The Wolf, using his cunning, questions Red further about her grandmother's solitude, her own journey, and the timing of her visit, gathering information through subtle conversation.

Red, feeling proud of her devotion and not sensing immediate danger, continues to converse, even mentioning that this journey is usually made with her mother, but today she is alone.

Red clutches her basket a little tighter, offering a polite smile to the wolf, her voice bright and trusting as she steps just a little closer, unaware of the danger lurking beneath his friendly demeanor. Red clutched her basket a little tighter, the woven handle pressing into her palm as she offered the wolf a polite, trusting smile. She stepped just a bit closer, emboldened by the warmth of the afternoon sun and the wolf's seemingly friendly demeanor. "I'm on my way to my grandmother's house," she explained brightly, her voice carrying an innocent cheer. "She lives at the end of this path, past the old willow tree. She's not feeling well, so I'm bringing her some medicine and treats." Red glanced down at the basket, then back at the wolf, her eyes shining with earnestness. "It's such a lovely day for a walk through the woods, isn't it?" The WolfThe wolf tilts his head with feigned curiosity, his eyes glinting as he steps lightly to block more of the path. The wolf tilted his head with a feigned curiosity, his amber eyes glinting as he edged forward, blocking a little more of the winding path. Lowering his massive head, he let a sly, knowing smile curl along his lips. In a voice smooth as velvet and just as deceptive, he remarked, "Indeed, such a fine day—one might say perfect for a visit." His gaze lingered on Red, unblinking. "Tell me," he continued, every word deliberate, "does your dear grandmother often spend her days alone in that little house beyond the willow?" Red tucks a stray curl behind her ear, her gaze earnest and trusting as she shifts the basket in her hands. Red tucked a stray curl behind her ear, the motion almost unconscious as her fingers gripped the basket a little tighter. She met the wolf's gaze with an earnestness that betrayed both her trust and worry. "She's been alone since Grandfather passed," Red explained, her voice gentle, "so I try to visit whenever I can. Especially now, when she's feeling poorly." The words came out softly, woven through with determination and a tenderness that revealed just how much her grandmother meant to her. The WolfThe wolf leans in closer, eyes glinting with curiosity as he feigns sympathetic concern. The wolf lowered his massive head until he was uncomfortably close, his eyes glinting with a curiosity that seemed almost gentle. His lips curled into a sly, knowing smile as he spoke in a low, articulate voice, feigning sympathetic concern. "How thoughtful you are, child," he murmured, tilting his head just so, his tone smooth as velvet. "Surely your grandmother must look forward to your visits—especially when her door stays closed to all but family." Red clutches her basket a little tighter, her face bright with pride but unaware of the wolf's growing interest. Red's fingers tightened around the woven handle of her basket, the weight of her errand both a comfort and a challenge. Pride warmed her cheeks as she spoke, her words tumbling out with the earnestness of someone eager to prove herself. She explained that her grandmother always left the cottage door unlocked for her, just in case she arrived while the old woman was resting. After all, her grandmother insisted, family should never have to wait outside. Red smiled at the memory, unaware that the wolf's sly gaze had sharpened with interest, his head lowering ever so slightly as he listened. The WolfThe wolf tilts his head just so, his gaze lingering with feigned admiration, while his claws flex idly in the moss at his feet. The wolf tilted his head with an air of languid curiosity, his amber eyes sweeping over Red as if appraising her very soul. His claws flexed idly in the damp moss, betraying a restless energy beneath the facade of admiration. Lowering his head, lips curling into a sly, almost affectionate smile, he let his voice slip out low and smooth—each word measured and precise. He mused aloud about the rarity of trust between kin these days, remarking on how fortunate her grandmother was to have someone so devoted. Surely, he continued, her grandmother must feel so safe knowing Red could arrive at any hour, unannounced. The wolf's tone dripped with gentle praise, yet there lingered an unsettling undertone, as though each compliment were a thread spun into some unseen web. Red

clutches her basket a little tighter, glancing down the winding path with a shy, uncertain smile. Red clutched her basket a little tighter, the woven handle digging into her palm as she glanced down the winding path. A shy, uncertain smile flickered across her lips, betraying both her nerves and her resolve. When the wolf dipped his head, his voice smooth and low, Red felt her heart flutter with caution. She steadied herself, drawing a breath, and tried to sound braver than she felt. All she wanted, she explained softly, was for her grandmother to know she was never truly alone—even if the woods, with their tangled shadows and unfamiliar sounds, sometimes made her feel that way herself. The WolfThe wolf tilts his head, watching Red closely, his eyes glinting with interest as his words hang in the air. The wolf tilted his massive head, watching Red with an unsettling intensity. His amber eyes glinted with a predatory interest as he let his words linger in the hush between them. Lowering his head just enough for his sly smile to catch the waning light, he addressed her in a voice low and articulate, the timbre both inviting and dangerous. Loneliness, he mused, could be a curious companion—one that sometimes allowed a person to hear things in the silence that others might miss. The notion hung in the air, subtle and seductive, as if he were offering Red a secret she'd been longing for without ever realizing it. Red hugs her basket a little tighter, glancing nervously at the shifting shadows among the branches. Red hugged her basket a little tighter, her fingers pressing against the worn wicker as she stole a glance at the shifting shadows among the branches. The wolf's head lowered, his lips curling into a sly smile, and his voice slithered through the hush of the woods. Red's eyes darted to a swirl of wind, the faint rustle of leaves, and she whispered, almost to herself, "Sometimes the wind sounds almost like whispers, but I know it's just the trees talking to each other." Her words mingled with the woodland hush, a fragile certainty bracing against the wolf's enigmatic presence. The WolfThe wolf tilts his head, his eyes glinting as he steps just a fraction closer, voice smooth and inviting. The wolf tilted his great head, the silver light flickering across his eyes as he regarded Red with a predator's patience. He stepped forward, just enough for her to sense the shadow of danger, yet his voice, when he finally spoke, was velvet—low and articulate, wrapping around the silence of the woods. His lips curled into a sly, knowing smile as he said, almost conspiratorially, that sometimes, if one listened closely, the woods would share their secrets with those clever enough to ask. Red hugs her basket a little tighter, glancing nervously at the dark spaces between the trees. Red hugged her basket a little tighter, fingers pressing into the worn handle as she took a tentative step back. The woods pressed in around her, shadows pooling thick and silent between ancient trunks. She glanced nervously at those dark spaces, heart fluttering against her ribs. The wolf lowered his head, his eyes glinting with a sly intelligence, lips curled in a knowing smile. In a low, careful voice, he observed, "I never thought of the woods as having secrets—what sorts of things do you think they would tell?" The WolfThe wolf tilts his head, his eyes glinting with sly curiosity as he studies Red's face for a reaction. The wolf tilted his head, eyes narrowing with sly curiosity as he studied Red's face, searching for the flicker of unease he so enjoyed. His massive form lowered until his muzzle hovered just above the forest floor, lips curling into a predatory smile. With a low, articulate murmur, he mused aloud, "Perhaps they would reveal who passes beneath their boughs and when, or who finds comfort behind a certain unlocked door." Each word slipped from his tongue like silk, calculated to unsettle, as his gaze never wavered from Red's expression, hungry for the telltale signs of fear. Red clutches her basket a little tighter and glances nervously at the shadows between the trees. Red's fingers tightened around the worn handle of her basket as she inched forward, wary eyes flickering to the shadows that pooled between the ancient trees. The wolf's head dipped, his sly smile sharp against the gloom. Trying to sound braver than she felt, Red cleared her throat and said, "I suppose if the woods do keep watch, they must know I'm always careful and never stray from the path." Her words carried a quiet determination, but beneath them, her heart hammered

out a warning she couldn't ignore. The WolfThe wolf tilts his head, eyes narrowing with feigned admiration as he steps just a fraction closer, his gaze fixed intently on Red. The wolf tilted his massive head, eyes narrowing with a glint of feigned admiration as he drifted a fraction closer, his shadow stretching long across the mossy path. His gaze, unwavering and intent, lingered on Red. Lowering his head, lips curling into a sly, predatory smile, he let his voice slip out smooth and low, each word carefully measured. "Of course, wise little one—after all, the safest journeys are taken by those who know exactly where they're going and when they'll arrive." The compliment slithered from his tongue, deceptively warm, as he watched for any flicker of uncertainty in her eyes. Red hugs her basket closer, glancing down the trail with a hopeful, trusting smile. Red hugged her basket a little closer to her chest, the woven handle warm beneath her anxious fingers. She glanced down the winding trail, hope flickering in her smile despite the shadow draping the path ahead. "I always follow the path," she told herself quietly, more for reassurance than anything else, "so I should reach Grandmother's house just before lunchtime." The words slipped out, laced with trust and determination, as if saying them aloud might make the journey safer. The Wolf departs into the trees with a wealth of information, his predatory intent sharpened by Red's openness.

Red glances down at her basket, fingers tightening on the handle, her eyes flickering with uncertainty as she recalls her mother's gentle but firm voice in her mind. Red's fingers tightened around the worn handle of her basket, the weight of her task suddenly pressing against her small palm. She glanced down at the parcels of medicine and food, her eyes flickering with uncertainty. In her mind, the memory of her mother's gentle but firm voice rose up, echoing through the hush of the woods: Don't talk to strangers, and never stray from the path. The words lingered, overlapping with the rustle of leaves and the distant call of a bird.

Hesitating at the fork in the trail, Red's hand inched protectively over the lid of the basket. She whispered, barely louder than a breath, "You said to be careful, Mama. I remember." The reminder settled in her chest like a promise, steadying her nerves as she peered into the shadowed trees, determined to carry out her mother's instructions no matter what waited beyond the next bend. Red's MotherHer mother's voice echoes gently in Red's mind, the memory wrapping around her like a protective cloak as she clutches the basket closer to her side. Red's fingers tightened around the woven handle, her thumb brushing over the lid of the basket as she paused at the edge of the path. In the hush of the woods, her mother's voice echoed in her mind, practical and loving: always keep your wits about you, darling—what's in that basket is precious, just like you. The memory wrapped around Red, firm as a cloak, urging her to stay alert and tread carefully. She hesitated, glancing back toward the village, the weight of her mother's warning settling in her chest before she dared to step deeper beneath the shadowed trees. Red resumes her journey, comforted by the memory of her mother's advice, but unaware of the risk posed by her candidness.

Red pauses on the narrow forest trail, clutching her basket a little closer. She offers the wolf a polite, slightly nervous smile, her eyes flicking to his sharp teeth before meeting his gaze again. Red paused on the narrow forest trail, her fingers tightening around the handle of her basket. The wolf's sudden appearance made her heart skip, and she managed a polite, if slightly nervous, smile. She glanced briefly at his sharp teeth before forcing herself to meet his gaze. "Good afternoon, Mister Wolf," she said, her voice a little unsteady. "You startled me—I didn't see you there." Red tried to steady herself, noticing how quiet the path was today, the silence pressing in. She hesitated, searching for courage, then asked, "Are you out for a stroll too?" The WolfThe wolf circles closer, his head tilted with feigned curiosity, golden eyes fixed on Red as his nose twitches, catching the scent of her basket. The wolf circled nearer, his powerful frame gliding through the undergrowth

with a predator's grace. His head cocked to one side in a pantomime of curiosity, golden eyes never leaving Red as his nose twitched, savoring the tantalizing aroma wafting from her basket. "Ah, forgive me, dear child—I meant no fright; the forest is so vast, one's paws wander where they will," he murmured, the words rolling off his tongue with a silken ease, as if his approach were an innocent accident. Beneath his articulate apology, the wolf's gaze lingered, calculating, hungry—masking his true intent behind gentle civility. The WolfThe wolf lowers his head closer to Red's basket, nostrils flaring subtly as he circles, keeping his tone light and eyes fixed on her face. The wolf lowered his massive head, nostrils flaring as he circled closer to Red's basket, every movement deliberate and predatory. His voice, light and almost congenial, floated between them as his cold, amber eyes never left her face. "Tell me, young traveler," he murmured with deceptive gentleness, "what brings you so deep into these woods on your own?" His gaze lingered on her small hands clutching the basket, a flicker of amusement passing through his features. "Do you not fear what shadows might linger beneath these ancient trees?" The words slipped from his mouth like smoke, soft and curling, all the while his body remained tense with barely concealed hunger. Red hugs her basket a little tighter and glances down the path, her voice brave but her eyes wary of the wolf's watchful gaze. Red hugged her basket a little tighter, fingers pressing into the worn weave as she forced herself to stand tall. The wolf's eyes glimmered, unblinking, and though her voice sounded steady, a tremor betrayed the uncertainty she felt beneath his watchful gaze. Mama had always told her she'd be safe if she kept to the path and didn't talk to strangers—words she clung to now, repeating them silently as she glanced down the winding trail ahead. She tried to sound brave as she explained, almost as much to herself as to the hungry beast circling her, that she was only delivering medicine and food to her grandmother's house, just past the bend where wild roses tangled in bloom. The WolfThe wolf lowers his head, nostrils flaring as he edges closer, his gaze fixed hungrily on the basket, tail swishing with anticipation. The wolf lowered his massive head, nostrils flaring as he crept ever closer to Red. His eyes flickered hungrily toward the basket she clutched, tail swishing with quiet anticipation. Circling slowly, he drew in the scent between them, a mocking warmth threading through his voice as he observed, "Such devotion—surely your grandmother will be delighted by a visit from her cherished granddaughter." He let his gaze linger on the tempting basket, lips curling in a semblance of a smile. "And that basket looks particularly inviting. Tell me, do you often make this journey all alone?" The words slithered from him, equal parts admiration and inquiry, each syllable weighed with cunning intent. Red hugs the basket a little closer, glancing down the path as if to reassure herself of its safety, but her eyes flicker back to the wolf with a touch of curiosity. Red tightened her grip around the basket, the rough weave pressing into her palms as she glanced anxiously down the winding path. It looked safe enough, the familiar trees arching overhead just as they always did. Still, she couldn't help but steal a glance at the wolf, curiosity flickering in her wide eyes despite the wariness that kept her rooted to the spot. She'd admitted quietly, almost as if reasoning with herself, that she didn't come this way alone very often—Mama usually walked beside her, keeping careful watch. But today, with her mother busy baking at home, Red had insisted she could handle the errand by herself, promising she'd go straight to Grandmother's and return without wandering. The WolfThe wolf lowers his head slightly, voice silky, eyes glinting as he takes a measured step closer and lets his tongue flick over his teeth. The wolf lowered his massive head, the silver gleam of his eyes fixed keenly on Red as he circled her with deliberate, predatory grace. His voice slipped through the hush of the woods, smooth and enticing, while his tongue traced the edge of his teeth in a careful gesture that was almost thoughtful. "How brave you are, little one," he murmured, the words curling in the air between them as he drew another step closer, nostrils flaring to catch the mingled scent of fear and innocence. "To wander these woods alone, with only the trees and birds to keep you

company.” He paused, eyes never leaving her face, his tone deceptively gentle as he pressed on, “Tell me—does your grandmother expect you soon, or might she be surprised by an early visit today?” Red hugs her basket close, glancing down the path as if measuring the distance to her grandmother’s cottage, her grip tightening with a hint of unease. Red hugged her basket closer, pressing the woven handle against her chest as she peered down the winding path. The woods felt bigger than she remembered, shadows moving restlessly between trunks as the wolf circled her, its eyes glinting with hunger and calculation. She measured the distance to her grandmother’s cottage, trying to ignore the prickle of unease in her stomach. Still, determination steadied her hands. If she kept walking, she’d reach the cottage much earlier than usual—she had left as soon as the bread cooled, not waiting for the sun to climb higher. The thought almost made her smile; Grandmother would be surprised to see her so early, medicine and fresh food delivered before she’d even expected a visitor. The WolfThe wolf’s amber eyes narrow slightly, his tail curling behind him as he steps closer, nostrils flaring with the scent of bread and innocence. The wolf’s amber eyes narrowed, glinting with a sly intelligence as he drifted closer, his tail curling in anticipation. He inhaled deeply, savoring the mingled scent of fresh bread and innocence that clung to the girl before him. Circling Red with predatory grace, he let his words slip out as smoothly as silk, his voice honeyed and coaxing. How delightful, he mused aloud, that a day could be sweetened by a surprise—especially for someone living all alone at the edge of these shadowy woods. Wouldn’t she agree? His nostrils flared again, drinking in the promise of an easy meal as he watched for the flicker of trust or fear in her wide eyes. The WolfThe wolf cocks his head, eyes glinting as he steps closer, his tail swaying with feigned friendliness. The wolf cocked his head, a sly glint flickering in his amber eyes as he drifted a step closer to Red, tail swaying in an imitation of friendly curiosity. He circled her with deliberate slowness, each movement calculated, nostrils flaring as he drank in the scent of innocence and uncertainty that lingered between them. “And does your dear grandmother keep anyone else for company,” he inquired, voice smooth as velvet and edged with something sharper, “or will she have only you and the birds to greet this afternoon?” Red clutches her basket a bit tighter, glancing toward the path ahead, a faint uncertainty flickering in her eyes as the wolf’s questions linger in the air. Red’s fingers tightened around the wicker handle, the basket pressing close against her skirt as she cast a wary glance up the winding forest path. The wolf’s eyes glinted with sly interest, his questions still echoing in the hush between them. Red hesitated, her voice soft but steady as she tried to sound braver than she felt. It was just Grandmother, she explained—her grandmother lived out here, preferring the quiet of the woods. Still, Red added, shifting her weight and hoping she sounded casual, she was sure Grandmother would be glad for a little company today. The WolfThe wolf’s yellow eyes narrow with interest as he sidles a step closer, his voice low and silky, his nose twitching as if savoring the scent of the bread in Red’s basket. The wolf’s yellow eyes narrowed with a glint of interest as he sidled a step closer, his heavy paws barely making a sound on the mossy earth. His nose twitched, savoring the sweet tang of bread wafting from Red’s basket. In a voice low and silky, he murmured, almost purring, “Such a peaceful spot for a gentle soul—how fortunate that you visit her, for in these silent woods, one never knows what unexpected guests might wander by.” He circled her slowly, each movement calculated, as if weaving an invisible snare with every soft word and deliberate step. —————

As Red disappears deeper into the tangled undergrowth, the woods settle into an uneasy silence, broken only by the fading echoes of her hurried footsteps. Unseen among the shadows, another presence moves with purpose, weaving through the trees with a cunning patience. While Red presses onward, unaware of just how closely she is being hunted, the path ahead leads not just to

her grandmother's door—but to a danger already lurking within.

Chapter 4: The Wolf Breaks Into Grandmother's Cabin

As the wind gusts, the latch on the cabin's back window creaks, drawing Grandmother's attention from her bed.

She rises with effort, her hands trembling as she pulls her shawl tighter.

Outside, the Wolf circles the cabin's perimeter, paws sinking into soggy earth, nose twitching as he catches the scent of illness and warm broth drifting from the chimney.

With a calculated leap, the Wolf lands beneath the window, bracing himself and pushing against the glass until it cracks open.

Grandmother, hearing the sharp snap, limps toward the back room, her cane tapping against the worn floorboards.

The Wolf squeezes his massive frame through the gap, claws scraping against the wood, then lopes into the main room, blocking the doorway.

Grandmother grips her cane, brandishing it as she faces the intruder.

Grandmother stands tall despite her trembling hands, lifting her cane in warning as she plants her feet firmly between the Wolf and the door. Grandmother stood tall in the dim light of her cabin, the tremor in her hands betraying neither fear nor weakness as she gripped her cane and planted herself firmly between the Wolf and the door. Her gaze, sharp despite her frailty, swept over the intruder as she raised the cane in warning. "Stay back now, you beast!" she declared, her voice steady and resolute. "I may be old, but I've lived through worse than the likes of you." She squared her shoulders, the cane poised and ready. "One step closer and you'll feel the sting of this cane!" The Wolf edges a paw forward, lips curling back to reveal sharp teeth in what could almost be mistaken for a smile. The Wolf edged a heavy paw forward, claws scraping softly over the worn floorboards as his massive frame blocked the fading sunlight. Lips curled back from gleaming teeth in a semblance of a smile, he fixed Grandmother with a gaze both mournful and mocking. "Oh, dear lady," he crooned, voice as smooth as velvet and just as dark, "there's no need for threats—I only wish to keep you company on this lonely afternoon." The cane trembled in her grasp, but the Wolf's tone, so gentle and reasonable, threaded through the tense air, weaving a subtle snare around her resolve. Grandmother widens her stance, raising her cane higher, her knuckles white with tension. Grandmother tightened her grip on the cane, her knuckles paling as she widened her stance, planting herself firmly between the intruder and the fragile comfort of her cabin. Despite the frailty that illness had brought, her eyes were sharp with defiance. "Company from the likes of you is the last thing I need," she said, her voice steady even as her body trembled. She lifted her cane higher, never breaking eye contact. "I've seen that glint in your eye before, and it never led to anything good." The Wolf steps forward, its lips curling into a sly, unsettling smile as its shadow stretches across the floor. The Wolf advanced, its massive form blotting out the hearth's feeble glow, lips curling into a sly, unsettling smile. Its shadow unfurled over the wooden floorboards, creeping toward the old woman clutching her cane like a lifeline. With a voice as smooth as velvet, the creature spoke, every word artfully measured. "Why such suspicion, grandmother—perhaps if you lowered that cane, you'd see I mean no harm at all." The promise of innocence hung in the air, but beneath the wolf's silken tone lurked something cold and hungry, coiling closer with

every step. Grandmother narrows her eyes, tightening her grip on the cane and edging closer to the fireplace, searching for something else to defend herself with. Grandmother narrowed her eyes, the frail lines of her face hardening as she tightened her grip on the cane. Inch by inch, she edged closer to the fireplace, fingers fumbling along the mantel in search of anything else she might wield as a defense. Her gaze never left the shadowed figure before her. “If you meant no harm,” she said, voice steady and unyielding despite the tremor in her limbs, “you’d have knocked at my door like any decent soul, not slinked in on silent paws.” The Wolf circles slowly, lips curling in a thin, predatory smile, eyes never leaving the trembling cane. The Wolf prowled in a slow, deliberate circle, claws whispering against the wooden floorboards as he drew ever closer. His lips curled in a thin, predatory smile, eyes glinting with cold amusement that never once left the trembling cane gripped tightly in Grandmother’s knotted hands. “Decency is for sheep, dear grandmother—wolves must enter as hunger commands,” he murmured, the words slipping from his jaws with sinister ease, each syllable a silken snare meant to sap her courage and remind her precisely who, or what, she faced. Grandmother narrows her eyes, tightening her grip on the cane, her knuckles white as she braces herself between the Wolf and the doorway. Grandmother narrowed her eyes, the lines of her face deepening with resolve as she tightened her grip on her cane—her knuckles whitening against the polished wood. Though her body trembled with age and illness, she planted herself firmly between the Wolf and the doorway, refusing to yield even an inch. Brandishing her cane with a steadiness that belied her frailty, she met the intruder’s gaze. “Hunger or not,” she declared, her voice clear and unwavering despite the chill in the air, “you’ll find I don’t bow to wolves—and if you take one more step, you’ll regret it.” The Wolf bares his teeth in a mocking smile, slowly advancing, muscles tensed for a spring. The Wolf bared his teeth in a mocking smile, each step deliberate as he advanced, muscles coiled beneath his bristling fur. His eyes glinted coldly as he regarded the old woman, her knuckles white around the cane she dared to brandish. “Regret is for those who survive, grandmother,” he purred, his voice curling through the musty air like smoke. “I suggest you drop that cane before your trembling hands betray you.” Grandmother tightens her grip on the cane, planting her feet firmly as she glares at the Wolf, refusing to yield ground. Grandmother’s grip tightened around her cane, knuckles white and trembling, but her stance remained unyielding as she squared her frail shoulders to face the Wolf. Her eyes, sharp beneath a veil of age, fixed fiercely on the intruder. Though her hands shook, she brandished the cane with practiced purpose, her voice steely as she warned, “My hands may tremble, but my aim is true—and if it’s regret you wish to taste, come any closer and I’ll show you the strength that kept me alive this long.” The threat hung in the small cabin, defiant and clear, a testament to the resilience that had carried her through a lifetime of hardship. The Wolf bares his teeth in a grim smile, inching forward with muscles coiled and eyes locked on the cane. The Wolf’s lips curled into a grim smile, his teeth flashing pale in the gloom as he inched forward, every muscle taut beneath his bristling fur. His gaze flickered hungrily to the cane clutched in Grandmother’s trembling hands. “Strength may have kept you alive,” he observed, his tone silkily cruel, “but courage won’t fill an empty belly—and I’m hungrier than you can imagine.” The words slithered through the room, heavy with threat, as Grandmother gripped her cane tighter, her resolve facing the predator’s relentless advance. Grandmother tightens her grip on the cane and squares her shoulders, planting herself firmly between the Wolf and the door. Grandmother’s gnarled fingers tightened around her cane as she squared her frail shoulders, planting herself firmly between the hulking Wolf and the fragile wooden door behind her. Though illness had stolen much of her strength, her eyes flashed with undimmed intelligence and resolve. She brandished the cane and set her jaw, her voice steady and unwavering despite the tremor in her limbs. “Then you’ll have to earn your supper, beast—because I won’t let you take it from me while there’s breath in my

body!” The Wolf bares his teeth but first engages Grandmother in a tense verbal exchange, using manipulation and psychological intimidation rather than immediate violence.

Grandmother resists, showing both courage and vulnerability, attempting to bargain for her life by offering food and appealing to the Wolf’s potential for mercy.

The Wolf rebuffs her, expressing his predatory intent and lack of compassion, but delays his attack, savoring Grandmother’s fear and desperation.

Grandmother gasps, her breath shallow as the Wolf’s heavy paw pins her shoulder. She reaches desperately for her cane, her eyes wide with terror, struggling to free herself from his crushing grip. Grandmother’s breath rattled in her chest as the Wolf’s weight pressed her into the creaking floorboards, his paw pinning her frail shoulder with a force that stole what little strength she had left. Panic flashed in her wide eyes, and her trembling hand reached out, fingers scrabbling desperately for her cane—her only hope—only for it to be knocked out of reach. Terror and resilience warred within her as she stared up at her captor. “Please—have mercy!” she gasped, her voice thin but unwavering despite her fear. “What do you want from me? Let me go, I beg you!” The words tumbled out, a plea shaped by both dread and the stubborn courage that had seen her through so many storms before. The Wolf leans in close, his hot breath grazing her cheek as his claws dig deeper into her shoulder. The Wolf leaned in, his jaws inches from her ear, hot breath prickling her skin as his claws pressed deeper into the soft flesh of her shoulder. He smiled—a flash of hunger and cunning—while Grandmother trembled beneath his crushing weight, her cane clattering uselessly across the floorboards. “Mercy is for the weak, old woman,” he murmured, voice low and silken, each word drawn out for her terror. “Tonight, I want more than your pleas—I want your silence.” Grandmother’s voice trembles as she tries to twist free, her eyes wide with terror, searching the Wolf’s face for any hint of compassion. Grandmother’s voice broke in a desperate plea as she struggled beneath the Wolf’s crushing weight, her frail hands clawing at his fur and her heart hammering against her ribs. “No, please—I’ll do anything, just spare me!” The words tumbled out with trembling urgency, her eyes wide and glistening as they searched his face for even a flicker of mercy. Despite the terror knotted in her chest, a spark of resilience lingered in her gaze, refusing to surrender hope as she twisted, trying to free herself from the heavy paw pinning her to the rough cabin floorboards. The WolfHe bares his teeth in a wicked grin, pressing down harder as Grandmother gasps, her struggles growing more desperate. The Wolf lunged, knocking the cane aside with a swift, merciless swipe. Grandmother tumbled to the floorboards, her frail limbs flailing as his heavy paw pressed down on her chest, pinning her in place. He leaned in close, his muzzle curled into a wicked grin, teeth gleaming in the dim light. As she gasped and struggled, her desperation clawing at the air, the Wolf’s voice slithered out—a cold, articulate whisper. “Your anything means nothing to me,” he said, the words heavy with years of hunger and anticipation. “I’ve waited too long to be denied now.” His eyes gleamed with ruthless intelligence, savoring the fear that radiated from his captive, every tremor fueling his predatory delight. The Wolf leans in close, his hot breath rasping against her cheek as his claws dig deeper into her shoulder. The Wolf lunged with terrifying swiftness, knocking the cane aside and driving Grandmother to the floorboards. His weight pinned her fast, a heavy paw pressing mercilessly into her frail shoulder while claws bit through cloth and skin. He leaned in close, so near that his hot, fetid breath rasped against her cheek. With a predatory glint in his golden eyes and a voice thick with mockery, he murmured in her ear, “You should have locked your door tighter, Grandmother—now it’s far too late for bargains.” As the pot of soup simmers and the fire pops in the hearth, the Wolf gradually overpowers Grandmother, dragging her toward the shadowed

bedroom as she pleads for mercy.

Grandmother clings to the doorframe, her hands trembling as she stares at the Wolf, eyes wide with terror and disbelief. Her voice quivers, pleading as she tries to halt his advance. Grandmother clung to the doorframe, her frail hands trembling as she stared up at the Wolf, terror and disbelief mingling in her wide, glassy eyes. The fire snapped in the hearth behind her, and the scent of simmering soup hung heavy in the air. Her voice, thin and quivering, pleaded as she tried to halt his advance. "Please, sir—what is it you want with me?" she managed, breathless. "I have nothing of value, only soup and old bones." She nodded shakily toward the bubbling pot, her fear barely contained. "If you're hungry, take what you need, but let me be," she begged, desperation sharpening her words. "Why do you look at me so?" The Wolf bares his teeth in a crooked grin, tightening his grip as he hauls Grandmother closer to the darkened doorway. The Wolf's crooked grin widened as he bared his teeth, his claws tightening their grip around Grandmother's frail arm. He hauled her closer to the shadowed threshold, where the flickering firelight cast monstrous shapes on the walls and the pot of soup simmered, forgotten, on the hearth. Leaning in, his voice a silken whisper laced with menace, he let the truth slip between his fangs—a truth meant to chill the old woman's blood. It was not hunger for soup that gnawed at him tonight, he confided, but something far darker: the taste of fear, and she, trembling in his grasp, seasoned it exquisitely. Grandmother clutches her apron with trembling hands, glancing desperately toward the bubbling pot as the Wolf's shadow looms over her. Grandmother's hands trembled as she clutched her faded apron, knuckles whitening with fear. Her eyes darted from the looming shadow in the doorway to the bubbling pot of soup, its aroma mingling with the sharp scent of her dread. The Wolf's presence filled the small cabin, oppressive and inescapable. Still, she mustered her courage, voice quivering but steady as she pleaded, "Mercy, Wolf—there's no need for cruelty; I'll fetch you bread and broth, just spare an old woman her peace." The Wolf tightens his grip, dragging her deeper into the gloom, his eyes glinting as the firelight flickers across his snout. The Wolf's grip tightened, claws pressing coldly through the worn fabric of Grandmother's nightgown as he dragged her, step by step, away from the safety of the hearth. Shadows spilled across the floor, swallowing the edges of the flickering firelight that danced over his pointed snout. His eyes—unblinking, glinting with a predatory sheen—never left her trembling form. With a voice that curled around her like smoke, the Wolf leaned close, his breath stirring the sparse gray hairs at her temple. "Peace is a thin blanket against the winter, Grandmother," he murmured, letting each word linger as he pulled her deeper into the gloom, "and tonight, I mean to wrap myself in something warmer." Grandmother clings to the doorframe, her fingers trembling as she tries to meet the Wolf's gaze. Grandmother clung to the doorframe, her frail fingers trembling against the rough wood as the Wolf's shadow loomed over her. The pot of soup simmered unattended, its warm aroma mingling with the sharp scent of fear. Drawing a shaky breath, she forced herself to meet the beast's gaze, her voice steady despite the quiver in her limbs. "Surely you have a mother too, Wolf," she murmured, searching his eyes for a flicker of mercy. "Would she wish you to spill an old woman's blood for warmth?" The Wolf tightens his grip, dragging Grandmother closer to the darkness beyond the bedroom door, his eyes glinting with cruel anticipation. The Wolf's massive paw tightened around Grandmother's frail wrist, claws pricking through the thin fabric of her nightgown as he dragged her inexorably toward the yawning darkness beyond the bedroom door. The flickering firelight cast monstrous shadows along the walls, briefly illuminating the cruel anticipation glittering in his eyes. Leaning close, his muzzle nearly brushing her ear, he murmured with chilling composure, "My mother taught me the cold never pities the weak, Grandmother—so why should I?" His words slid through the gloom, as merciless and inevitable as the encroaching night, and Grandmother felt the

last vestiges of warmth drain from the room. Grandmother clutches the edge of the bedstead, her voice trembling as the Wolf's shadow looms larger against the flickering firelight. Grandmother's gnarled fingers tightened around the bedstead as the Wolf's shadow stretched menacingly across the flickering firelight. The pop and simmer of the soup in the hearth did little to ease the chill that crept through her bones. With every ounce of strength left to her, she lifted her trembling voice into the gloom, reminding him, "Even the coldest night can be softened by kindness, if you let it." Her words were not a plea, but a gentle invocation—a fragile hope offered to the beast looming before her. "Please, Wolf," she continued, her intelligence shining through the frailty, "remember what it is to be spared." The Wolf tightens his grip, dragging her closer to the darkness of the bedroom, his shadow swallowing hers on the rug. With a predatory ease, the Wolf tightened his grip around Grandmother's frail wrist, dragging her inexorably closer to the velvet shadows of the bedroom. His hulking form loomed, swallowing her silhouette as the rug muffled her stumbling steps. In the kitchen, a pot of soup simmered, the aroma nearly drowned out by the crackling fire popping in the hearth—domestic sounds that seemed, in this moment, like the distant echoes of a safer world.

Leaning in, his voice slid over her ear, smooth and cold as river stone. He whispered, almost thoughtfully, "Kindness is a luxury for those who sleep safe behind locked doors, Grandmother—and tonight, your door was left wanting." The words lingered, sharp and deliberate, as he pulled her deeper into the gloom, his eyes glinting with ruthless intelligence. Grandmother's trembling hands clutch the edge of the bed as the Wolf's shadow looms larger, his claws tracing the curve of her shoulder. Grandmother's trembling fingers clung to the fraying quilt as the Wolf's shadow stretched across her bed, his claws idly tracing the curve of her shoulder with chilling intent. The aroma of simmering soup mingled with the sharp tang of fear in the air, while the fire snapped and spat in the hearth, casting wavering light over the small cabin. Despite her frailty, she lifted her chin, voice steady but gentle as she pleaded, "You needn't do this—there's enough warmth here for us both, if only you'd sit and share the soup instead of taking what can never be given." Her words hung between them, a fragile barrier against the encroaching darkness, her trust and resilience shining through the trembling of her hands. Outside, Red's distant footsteps crunch along the path, nearing the clearing as a raven flaps overhead and the forest hushes.

Inside the dim cabin, the wolf settles into his stolen disguise, every movement rehearsed in anticipation. As the last echoes of Grandmother's plea fade, the hush outside grows tense, broken only by the approaching rhythm of Red's footsteps. The forest seems to hold its breath, and danger coils within the walls, ready to spring. With each step Red takes toward the door, the stage is set for a desperate struggle—one where survival hangs in a fragile balance, and rescue may come at a terrible cost.

Chapter 7: Fight for Survival and Rescue

Red crouched near the hearth, clutching a heavy iron poker, her knuckles white.

Grandmother, pale but resolute, edged toward the locked pantry, dragging a battered stool behind her.

The Wolf, his fur slick and bristling from the storm, prowled at the threshold, claws scraping wood and nose twitching as he sniffed the air for weakness.

Red darted forward, thrusting the poker between herself and the beast, shouting, 'Stay back!

Red grips the poker tightly, her hands trembling despite her bold stance, eyes wide with fear but refusing to back down. Red darted forward, thrusting the poker between herself and the beast. Her hands trembled despite the boldness of her stance, eyes wide with fear, but she refused to back down. "Stay back!" she shouted, her voice wavering but determined. "I mean it—don't you dare come any closer! I won't let you hurt me!" The words tumbled out, fierce and desperate, as she held her ground, heart pounding, every muscle taut with the urge to run—but she stood firm, gripping the poker as if it were a lifeline. ' Grandmother flung open the pantry door, tossing a jar of pepper toward Red.

The Wolf lunged, jaws snapping;

Red swung the poker, striking his snout and scattering hot embers from the fire.

The Wolf recoiled, yelping, momentarily blinded by the smoke and pepper.

Grandmother seized the moment, throwing a heavy quilt over his head, tangling his limbs.

Red pushed her advantage, driving the Wolf toward the open door as thunder shook the cabin.

The Wolf, snarling, tore free and fled into the storm, leaving muddy prints and the acrid smell of singed fur behind.

Red slammed the door and bolted it, panting.

Grandmother collapsed onto the stool, Red rushed to her side, pouring water from a chipped mug.

The Wolf's retreat bought them time and safety, for now.

As the storm faded and dawn crept across the sky, Red and Grandmother sat together by the quiet hearth, safe at last, knowing that courage—and love—had carried them through the night.