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Chapter 1: Red Receives Her Grandmother's Warning

Red tightens the strap on her medicine satchel as she steps onto the cottage porch, her red cloak brushing the rough wood.

Her mother emerges from the doorway, placing a hand on Red's shoulder to stop her.

She leans in, voice low and urgent, warning Red to stick to the main path and avoid the shadowed parts of the forest.

Red's MotherShe grips Red's shoulders gently but firmly, searching her daughter's eyes for understanding, her own voice trembling with worry. Red's mother gripped her daughter's shoulders, gentle yet unyielding, her thumbs pressing lightly through the fabric as if she could anchor Red in place. Leaning in, she searched Red's eyes for some sign of understanding, her own gaze shadowed by worry. Her voice trembled, urgent and low, as she pleaded, "You must stay on the main path, do you hear?" The words hovered between them, a fragile tether. She glanced toward the forest, the gloom pooling between the trees, then turned back, her worry sharpening. "The shadows between the trees are no place for a girl, not today." She hesitated, her breath catching, before continuing, "Promise me you'll keep to the sunlight and not wander—there are things in that forest that even I can't explain." Red tries to sound brave, but glances nervously at the looming forest beyond the garden gate. Red squared her shoulders, determined to sound braver than she felt, though her eyes lingered on the forest's edge where the shadows pressed against the fading light. She leaned in close, her voice low and urgent, trying to reassure her mother. "I promise, Mama, I'll keep to the main path—besides, I'm not afraid of a few shadows." Her hand tightened around her basket, as if the familiar weight could steady her resolve, even as a shiver of uncertainty flickered beneath her iconic red cloak. Red's MotherShe gently tucks a loose strand of hair behind Red's ear, her eyes lingering on her daughter's face, searching for understanding. Red's mother reached out, her fingers gentle as she tucked a stray strand of hair behind Red's ear. Her touch lingered, just for a moment, as if she could shield her daughter with nothing but her hands. Leaning in, her voice dropped to an urgent whisper, its warmth edged with worry. "Bravery is good, my love," she murmured, her gaze searching Red's face for understanding, "but wisdom keeps you safe." She hesitated, eyes flicking toward the shadowed forest beyond the path. "Remember, even the brightest souls can be lost in darkness." Red listens, then pulls away, determinedly adjusting her hood and promising to be careful.

Red listens to her mother's warnings, then gently pulls away, adjusting her crimson hood with determination gleaming in her eyes. Red listened as her mother fussed over her, concern etching deep lines into her face. She understood the worry, felt its weight in the gentle touch on her arm. Still, Red gently pulled away, her fingers deftly adjusting the crimson hood that framed her determined face. "I know you're worried, Mother," she murmured, her voice steady and reassuring. "But I promise—I'll stay on the path and be extra careful." The words hung in the air, threaded with compassion and resolve, as she squared her shoulders and prepared to set out, unwilling to let fear keep her from her journey. Red's MotherShe gently tucks a loose strand of hair behind Red's ear, her gaze soft but anxious. Red's mother reached out, her hands gentle yet trembling slightly as she tucked a stray lock of hair behind her daughter's ear. Her eyes lingered on Red's face, soft but shadowed with worry. "Remember, my dear," she murmured, voice low and earnest, "the woods can be full of surprises." Her fingers hovered near Red's cheek, protective, almost reluctant to let go. "Trust your instincts, and come straight home if anything feels wrong."

Red listened in silence, absorbing the concern woven through her mother's words. Then, with quiet resolve, she pulled away, adjusting the crimson hood over her head. She offered a small, reassuring smile—one that tried to dispel the anxiety in her mother's eyes—and promised, "I'll be careful." Her mother, still worried, presses a loaf of bread into Red's hands and watches as Red strides toward the forest trail, the red of her cloak stark against the grey-green morning.

As Red steps beneath the canopy of ancient trees, the familiar world of her village falls away behind her, replaced by the cool hush of the forest. Every crunch of twigs underfoot echoes her promise to return, but shadows seem to linger at the edge of her path, reminding her of her grandmother's urgent warning. Determined yet cautious, she moves deeper into the woods, where not only danger but unexpected company awaits.

Chapter 2: The Encounter with the Woodsman

Red, clutching her wicker basket, steps carefully over a fallen log, her red cloak catching on the rough bark.

She pauses as a sudden rustling to her left makes her grip the basket tighter.

The Woodsman emerges from behind a thick trunk, his axe slung across his shoulder, boots crunching on twigs.

He blocks Red's path and raises a hand in greeting but keeps his eyes scanning the shadows.

'It's late, Red.

Woodsman steps from the shadows, axe in hand but lowered, eyes scanning the dark forest around them before settling on Red with a mixture of worry and sternness. From the shadowed edge of the tree line, the Woodsman emerged, boots crunching softly over damp needles. His axe hung low in his grip—ready, but not threatening—as his gaze swept the moonlit forest with practiced vigilance. When his eyes landed on Red, worry flickered across his weathered face, deepening the lines carved by years of watchfulness. He spoke quietly, his voice rough with concern and an unyielding sense of duty. "It's late, Red. You shouldn't be out here alone at this hour." Red clutches her basket tighter, glancing nervously at the darkening path behind her. Red clutched her basket tighter, her

fingers digging into the woven handle as she glanced nervously at the darkening path behind her. The forest seemed to press closer in the fading light, shadows stretching long and thin. She bit her lip, but her resolve did not waver. Of course it was late—too late, perhaps, for a young girl to be out alone. But Grandma needed these supplies, and Red simply couldn't wait until morning. Not when her grandmother's well-being depended on her. She drew her red cloak tighter around her shoulders and pressed on, determined to finish what she'd started, no matter how the night gathered at her heels. WoodsmanHe glances around the shadowy trees, his grip tightening on his axe as he steps closer to Red. The woodsman paused, casting a wary glance toward the shifting shadows between the trees. His broad shoulders tensed, and his fingers curled tighter around the worn handle of his axe as he took a step closer to Red. "It's late," he murmured, voice low but steady, his eyes scanning the darkness as if expecting trouble to slip between the trunks at any moment. The caution in his tone was unmistakable, edged with the weight of past encounters and the responsibility he felt for those who wandered these paths. "The woods can be dangerous after dark," he added, his gaze lingering on Red as if to impress the warning upon her. "Next time, let me walk with you." Red clutches the basket tighter and glances nervously down the shadowy path. Red clutched the basket a little tighter, her knuckles paling against the worn handle as she glanced nervously down the shadowy path winding through the trees. It was late—too late, perhaps, for a girl her age to be out alone. Still, she shook her head with gentle determination, brushing off the offer of help. "Thank you, but I didn't want to bother anyone—I'll be quick, I promise," she said, her voice quiet yet steady, as if reassuring not only her companion but herself as well. Woodsman adjusts his grip on his axe and steps closer, scanning the shadows between the trees. The woodsman tightened his grip on the worn handle of his axe, the familiar weight comforting in his calloused hands. He stepped closer, his eyes narrowing as he searched the shifting darkness between the trees. "It's late, Red," he said, his voice low but steady, every word edged with concern. Though fatigue lined his face, he offered a reassuring nod. "I don't mind being bothered if it means you're safe—at least let me walk you the rest of the way." He scanned the undergrowth once more, protective instinct overriding any thought of returning to his own path. The forest isn't safe—especially now,' he warns, his voice low and gravelly.

WoodsmanHe steps closer to Red, glancing nervously over his shoulder at the darkening woods, fingers tightening around the axe at his side. The Woodsman stepped closer to Red, his broad frame casting an uneasy shadow as the last streaks of daylight slipped behind the trees. His grip tightened around the worn handle of his axe, knuckles whitening with the familiar tension of vigilance. Glancing over his shoulder at the deepening gloom, he kept his voice low and gravelly—a tone reserved for warnings that mattered. "Red," he said, the words heavy with concern, "the forest isn't safe, not like it used to be." His eyes lingered on the shifting pines, as if he could sense the threat moving just out of sight. "There's something out there, lurking between the trees," he continued, urgency threading through every syllable. "You need to turn back before it's too late." Red tightens her grip on her basket, eyes scanning the shadowed treeline as she hesitates, weighing whether to heed the warning or press on. Red tightened her grip on the woven basket, fingertips pressing white against the handle as she peered into the tangled shadows of the treeline. The man's gravelly warning echoed in her ears—the forest wasn't safe, not now. She hesitated, stubbornness and worry warring in her chest. She'd walked these old paths hundreds of times; no one knew their twists and hidden clearings better. But if even he, with his lifetime of woodland wisdom, was afraid... then whatever lurked beyond the brambles must be worse than wolves. WoodsmanThe woodsman grips his axe tighter, scanning the treeline as the last light fades. The woodsman gripped his axe tighter, the rough handle pressing into his calloused palm

as he scanned the treeline. Twilight bled away, shadows gathering thick and unnatural beneath the boughs. His voice, low and gravelly, cut through the hush. "It's not just worse out there," he warned, keeping his eyes fixed on a patch of darkness where the underbrush shivered. "It's smarter, and it hunts after dusk." He didn't flinch as a cold wind stirred the leaves, his stance broad and protective. He'd seen the shadows move—seen them slip and twist where nothing living should. That memory kept him vigilant, every muscle honed for what might emerge when the forest's secrets woke. Red tightens her grip on her basket, eyes scanning the darkening treeline as she weighs her next move. Red's grip tightened around her basket as she listened to his warning, her gaze darting between the looming trunks and the shifting shadows that crept ever closer. Fear pricked at her resolve, but she drew herself straighter, stubbornness flaring in her chest. If the creature out there was learning to stalk them, as he claimed, then simply hiding wouldn't protect anyone. She knew what had to be done. "We need to warn the others," she insisted, her tone edged with determination that cut through the dusk, her compassion for her neighbors outweighing her own unease. WoodsmanHe grips her arm with calloused fingers, eyes darting to the darkening woods behind her. His calloused fingers closed firmly around her arm, anchoring her in place as his gaze flickered anxiously to the thickening shadows pooling behind her. The woodsman's voice, low and rough as gravel, rumbled close to her ear. "No one will believe you until it's too late, Red," he warned. His grip tightened, a silent plea as much as a command. "So if you go, go swift, and don't stray from the river's edge." The caution in his eyes was edged with something sharper—memory, perhaps, or fear—but he did not release her until he was certain she felt the weight of every word. Red, determined to reach her grandmother, insists on pressing forward despite the dangers, emphasizing her urgency and the importance of her errand.

Red tightens her grip on the basket and lifts her chin, her eyes fixed firmly on the path ahead. Red tightened her grip on the basket, the wicker creaking softly beneath her determined fingers. Lifting her chin, she fixed her gaze on the winding path ahead, refusing to let doubt slow her steps. "I can't stop now—my grandmother is waiting, and she needs this medicine," she insisted, her voice steady with purpose. She remembered the promise she'd made that morning, and the urgency of her task pressed at her chest. No matter what, she would get the medicine to her grandmother, just as quickly as she could. WoodsmanThe Woodsman steps in front of Red, concern evident in his voice as he glances at the deepening shadows around them. The Woodsman stepped in front of Red, casting a wary eye toward the deepening shadows that pooled between the trees. His broad shoulders tensed, blocking her path as he spoke, concern roughening his usually steady voice. "Are you sure it's safe to rush through these woods alone, Red?" The question hung in the air, laced with the weight of his experience and the memory of threats lurking just beyond the fading light. Red tightens her grip on the basket and steps forward, her resolve clear in her eyes. Red tightened her grip on the basket, fingers curling stubbornly around the worn handle. The path ahead was thick with shadows and uncertainty, but her eyes held a steady gleam of determination. She straightened her spine, the crimson cloak falling in careful folds behind her, and took a deliberate step forward. "I have medicine to deliver," she said, voice unwavering. She knew the dangers that lingered between the trees—the stories her mother told, the warnings whispered by villagers—but she refused to let fear root her in place. Her grandmother depended on her, and Red would not allow hesitation to stand in the way. No matter the risks, she pressed on, heart fierce and mind resolute. WoodsmanThe Woodsman steps closer, his axe resting on his shoulder, offering a steadying presence beside Red. The Woodsman shifted his weight, the heft of his axe reassuring on his broad shoulder as he moved to stand protectively beside Red. His gaze swept the shadows between the trees, wary and seasoned by experience. "Even the bravest can run into trouble,"

he murmured, voice low but steady—an offer rather than an admonition. He nodded toward the winding path ahead, his presence solid and calming. “Let me at least walk with you part of the way, just in case.” Red tightens her grip on the basket and quickens her pace, glancing anxiously down the shadowed path. Red tightened her grip on the basket, the worn handle pressing into her palm as she quickened her pace along the shadowed path. Anxiety flickered in her eyes, but when the Woodsman stepped beside her, offering his company, she straightened with determined resolve. “Thank you, Woodsman—I won’t turn down your company,” she said, her voice steady despite the worry etched across her brow, “but I can’t afford to lose any time.” The weight of the medicine in her basket reminded her with every step: her grandmother was waiting, and nothing—not even the deepening shadows or the promise of help—would slow her down. The Woodsman, more cautious than before, warns her of a new, smarter threat lurking in the woods and suggests that hiding alone won’t save anyone;

Red stands abruptly, clenching her cloak tighter around her, her face tense with worry as she looks urgently at Woodsman. Red shot to her feet, her hands gripping her red cloak so tightly her knuckles whitened. Worry sharpened the lines of her young face as she turned to Woodsman, her gaze urgent and unyielding. She could barely keep still, the need to move tugging at her limbs. “I can’t stay here any longer,” she insisted, voice low and trembling with determination. “My grandmother—she’s alone, and she’s sick. She needs me now more than ever.” Red’s eyes darted toward the shadowed path that led deeper into the forest. “If I don’t get to her soon,” she added, her words strained by fear, “I don’t know what might happen.” Woodsman places a reassuring hand on Red’s shoulder, his expression resolute. The woodsman placed a steady, reassuring hand on Red’s shoulder, his rough palm warm through the fabric of her cloak. His gaze was resolute, unwavering as he met her worried eyes. “Red,” he said quietly, yet with the strength of someone who had faced the forest’s darkest secrets, “I understand—your grandmother is like family to me too.” He let the words settle between them, the weight of his promise evident in his voice. “If she truly needs you, then I’ll help you get to her as fast as we can.” The protective certainty in his manner left no room for doubt; he would see her safely through whatever lay ahead. he urges Red to warn others if she can.

Red refuses to turn back, prioritizing her grandmother’s wellbeing over her own safety, and the Woodsman, recognizing both her determination and the gravity of the situation, offers to accompany her as far as possible for protection.

As they move together, he points out dangers both natural and unnatural, and they agree to stay alert and communicate closely, with Red promising to heed his warnings along the way.

Their journey is marked by urgency, mutual trust, and a heightened awareness of a threat that is more cunning than any wolf.

WoodsmanHe glances over his shoulder at Red, voice low but steady, guiding her around a thick tangle of roots and keeping a watchful eye on the deepening gloom between the trees. With a cautious glance over his shoulder, the Woodsman guided Red around a thick tangle of roots, his hand steady and protective at her elbow. The deepening gloom between the trees seemed to press in from all sides, swallowing up the last traces of daylight. Boots sank slightly into the damp moss as they moved, the muffled squish sounding almost unnaturally loud in the hush. “Stay close,” he murmured, his voice low but unwavering, every word shaped by years spent navigating these woods. “The forest isn’t as peaceful as it looks. Shadows here can hide more than just rabbits.” He kept his gaze scanning the darkness ahead, his body tense with experience, and added, “I know

every path and danger—no wolf or worse will lay a claw on you while I’m by your side.” Red glances nervously between the trees, tightening her grip on her basket as she walks a little closer to the Woodsman. Red’s eyes flickered nervously between the looming trees, the shadows shifting with every breath of wind. She tightened her grip on the basket, its familiar weight grounding her as she edged a little closer to the Woodsman’s side. Though she trusted him, the uncertainty gnawed at her. “Thank you, Woodsman,” she said quietly, her voice steady despite the worry in her chest. “I trust you, but... what kinds of dangers are really out here?” Her words hung in the damp air, mingling with the soft thud of their boots sinking into moss, as she waited for his answer. WoodsmanHe glances back at her, eyes scanning the undergrowth, his hand resting reassuringly on the axe at his belt. The Woodsman moved ahead, boots sinking slightly into the damp moss, but his attention was never far from her. He glanced back, eyes narrowed as they swept the tangled undergrowth, his hand steady and reassuring on the axe at his belt. “There are wolves, yes,” he said quietly, voice low so as not to carry, “but that’s not all. Trappers leave their snares out here, half-hidden among the roots, and there are sudden drops where the ground just gives way beneath your feet.” His gaze lingered on the shadowy line of trees ahead, as if he half-expected the forest itself to betray them. “Sometimes,” he added, softer still, “the woods seem to whisper warnings of their own, so keep your wits sharp—and your steps quieter still.” Red glances anxiously at the twisted trees, clutching her basket a little tighter as she matches her pace to the Woodsman’s stride. Red glanced anxiously at the twisted trees edging the path, her grip tightening around the basket as she hurried to match the Woodsman’s long stride. The moss beneath their boots sank softly, muffling their footsteps in the hush of the deepening forest. Determined to be brave, she promised herself to listen carefully and stay close, but the unfamiliar shadows pricked at her nerves. “If you hear anything strange,” she pressed, her voice low but resolute as she looked up at him, “will you tell me right away?” WoodsmanHe scans the trees ahead, his grip tightening on the axe at his side, listening for any unnatural sounds. The Woodsman moved ahead, boots sinking slightly into the damp moss, his eyes never still as they swept the shadowed tree line. Every few steps, he paused, the weight of his axe shifting in his grip, ready for anything lurking beyond the tangled undergrowth. Experience had taught him to trust even the smallest warning: a sudden hush in the wind, a snapped branch out of rhythm with the forest’s breath. He glanced back at Red, his voice low and steady—protective, but firm. “If the wind changes or a branch snaps where it shouldn’t, I’ll make sure you know before we take another step.” The promise was not just a reassurance, but a vow born of hard-earned caution, the memory of the Wolf never far from his mind. —————

As Red slipped deeper into the forest, the memory of the woodsman’s warnings echoed in her mind, but determination urged her forward. Shadows thickened around her with each step, and the reassuring sounds of the woodsman soon faded behind her, replaced by an uneasy silence. Unbeknownst to Red, something else was already watching from the gloom, waiting for her to stray further from the safety she had just left behind.

Chapter 3: The Wolf’s Trap in the Shadows

Red arrives at the edge of her grandmother’s clearing, gripping her medicine basket tightly and scanning the shadowy tree line for movement.

She knocks firmly on the warped wooden door, her boots squelching on the damp moss.

Inside, Grandmother peers through a cracked window, recognizes Red, and hurriedly unlocks the

door, motioning her inside.

As Red steps over the threshold, the faint rustle of paws on leaves comes from behind the cottage—The Wolf, hidden in the gathering shadows, circles the small home, nose twitching as it sniffs the air for Red’s scent.

Grandmother bolts the door behind Red and whispers, ‘You must stay close, child.

Something’s prowling tonight.

’ Red sets down her basket and checks the shuttered window, determined to protect her grandmother, while outside, The Wolf presses its ear to the wall, listening for voices and plotting its next move.

Unaware that danger lingers just beyond the walls, Red tries to steady her nerves, her senses heightened by every creak and rustle outside. As the darkness deepens and the cottage settles into uneasy silence, the boundaries between safety and peril grow thin. Meanwhile, the Wolf’s patience wears away, and its intentions sharpen, drawing both hunter and prey inexorably together. Soon, the quiet interior of the cottage will become the stage for a confrontation neither Red nor her grandmother can avoid.

Chapter 4: Red’s Confrontation at the Cottage

Red pushes open the creaking cottage door, clutching a basket of medicines, her red cloak trailing over the warped floorboards.

Grandmother, pale but resolute, limps to barricade the window with a heavy oak chair, whispering warnings about the Wolf’s cunning and urging Red to trust her senses over appearances.

Grandmother drags the heavy oak chair across the floor with a grunt, wedging it beneath the window latch. Her hands tremble as she smooths her apron and casts nervous glances at every corner, lips pressed to a thin, determined line. Grandmother pressed a trembling finger to her lips, urging silence as she crouched low behind the heavy oak table. Her eyes, sharp despite the years, darted to the door and its frail latch. “That beast is cleverer than hunger itself,” she whispered, voice tense with worry and old wisdom. She motioned for the child to stay down, her gnarled hand hovering protectively. “He’ll try the latch, the cracks—maybe even the chimney if he thinks it’ll get him in.” Grandmother’s gaze lingered on the flickering shadows beyond the window, haunted by memories of nights when she’d glimpsed a lean, prowling shape slipping between the trees. “I’ve seen his shadow slide through darker nights than this,” she murmured, as much to herself as to the child. Her hand settled on the thick wooden beam bracing the door, knuckles white with resolve. “Don’t trust your eyes, child,” she said quietly, her tone gentle but urgent, “trust the weight of the wood.” Grandmother presses her trembling hand to the doorframe, listening for the faintest scrape or whisper beyond the wood. Grandmother pressed her trembling hand to the doorframe, the pulse of her anxiety echoing through her veins as she strained to catch the faintest scrape or whisper beyond the sturdy wood. Moonlight spilled across the floor, pale and uncertain, as she limped to the window and dragged the heavy oak chair into place, her breath trembling in the cold air. As she wedged the chair against the sill, her voice, no louder than the rustle of leaves, slipped into the shadows: a warning shaped by old wounds and hard-won wisdom. If he should

call your name sweetly, she whispered to the darkness—remember, the Wolf has worn a hundred voices to steal into lonely hearts. Grandmother presses her trembling palm against the doorframe, listening for the faintest scratch on the timber. Grandmother pressed her trembling palm to the doorframe, every muscle taut with listening for the faintest scratch against the timber. Pale but resolute, she limped across the room, dragging a heavy oak chair to barricade the window. Under her breath, she whispered, “Bolt the cellar door, darling—he feigns patience when he prowls, but his patience is just another snare.” The warning slipped out, half prayer, half command, born from years of surviving the Wolf’s cleverness and cruelty. Even as fear prickled at her skin, resilience steadied her hands; she would not let danger catch her family unaware. She instructs Red to bolt the cellar door and reminds her that the Wolf is a master of deception, able to mimic voices and lure victims.

The Wolf throws off the shawl, baring its fangs, and lunges from behind the kitchen table, swiping at Red with a clawed hand. The Wolf shed the borrowed shawl with a fluid, predatory motion, revealing the cruel gleam of its fangs. Its voice, moments ago sweet and trembling with grandmotherly concern, now slid into something deeper and more sinister, each syllable laced with hunger. “Did you truly believe,” it rasped, advancing from behind the kitchen table, “that a bit of cloth and a gentle tone could mask the gnawing hunger in my bones?” Claws flashing, the Wolf lunged for Red, teeth bared in a grotesque smile. “Come closer, child,” it crooned, the promise of violence glinting in its eyes, “let me show you just how big my teeth can be.” The Wolf bares its fangs, leaping from behind the table with a guttural growl, claws outstretched toward Red. With a guttural growl reverberating through the cramped cottage, the Wolf shed its grandmotherly disguise in a violent, fluid motion. The shawl slipped from its hunched shoulders as it bared its wicked fangs, yellow eyes fixed hungrily on Red. Claws outstretched, it lunged from behind the table, voice twisting from feigned affection to chilling malice. “Foolish child,” it rasped, the borrowed tones of Grandmother warping into something monstrous, “it’s not your grandmother who waits for you—it’s the end of your story!” Suddenly, the Wolf—disguised by a shawl and speaking in Grandmother’s voice—lunges from behind the kitchen table, revealing his true form and taunting Red with threats.

Red dodges, grabs the iron poker from the fireplace, and swings at the Wolf, driving it back into the shadows.

Grandmother searches a drawer for her silver shears, determined to help defend her cottage.

The Wolf bares its teeth in a final, guttural snarl before melting into the shadows, its eyes never leaving its adversary. The Wolf bared its teeth in a final, guttural snarl, the muscles rippling beneath its bristling fur as it slowly melted into the shadows beyond the reach of the firelight. Its yellow eyes, feral and unblinking, never left its adversary. A low, mocking voice, uncanny in its resonance, lingered in the air as the beast retreated. “You think this is over?” The words slithered through the darkness, heavy with promise and threat. “Remember the scent of my fury—I will return, stronger than before, and your fire won’t save you next time.” With a last glint of malevolence, the Wolf vanished into the night, leaving behind only the echo of its vow and the oppressive weight of its presence. The Wolf snarls, retreating but vowing to return stronger, his yellow eyes glinting in the firelight.

Red and Grandmother quickly reinforce the door, locking out the beast for now.

As the echoes of the Wolf's threat fade into the night, fear and adrenaline still pulse through Red's veins. She exchanges a shaken glance with her grandmother, both acutely aware that their ordeal is far from over. Outside, the darkness seems to press closer, and every creak of the wind carries the promise of danger yet to come. Inside the battered cottage, Red steels herself, knowing that survival will demand more than courage alone. With the Wolf lurking in the shadows and uncertainty hanging in the air, the fight for survival has only just begun.

Chapter 5: The Fight for Survival

Red crouches behind a moss-covered log, clutching a heavy branch, her red cloak catching on brambles.

She scans the tree line, searching for movement, determined to protect her injured Grandmother still inside the cottage.

The Wolf, disguised in scraps of torn clothing, circles the cottage silently, ears pricked, pausing to sniff the air and taste Red's scent on the wind.

As the Wolf draws closer, Red steps out, her frustration boiling over.

She shouts, 'Stay back!

I swear, if you come any closer—I'll do whatever it takes!

Red positions herself between the threat and the girl, breaths coming fast and ragged, eyes wild with fear and fury. Her hands tremble, but she holds them out protectively, ready to fight. Red scrambled backward, her boots slipping on the slick carpet of wet leaves. Heart pounding, she positioned herself between the threat and the trembling girl behind her, breaths coming fast and ragged. Fear churned in her chest, but fury burned brighter in her wild eyes as she held her hands out protectively, fingers trembling but determined not to falter. "You won't get her!" Red snarled, voice raw. She refused to move aside, her stance defiant. "Stay back," she warned, every word edged with resolve. "I swear, if you come any closer—I'll do whatever it takes. She's not yours to take." She's not yours to take!

Red crosses their arms, looking both frustrated and worn out, making it clear they're done with the current arrangement. Red crossed her arms, her iconic cloak gathering folds at her elbows, and let out a weary sigh. The frustration in her eyes spoke louder than words, making it clear she'd reached her limit. "Honestly," she said, voice edged with exhaustion, "I'm tired of always being the one who has to figure out food for everyone." Her determination flickered beneath her fatigue, but this time, compassion gave way to stubborn resolve. She looked up, unyielding. "If you're hungry, it's time you start handling your own meals. I'm not your personal chef." ' Then, with unexpected defiance, she adds, 'Honestly, I'm tired of always being the one who has to figure out food for everyone.

If you're hungry, it's time you start handling your own meals.

I'm not your personal chef.

' The Wolf snarls, baring its fangs, momentarily thrown by Red's strange deflection.

Red uses the Wolf's hesitation to hurl a stone, striking its flank and drawing its attention away from the cottage door.

The Wolf lunges, but Red swings her branch, striking its muzzle and forcing it to retreat, buying precious seconds to dash for the cottage door.

As the dust settles and the cottage grows quiet once more, Red and the woodsman stand over the fallen Wolf, breathless and shaken by the violence that has just transpired. The adrenaline slowly ebbs away, leaving space for uncertainty and questions. With the threat vanquished, they are forced to confront the reality of what has happened and the secrets lingering in the wake of the Wolf's demise. As dawn creeps through the shattered windows, the truth begins to surface amid the wreckage, setting the stage for the revelations and consequences that await.

Chapter 6: The Truth Revealed and Aftermath

Red kneels by the threshold, examining deep claw marks gouged into the wooden door, as Woodsman paces the perimeter, scanning for fresh tracks with his axe hefted.

Red traces the jagged grooves with trembling fingers, glancing over her shoulder with a mix of dread and determination toward Woodsman. Red knelt at the threshold, her breath shallow as she traced the jagged grooves carved deep into the wood. The marks were raw and fresh, splintering beneath her trembling fingertips. She glanced over her shoulder, dread flickering in her eyes before stubborn resolve took its place as she called quietly to Woodsman. These marks, she pointed out, were deeper than anything she'd ever seen. The beast hadn't just tried to get inside—it had been desperate, maybe even furious, throwing itself against the door in a blind attempt to tear straight through. Woodsman crouches low beside the prints, frowning as he traces the outline with calloused fingers, then glances up at Red, jaw set. Crouching low beside the prints, the Woodsman ran his calloused fingers along the fresh impressions in the earth, his brow furrowing in concern. He glanced up at Red, jaw set, and spoke in a low, steady voice that brooked no argument. These tracks were fresh—wider and heavier than the ones he remembered from before. Whatever had made them wasn't simply moving through the village this time. It was hunting. Red rises, jaw set, exchanging a tense glance with Woodsman as he tightens his grip on her basket, determination flaring in her eyes. Red rose from her crouch by the threshold, her jaw set with purpose. She exchanged a tense glance with the Woodsman, who tightened his grip on her basket as if bracing himself for whatever danger lurked beyond the gouged wooden door. Determination flared in her eyes, clear and unwavering. The deep claw marks etched into the timber spoke of recent violence, and Red's voice was low but resolute as she broke the silence. If it was hunting, she reasoned, then someone—or something—had driven the creature to this desperation, and they needed to uncover the cause before it circled back. Woodsman tightens his grip on the axe, glancing once at Red for confirmation before striding toward the tangled underbrush where the tracks vanish. Woodsman tightened his grip on the worn handle of his axe, shoulders squared against the chill that lingered in the forest air. He flicked his gaze to Red, searching her face for resolve, then nodded toward the tangled underbrush where the wolf's tracks vanished. "We have to move fast," he said, voice low and steady, already calculating their next move. He stepped forward, boots crunching against fallen pine needles. "I'll follow the tracks. You warn the village." His tone left little room for argument—the urgency in his stance spoke of too many close calls. "If we split up, it won't catch us both off guard." Without waiting for protest, he strode into the shadows, every muscle taut with the promise of danger. Grandmother, clutching her shawl tightly, unbolts the window and points to a scrap of fur snagged on the sill, urging Red to bring it to Woodsman.

Grandmother clutches her shawl tighter, voice trembling, as she points with a shaking finger to the tuft of fur caught on the window sill, her eyes darting anxiously toward the edge of the forest. Grandmother's voice trembled as she beckoned Red into the room, her hand clutching something small and bristly. "Come quickly, child," she urged, her eyes wide and wary. In the pale light, she revealed a scrap of fur snagged on the window frame, her fingers reluctant to let it go. "See this?" she whispered, pressing it into Red's palm. "I found it just now, and it chills me to my bones." The worry etched on her face deepened as she leaned closer, lowering her voice. "Take it straight to the Woodsman, will you? He'll know what it means." She paused, casting a glance toward the shadowed forest beyond the glass. "Hurry, now," she said, her tone heavy with warning. "There's more to fear in these woods than shadows tonight." Red gently takes the fur scrap from Grandmother's trembling fingers, tucks it safely into her basket, and heads for the door, glancing anxiously at the darkening woods outside. Red watched as Grandmother's hands, thin and trembling, released the scrap of fur into her palm. She tucked it carefully into her basket, feeling its strangeness against the familiar weave. The room was heavy with worry, Grandmother clutching her shawl and glancing toward the window, where the woods pressed close and shadows gathered. Red's gaze followed, lingering on the darkness beyond. She understood what was being asked of her—she would go to him right away, just as Grandmother hoped. And, as she slipped toward the door, she silently promised herself that no one would see her with the fur; she would be careful, as always, determined to protect what mattered most. As Woodsman inspects the fur, he mutters about the Wolf's cunning and the likelihood of a trick, noting that the Wolf may be growing desperate and bold.

Woodsman inspects the ragged fur closely, brow furrowed, then gestures urgently toward the stone pile outside, keeping a wary eye on the forest edge. The woodsman crouched low, his calloused fingers brushing over the tuft of gray fur tangled in the brambles. His brow furrowed with suspicion as he beckoned Red to his side. "Take a look at this," he muttered, voice low and wary. Though the Wolf had vanished into the undergrowth, he'd left behind a patch of his pelt—a ruse, no doubt, meant to lure them into a false sense of safety. The woodsman's eyes swept the shadowy tree line, every muscle taut with vigilance. "He's cleverer than folks think," he warned, glancing meaningfully at Red. "We can't trust that he's finished with us yet." Straightening, he pressed a firm hand to Red's shoulder. "I want you to gather as many stones as you can carry. We'll reinforce the door—if he tries anything tonight, he'll find we're ready for him." Red hesitates, glancing nervously at the pile of fur before moving toward the doorway to start searching for stones. Red lingered at the threshold, her gaze flickering anxiously to the heap of coarse, gray fur sprawled across the floor. The woodsman, bent over the remains, grumbled something about the Wolf's slyness, his hands already searching for a sturdy sack. Red's fingers tightened around the edge of her cloak as she edged toward the doorway, ready to begin the search for stones as he'd instructed. But a tremor of doubt crept into her voice as she paused, her eyes never quite leaving the fur. Did he truly believe the Wolf might return, even stripped of his own hide? WoodsmanThe Woodsman kneels by the door, running his hand along its edge as he eyes the darkening forest, motioning for Red to hurry with the stones. Kneeling by the rough-hewn door, the Woodsman ran his calloused hand along its edge, eyes flickering warily toward the thickening shadows beneath the trees. He paused, fingers brushing a tuft of fur left clinging to the threshold. His voice was low, a mutter almost lost in the hush of the evening, weighted with experience and warning. "I've seen sly beasts double back before, Red—he's desperate now, and desperation makes the cunning even bolder." With a sharp gesture, he beckoned her to hurry, urgency lacing his motion as he inspected the ominous remnants left behind. Red glances nervously at the fur, then quickly heads

outside, scanning the ground for sturdy stones. Red's gaze lingered warily on the coarse fur before she forced herself to turn away, her heart thudding with a mixture of dread and determination. Without wasting another breath, she hurried outside, her eyes darting over the mossy earth in search of the sturdiest stones she could find. "Just show me where you want them piled," she called over her shoulder, her voice steady despite the tremor in her hands, already bracing herself for whatever grim task lay ahead. The group realizes the Wolf is actively hunting, rather than merely passing through, and that someone or something may have provoked it.

Woodsman quickly decides they must split up: he will follow the Wolf's tracks to learn more about its intentions, while Red is tasked to warn the village and help reinforce the defenses by gathering stones for the door.

Grandmother remains inside, boiling medicinal herbs, determined to keep Red and herself safe.

Woodsman tightens his grip on his axe, jaw set with determination. He glances at Red, searching her face for any sign of hesitation or resolve as the sun dips lower, casting long shadows through the trees. The woodsman's grip tightened around the haft of his axe, his knuckles pale beneath the grime. As the last rays of sunlight filtered through the ancient pines, he swept his gaze over the clearing and then to Red, searching her face for any flicker of doubt or resolve. His jaw was set, voice low but steady as he broke the hush settling over their preparations. He would take the first patrol at dusk, he declared—if the Wolf dared show its muzzle near the village tonight, he would not let it slip away again. Too much had already been lost for him to sit idly by. He caught Red's eye, his tone softening just enough to carry a warning. She was to stay close; this fight was far from over. Red grips her cloak tighter, resolve flickering beneath her worried gaze as she glances toward the darkening forest. Red gripped her cloak tighter, the fabric bunched in her fist as she stared toward the darkening edge of the forest. Woodsman's announcement settled over the group like a shadow—patrol at dusk, ready or not. Fear flickered in her chest, but she pressed it down, letting resolve rise in its place. She straightened, determination sharpening the lines of her worried face. "I'll keep my eyes sharp and my lantern ready," she promised, her voice steady despite the tremor in her hands. Whatever waited beyond those trees, she knew they would face it together. As dusk approaches, Woodsman announces he will patrol the village perimeter, ready to confront the Wolf if it returns.

Red, now more involved in protecting not just her family but the entire village, prepares to assist Woodsman and keep a vigilant watch.

As the last rays of sun faded behind the trees and the village braced for nightfall, Red stood beside Woodsman and Grandmother at the fortified door, their courage holding steady against the encroaching darkness, knowing that together, whatever shadows might prowl the woods, they would meet the dawn unbroken.