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Red stands at the threshold, knuckles whitening around the iron pan, her gaze fixed on the shadowed figure in the bed. Her voice is measured, but a tremor betrays her unease as she inches no further, ready to defend herself if the truth proves as terrible as she fears. Red lingered at the threshold, the iron pan gripped so tightly in her fist that her knuckles blanched. Her eyes, sharp and unblinking, never left the shadowed figure nestled beneath the blankets. She refused to take another step, not until her suspicions were satisfied. With a voice as steady as she could muster—though a tremor slipped through—Red called out, “Show me your face, Grandmother. Now.” Her stance was resolute, every muscle ready for the worst, and she added, “I won’t come any closer until I see you, and hear your voice as I remember it.” The words hung in the air, both a warning and an appeal, as Red’s thumb rested on the pan’s handle, bracing herself for whatever truth waited beneath those covers. . . . .	17
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## Chapter 7: The Deadly Deception

Red enters her grandmother’s cottage, placing her basket on the table and immediately noticing something off about ‘Grandmother.

’ Sensing danger, she engages the Wolf—disguised as her grandmother—in a tense verbal exchange, focusing on the mysterious disappearance of the special herbal tea.

The Wolf, maintaining his charade but growing defensive, counters with evasive answers and subtle accusations.

Red presses him further, noting his nervous jaw twitch and hinting at her suspicions.

As the conversation intensifies, the Wolf’s composure slips, revealing more of his true nature in both words and appearance.

Red folds her arms and fixes the Wolf with a steady, accusing stare, catching the subtle twitch of his jaw. Red folded her arms across her chest, her gaze unwavering as she fixed the Wolf with a steady, accusing stare. She noted the subtle twitch of his jaw, a flicker that only sharpened her suspicion. “You wouldn’t happen to know what happened to Grandma’s special herbal tea,

would you?" she asked, her voice cool and deliberate. "Strange how it vanished right after your last visit." The words hung in the air between them, heavy with implication, as she watched him for the slightest sign of guilt. The Wolf shifts uneasily in his chair, glancing away to avoid Red's piercing gaze. The Wolf shifted uneasily in his chair, the wooden frame creaking beneath his weight as he glanced away, unwilling to meet Red's unyielding stare. His jaw twitched, betraying a flicker of annoyance before he masked it with a smooth, almost charming smile. "Well, Red," he said, voice silky but edged with feigned innocence, "I suppose anyone could've taken it, but surely you don't think I'd stoop to pilfering tea?" Red narrows her eyes, arms folded, while the Wolf shifts uneasily, glancing away. Red narrowed her eyes and folded her arms across her chest, her stance unwavering as she watched the Wolf shift his weight, gaze flickering toward the cracked window. His jaw twitched—just enough for her to notice. "Funny how you're suddenly so defensive, Wolf," she said, voice cool and measured, though suspicion simmered beneath each word. "Makes me wonder what exactly you were brewing in Grandma's kitchen." The Wolf's eyes narrow as he glances away, his tail flicking with irritation. The Wolf's eyes narrowed, a cold gleam flickering beneath his human disguise as his gaze slid away from Red's scrutiny. His tail, hidden from view but restless beneath the illusion, flicked with a barely contained irritation. She watched his jaw twitch, aware of the storm lurking beneath his charming facade. He gave a slow, calculating smile, voice smooth as silk but edged with something darker. Perhaps, he suggested, she ought to be more concerned with what Grandma had been hiding in that tea, rather than throwing accusations his way without a shred of proof. Red narrows her eyes and leans forward, scrutinizing the Wolf's reaction. Red narrowed her eyes, leaning forward to scrutinize the Wolf more closely. She didn't miss the subtle twitch of his jaw—a tell she'd come to recognize whenever she mentioned the missing herbal tea. Her voice was steady but edged with suspicion as she pressed, "Maybe I would trust you, if you didn't always seem to know more than you let on—especially with your jaw twitching every time I mention the tea." Compassion warred with caution in her chest; she wanted to believe him, but years of warnings echoed in her mind, urging her not to let down her guard. The Wolf averts his gaze, his claws drumming nervously on the table as he avoids Red's piercing stare. The Wolf averted his gaze, letting Red's unwavering stare slide past him as his claws tapped a restless rhythm against the old wooden table. A muscle jumped along his jaw, betraying the tension he tried to mask with a casual tilt of his head. "If you must know, Red," he murmured, voice smooth but edged with something darker, "perhaps the reason my jaw twitches is because secrets weighed down by guilt—or by knowledge—tend to ache after a while." The words hung between them, heavy and indistinct, while the Wolf's eyes flickered with a cunning glint that never quite met hers. Red deliberately steers the conversation toward physical features, forcing the Wolf to respond in characteristically wolfish ways ('all the better to hold/see/eat you with').

The Wolf leans forward, the quilt pooling around its haunches. As it shifts, a thick-furred paw, claws half-retracted, slides into view from beneath the covers. The Wolf leaned forward, the quilt pooling around his haunches as he shifted. In the faint light, a thick-furred paw—claws glinting, half-retracted—slipped into view from beneath the covers. His eyes glimmered with a predatory amusement as he fixed Red with a measured gaze. "My, my, Red," he murmured, his tone clipped yet oddly warm, "you startled me." He tilted his head, lips curling with feigned concern. "Is something the matter? You stare as if you've seen a ghost." Red narrows her eyes, taking a cautious step back as she points to the paw peeking from beneath the quilt. Red stepped lightly into the dim cabin, the familiar scent of herbs and old wood mingling in the air. Her gaze drifted to the bed, where her grandmother lay swaddled in heavy blankets. Yet something was off. Red's eyes narrowed as she moved closer, her heart thumping with a cautious urgency. She reached

out, but hesitated, her fingers curling in midair. The hands resting atop the quilt caught her attention—much larger than she remembered, and covered in an unusual layer of coarse fur.

Red's brow furrowed with suspicion as she studied those paws, her mind racing through every warning her mother had ever given about the dangers lurking in the forest. "Grandmother, what big paws you have," she murmured, her voice soft but edged with unease. "I don't remember your hands ever being so... furry." The Wolf quickly tucks the paw back beneath the quilt, forcing a smile that shows just a hint too many sharp teeth. The Wolf's paw, with its unnatural length and bristling fur, slipped swiftly beneath the quilt as he leaned forward, the fabric shifting slightly to reveal the outline of something not quite human. He forced a smile, lips stretching just a touch too wide, exposing more teeth than any kindly grandmother should possess. His eyes glinted with predatory amusement as he replied in a clipped, almost affectionate tone, "All the better to hold you with, my dear." Red steps closer, eyes narrowing, as the Wolf quickly tucks the paw back beneath the quilt. Red's boots creaked on the old floorboards as she stepped closer to the bed, her gaze sharpening. The Wolf, caught off guard, hurriedly tucked its paw beneath the quilt, but Red didn't miss the fleeting movement. With a trace of suspicion in her voice, she leaned in, her courage unwavering despite the unease prickling at her neck. "Hold me?" she echoed, searching the creature's shadowed face for comfort and finding only a gruff, unfamiliar tone. "Grandmother, your voice sounds so gruff—are you feeling alright?" Red's words hung between them, edged with concern but steeled by the instinct that something was not as it seemed. The Wolf's ears twitch beneath the bonnet, and its eyes glint hungrily as it beckons Red nearer, claws curling under the edge of the quilt. The Wolf's ears twitched beneath the frilled bonnet, catching every hesitant step Red took. Its eyes glinted hungrily in the dim light as it beckoned her closer, claws curling possessively under the edge of the quilt. Leaning forward, the Wolf let the quilt slip slightly from its narrow shoulders and fixed her with an unnervingly steady gaze. In a clipped, raspy tone that almost masked its hunger, it assured her, "Why, yes, child, just a touch of the cold—come closer, let me see you better." Red hesitates at the bedside, her hand clutching her basket tightly as she peers at the Wolf's face. Red hesitated at the bedside, her fingers tightening around the handle of her basket. She peered at the figure nestled beneath the quilt, the wolf's snout barely concealed in the dim light. There was something off about those eyes—sharp, gleaming with a fierce yellow intensity that sent a chill along her spine. Suppressing a shiver, Red tried to steady her voice, though suspicion edged her words. "Grandmother, your eyes—they look so fierce and yellow, not at all like yours." The Wolf's lips curl back in a strained smile, sharp teeth glinting as the quilt slips lower, revealing more of its bristling fur. The Wolf leaned forward, a strained smile stretching across its lips and baring teeth that glinted with predatory intent. As it shifted its weight, the quilt slipped lower, exposing more of the coarse, bristling fur that lay beneath its disguise. Its eyes, sharp and luminous, never wavered from their mark. "All the better to see you with, my dear," the Wolf murmured, voice clipped and edged with an unsettling charm, every word calculated to draw its listener closer. Red hesitates, her eyes widening as she takes a step back, clutching her basket tightly to her chest. Red hesitated, her breath catching as she took an involuntary step backward, the rough wicker of her basket pressing hard against her chest. Her eyes, wide with mounting unease, flicked to the strange, menacing grin spreading across her grandmother's face—or what she had believed, until this moment, was her grandmother. The quilt slipped slightly as the figure shifted, revealing more of those unnaturally sharp, glistening teeth. Heart pounding, Red forced herself to speak, her voice tight but steady despite her fear. "Grandmother, your teeth—why are they so sharp and long?" The Wolf bares its teeth in a wicked grin, the quilt slipping further to reveal its muzzle, and Red instinctively recoils in shock. The Wolf's lips curled back in a wicked

grin, jagged teeth flashing as the quilt slipped further, revealing the coarse line of its muzzle. Red shrank away, her breath catching in her throat, but the Wolf only leaned closer, its eyes glinting with predatory hunger. Its voice dropped into a clipped, chilling tone, the words slithering out as it shifted its bulk, the quilt pooling at its shoulders. “All the better to eat you with, my dear.” The standoff escalates as Red maneuvers closer to the iron poker, both aware that the moment of confrontation is near.

The dialogue reflects a battle of wits and suspicion, with Red cleverly probing and the Wolf alternating between deception and predatory threat, while the fate of Grandmother remains uncertain.

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The struggle in the cottage leaves Red shaken but resolute, her senses sharpened by fear and adrenaline. As the echoes of the Wolf’s attack fade, she forces herself to focus, desperate to find Grandmother before it’s too late. With danger still lurking and time slipping away, Red has no choice but to leave the ruined safety of the cottage behind. Steeling herself, she steps into the shadowed woods, unaware that someone—or something—else is already watching her every move.

## Chapter 2: A Stranger in the Woods

Red walks along the muddy path, adjusting her basket to keep the jars steady.

She notices fresh paw prints and crouches to inspect them, wary.

Suddenly, the Wolf appears—a tall figure in a rain-soaked, threadbare cloak, his eyes briefly flashing yellow before he greets Red.

Instead of keeping her destination vague, Red openly shares that she is heading to her grandmother’s cottage, even describing its location and mentioning her grandmother’s solitude and frailty.

The Wolf asks probing questions about the grandmother, her habits, and security, and Red answers honestly, revealing details about the unlocked door and her identifying song.

Their conversation grows tense as Red shows suspicion and cautious wit, engaging in a verbal sparring match with the Wolf, who continues to press for personal information under the guise of neighborly curiosity.

The Wolf leans heavily on a crooked walking stick, his hat brim shadowing his eyes, giving the impression of exhaustion while his gaze flickers sharply over Red, measuring her. Leaning heavily on a crooked walking stick, the stranger’s silhouette seemed to sag beneath the weight of exhaustion, his hat brim casting deep shadows over his eyes. Yet behind that weary facade, his gaze flickered, quick and sharp, appraising Red with predatory calculation. When he spoke, his voice was low and edged with a roughness that almost passed for fatigue, though it rumbled with something deeper, something wolfish. “Evenin’, miss,” he murmured, letting his words drag through the hush of the trees. “You know these woods better than I do, seems—tell me, where does this path wind off to? My feet are near worn through, and I’d rather not get lost before dark.” Red clutches her basket a little tighter, eyeing the traveler’s shadowed face with polite wariness. Red’s fingers tightened around the wicker handle of her basket as she regarded the traveler’s shadowed face, her posture polite yet edged with caution. The man’s voice, low and gravelly, drifted through the hush of the woods, asking where the path led. Red kept her gaze steady. “This path goes straight through

to my grandmother's cottage," she explained, her words measured and clear, "just past the old willow tree." She hesitated a moment, her compassion wrestling with suspicion. "But you best be careful, sir—the woods have a way of playing tricks on strangers." The Wolf leans in subtly, eyes glinting with interest, as if mapping out the path in his mind. The Wolf, cloaked in the guise of a weary traveler, leaned in with a subtle, predatory grace, his eyes glinting with a peculiar interest as if he were tracing invisible paths through the woods. His voice, low and edged with a growl that lingered just beneath civility, broke the hush between them. "Your grandmother's cottage, is it?" he murmured, the words curling around a smile that never quite reached his eyes. "Sounds like a cozy spot for shelter." He paused, gaze sharp and calculating, as though weighing possibilities in the quiet. "Tell me—does she live there alone, or might I expect company if I were to come upon it?" Red tightens her grip on the basket, eyeing the stranger warily as she steps a little further down the path. Red tightened her grip on the basket, her knuckles whitening as she eyed the stranger blocking her path. His voice, low and edged with something unplaceable, rumbled through the quiet shadows of the forest as he asked about her destination. She took a cautious step farther down the trail, putting just a little more distance between them, and kept her tone steady—though she couldn't quite hide the guarded note beneath it. "Only my grandmother," she said, watching for any flicker of reaction in the traveler's eyes. "She prefers her solitude out here, but I was bringing her some supper to keep her company tonight." The Wolf leans in slightly, eyes flickering with curiosity beneath his hood, as if measuring Red's response. The stranger—a man hunched beneath a battered hood, his eyes glinting with an unsettling curiosity—leaned in ever so slightly, as though confiding a secret. His voice, low and edged with something almost animal, rumbled from his throat. "Kind of you to look after her," he remarked, the words curling in the cold air like smoke. "These woods can be a lonely place for the old or frail, wouldn't you say?" Every syllable seemed to weigh and measure her, as if he were testing not just her answer, but her very nature. Red glances warily at the traveler, tightening her grip on the basket as she steps a little further down the path. Red eyed the traveler with suspicion, her grip tightening around the woven handle of her basket as she edged farther along the mossy path. The stranger's voice, low and threaded with an odd growl, lingered in the cool air. Red hesitated, then answered, her tone careful but tinged with genuine concern. She admitted she often worried about her grandmother—especially now, when the old woman's health was fading and the forest, shrouded in a deepening gloom, seemed more menacing than ever. The Wolf leans in slightly, watching Red with keen, glinting eyes, feigning concern while probing for details. The Wolf, cloaked in the guise of a weary traveler, leaned in just enough for his sharp, glinting eyes to catch the flicker of unease on Red's face. His voice rumbled with a low, almost soothing growl as he offered her a smile tinged with concern. "A thoughtful gesture, indeed," he murmured, feigning admiration while his gaze never left hers. "But if the forest grows darker, perhaps it's wise to reach her swiftly." He paused, letting the words settle between them, then tilted his head as if pondering her safety. "Tell me, does your grandmother keep her door locked when she's alone?" Red adjusts the basket on her arm, glancing warily at the stranger as a chill breeze rustles the leaves overhead. Red shifted the weight of the basket against her arm, her fingers tightening around its handle as she eyed the stranger with a mixture of suspicion and resolve. The wind swept through the branches overhead, scattering pale sunlight over the mossy path. She hesitated only a moment before answering, her voice steady despite the subtle tremor in the air. Her grandmother always kept the door locked, but Red explained that all it took was her familiar knock and the way she called out her grandmother's name—singing it the way only she could—for the old woman to know she'd arrived and to let her in. The Wolf leans in slightly, his eyes glinting with a hidden curiosity, as if weighing each of Red's words. The Wolf leaned in, just enough for the edge of his shadow to brush across Red's shoes.

His eyes, dark and unnervingly bright, lingered on her with a glimmer of secret calculation. “Ah, a song to announce yourself—how charming,” he murmured, the words threaded with a low, almost growling amusement. It was as if he were measuring each syllable, weighing the usefulness of this new knowledge. “I suppose she’d open her door for no one else, then?” Red shifts her basket to the other arm, glancing at the stranger with a hint of suspicion as the shadows deepen around them. Red shifted her basket to her other arm, the woven handle biting into her palm as she eyed the stranger warily. The deepening shadows tangled around them, and though his voice was polite, something in its low, almost growling timbre set her nerves on edge. Still, she kept her tone steady as she replied, “That’s right, sir—she’s careful, but she always knows it’s me by the way I call to her, so she doesn’t worry.” Her gaze lingered on the line of his jaw, searching for any sign that he meant her harm, determined not to let her guard slip even for a moment. Red maintains her independence and quick-thinking but is less secretive than in the original plot, providing the Wolf with information about her grandmother’s situation.

Red tightens her grip on the basket, keeping a careful distance as she studies The Wolf’s muddy boots and the unsettling gleam of his teeth. Red tightened her grip on the basket, her fingers whitening against the worn wicker as she kept a deliberate distance from the stranger. Her gaze flickered warily over his muddied boots, then up to the sharp, too-white gleam of his teeth—teeth that seemed almost to smile, though the expression never reached his eyes. Brave though she was, caution edged every word as she studied him.

“Not many folk pass through here at dusk,” she remarked, voice steady despite the prickle of unease. “You’re a long way from the deep woods, aren’t you?” The question hung between them, Red determined not to betray any fear, even as suspicion curled in her chest. The WolfRed tightens her grip on the basket, inching subtly backward as she studies The Wolf’s grin. Red’s fingers tightened around the wicker handle as she retreated a careful step, her eyes darting from the stranger’s mud-caked boots to the uncanny gleam of his teeth—sharp, too white, almost luminous in the gloom. The Wolf’s grin widened, predatory and knowing. His voice, low and smooth, slipped through the shadows between them: “Strange—I’d have thought the dark would keep most creatures in their dens, yet here you are.” Red tightens her grip on her basket, keeping a careful distance as she studies The Wolf’s face for any flicker of intent. Red kept a wary distance, fingers tightening around the wicker handle of her basket as she studied The Wolf’s face for any flicker of intent. His muddy boots left dark prints in the moss, and his smile—too wide, teeth too white—made her pulse quicken with suspicion. She let her gaze linger on the sharpness of that smile before meeting his eyes. “Funny,” she said, voice low and steady, “I find the shadows safer than strangers with smiles too sharp for comfort.” The Wolf tilts his head, his eyes never leaving Red’s face, the faintest hint of a grin curling at the edge of his mouth. The Wolf tilted his head, never breaking eye contact with Red. The faintest curl of a grin touched the edge of his mouth, as if he savored some private joke. “A wise instinct,” he murmured, voice low and smooth, almost gentle, though his gaze remained predatory. “Sharp smiles often hide sharper hungers.” Red tightens her grip on her basket, edging subtly away while keeping her eyes locked on The Wolf. Red tightened her grip on the woven handle of her basket, subtly edging back, careful not to snap a twig beneath her heel. Her gaze flicked from the wolf’s muddy boots to the unnaturally white flash of his teeth. She held his stare, unflinching, voice steady but edged with suspicion as she said, “Hunger’s one thing; intentions are another, and yours seem to track muddy footprints where they don’t belong.” The Wolf tilts his head, meeting her gaze with an unsettling steadiness, his grin never faltering. The Wolf tilted his head, meeting Red’s wary gaze with an unsettling steadiness, his grin never faltering. His voice was smooth, almost hypnotic, as his muddy boots left fresh imprints in the leaf-

littered trail. “Tracks can tell many stories, Red,” he murmured, sharp, too-white teeth flashing in the gloom. The words seemed to coil around her, as if he were not simply commenting on the prints between them but hinting at something deeper—something she could feel in the way his eyes lingered on hers. “Sometimes the truth isn’t in the footprints,” he continued, his tone deceptively gentle, “but in the eyes that notice them.” Red shifts her weight subtly, keeping one hand close to the basket’s handle as she watches The Wolf’s expression for any flicker of menace. Red shifted her weight, the rough pathway pressing cold through her worn boots, one hand never straying far from the basket’s curved handle. She watched The Wolf with narrowed eyes, taking in the muddy stains on his paws and the unsettling contrast of his too-white teeth, sharp and gleaming beneath a practiced smile. “Eyes see plenty,” she said at last, her voice careful, measured, “but not all that passes through is meant to be understood.” Even as she spoke, her gaze flicked from his restless hands to the shadows behind him, every nerve ready for whatever might come next. The WolfRed tightens her grip on her basket, her body angled subtly away as she watches The Wolf for the slightest movement. Red’s fingers tightened around the wicker handle of her basket, the motion nearly imperceptible but for the way her knuckles blanched beneath her glove. She angled her body subtly, a half-step turned away from the stranger whose muddy boots left hungry prints in the moss. Her gaze darted—boots, then teeth, far too white and sharp for comfort. When she finally spoke, her words were measured, cautious, as if testing the weight of each syllable before letting it fall. “Maybe,” she allowed, her voice a careful hush in the hush of the woods, “but even the darkest woods have paths worn by those who learned what shadows to trust—and which to avoid.” Red tightens her grip on the basket, standing square in the fading light, voice steady but low. Red tightened her grip on the basket, planting her boots firmly in the patchwork of late sunlight and shadow. Her voice, steady but pitched low, cut through the hush as she eyed the Wolf—first noting the clumps of wet earth clinging to his boots, then the unnerving glint of his too-white teeth. “So,” she ventured, suspicion flickering beneath her calm exterior, “which path brings you to my door, Wolf—the one you trust, or the one you hope I won’t notice?” The Wolf leans forward, his gaze lingering on Red’s steady hands gripping the basket handle, a flicker of amusement curling at the corner of his mouth. The Wolf leaned forward, his gaze lingering with pointed interest on the steady way Red gripped her basket, knuckles pale against the worn handle. Amusement flickered at the corner of his mouth as he let his eyes wander from her cautious fingers to the wary flicker in her eyes. “Perhaps I’m simply following the scent of curiosity,” he mused, voice low and inviting, as if confessing a harmless secret. His words slithered between them, velvet-soft and sharp. “Hoping to learn which doors open willingly—and which ones bite back.” The glint in his too-white teeth suggested he found either answer equally fascinating. Red’s hand tightens around the basket at her side, her stance shifting just enough to block the threshold. Red’s grip on the basket tightened, knuckles paling as she edged herself between the stranger and the open doorway. Her eyes flicked, quick and wary, from the clumps of forest mud caked on his boots to the unsettling gleam of his too-white teeth. “Curiosity,” she said, voice steady though her heart thudded, “can lead a beast straight into a hunter’s snare, if he isn’t careful where he sniffs.” The words hung in the air—half warning, half challenge—as she refused to give ground. The Wolf tilts his head, eyes glinting as he takes a slow step closer, testing the tension in Red’s stance. The Wolf tilted his head, eyes glinting with an unnatural brightness as he took a slow, deliberate step closer. Red watched him warily, her gaze darting from the mud caked on his boots to the unnatural gleam of his too-white teeth. He seemed to savor the tension stretching taut between them, reading every quiver in her stance. “And a clever beast knows when the hunter’s hands are trembling on the bowstring,” he murmured, words slipping out almost lazily, as if testing how far she might bend before breaking. Red tightens her grip on the basket’s handle, jaw set as her eyes narrow, never

leaving the Wolf's face. Red's fingers tightened around the basket's handle, her jaw set in a line of determination as she faced the Wolf. She watched him with narrowed eyes, tracking every shift of his muddy boots, every glint from his sharp, too-white teeth. She kept her voice steady, but her words carried a warning edge: Sometimes, she said, it wasn't the hunter's hands that trembled—it was the prey's patience that thinned, step by step, as danger drew near. The Wolf tilts his head, the gleam in his eyes flickering between amusement and warning as he inches just close enough to test her resolve. The Wolf tilted his head, a glimmer in his eyes oscillating between sly amusement and a predatory warning, as he edged just a fraction closer—close enough to test how much nerve she truly possessed. His gaze lingered on Red, sharp and assessing, before his lips curled to reveal a flash of those impossibly white teeth. "Patience is a fickle thing, Red—sometimes it snaps quietly, sometimes with teeth." The words slithered out, smooth as silk and just as dangerous, hanging in the hush between them as her wary eyes dropped from his mud-caked boots to the threat of his smile. Eventually, Red, feeling unsettled, points the Wolf toward the village and quickens her pace, determined to reach her grandmother swiftly.

The Wolf's lips curl into a sly smile as he leans in, nostrils flaring just enough to catch the scent that clings to Red's cloak, his gaze sharp and intent. The Wolf's lips curled into a sly, knowing smile, and he leaned in just a fraction closer, nostrils flaring ever so slightly as if savoring the elusive scent that clung to Red's cloak. His gaze, sharp and predatory, lingered on her with calculating intent. "Not many dare to wander these woods alone," he murmured, his voice a velvet caress—smooth, but edged with something dangerous. There was admiration in his tone, though it felt more like a hunter's appreciation for a clever prey. "It takes a certain... spirit," he continued, letting the word hang between them, almost tasting it. Then, with a tilt of his head, his smile deepened, and the suggestion of threat lingered in the air. "Or perhaps," he mused, eyes glinting, "you simply don't know what might be lurking beneath the trees?" Red clutches her basket a little tighter, her eyes flickering to the shadows behind the Wolf, uncertainty mingling with curiosity. Red's fingers tightened around the woven handle of her basket, the weight of bread and honey inside suddenly feeling heavier as she watched the Wolf's nostrils flare. His compliment lingered in the air, curious and unsettling, yet she refused to step back. She lifted her chin, eyes darting to the shifting shadows behind his massive frame. The woods were quieter than usual, and although suspicion prickled at her spine, she kept her voice steady. She told him she'd always enjoyed the solitude out here, even if her mother warned her about trusting strangers. The Wolf's gaze lingers on Red, lips curling in a faint, enigmatic smile as his nostrils flare, catching her scent. The Wolf's gaze lingered on Red, his lips curling into a faint, enigmatic smile. He inhaled quietly, nostrils flaring as her scent threaded through the forest air—sweet, reckless, alive. Leaning closer, he tipped his head as if in idle curiosity, though his eyes glittered with calculated intent. "Ah, wise advice," he murmured, voice smooth as river stones, "yet here you are, speaking to a stranger without a hint of fear." The words slipped from him like silk, both compliment and warning, as he watched for the flicker of doubt—or defiance—in her eyes. Red clutches her basket a little tighter, her gaze flickering from the Wolf's eyes to the shadows behind him. Red's fingers tightened around the woven handle of her basket as the Wolf's eyes lingered on her, his nostrils flaring ever so slightly as he leaned in—too close. She kept her posture steady, though her heartbeat fluttered against her ribs. "Maybe I'm just good at telling which strangers to trust," she replied, her tone light but her gaze unwavering, "or at least which ones to be careful around." Her eyes darted past his hulking figure to the shadows shifting in the undergrowth, alert for any sign that he might not be alone. The Wolf's gaze lingers, his smile widening just enough to reveal the edge of sharp teeth as he circles slowly, never quite breaking eye contact. The Wolf's gaze lingered on her, unblinking



and intent, his smile widening just enough to catch the gleam of something sharp behind his lips. He moved in a slow, deliberate circle, never quite breaking eye contact, every step measured and silent on the carpet of moss. “Trust is a delicate thing, little one—sometimes, the most dangerous creatures wear the friendliest faces,” he murmured, the words curling from his tongue like smoke. As he leaned closer, the air seemed to tighten, and he drew in a subtle, deliberate breath, nostrils flaring as if savoring the scent of her fear and curiosity. Red tightens her grip on her basket, her gaze flickering between the Wolf’s eyes and the shadowed path ahead. Red tightened her grip on her basket, her knuckles paling as she watched the Wolf’s yellow eyes glint with a curious intelligence. The shadowed path ahead beckoned her onward, but she felt the animal’s presence hovering too close, its damp nose twitching as it subtly drew in her scent. Forcing her voice to remain steady, she offered a wry, almost challenging smile. It seemed to her that a friendly face could be as much a mask as a snarl. “I suppose that means I should keep my eyes open, even when someone offers a smile,” she said, her words a quiet reminder to herself as much as to the Wolf, determination sharpening her tone. The Wolf tilts her head, gaze lingering on Red with a curious intensity, nostrils flaring as she inhales the girl’s scent more deeply. The Wolf tilted her head, the gesture almost human in its curiosity, though there was something unsettling about the way her gaze lingered on Red. Her nostrils flared, drawing in the girl’s scent with a deliberateness that bordered on hunger. A knowing smile curled at the edge of her lips as she leaned a fraction closer, her voice low and silken. “Indeed—but sometimes, the true intentions linger just beyond what the eyes can see.” The words slipped from her as naturally as a shadow slipping through the trees, their meaning hanging in the air between them, heavy and unseen. Red shifts her basket to the other arm, watching the Wolf’s face carefully, her posture a blend of curiosity and caution. Red shifted her basket to her other arm, careful not to let the Wolf’s gaze unsettle her. She watched his face, alert to the glint in his eyes as he leaned closer and breathed in, as if trying to catch some secret she carried on her skin. Her mother’s warnings echoed in her memory, but pride stiffened her spine. If she was to prove herself capable, she’d need to do more than just watch—she’d have to listen, too, to every subtle hint of danger. “I suppose I’ll have to listen closely, then,” she thought, her curiosity warring with caution, “not just look.” The Wolf tilts his head, his gaze fixed on Red with a glint of amusement, his nostrils flaring ever so slightly as he inhales her scent again. The Wolf tilted his head, eyes glinting with amusement as he regarded Red. His nostrils flared almost imperceptibly, drawing in her scent—sharp and vivid amidst the damp musk of the woods. “A wise approach,” he murmured, voice smooth as velvet and edged with something darker. Leaning just a fraction closer, he allowed himself another subtle taste of the air, as if searching for the secrets she carried. “After all, the woods are full of secrets that only careful ears and clever hearts can uncover.” The Wolf watches her leave, his interest piqued by the information gained, and disappears into the forest shadows.

Red steps back, her fingers tightening on the edge of her red cloak as she pretends to adjust her hood, keeping her eyes fixed warily on the Wolf. Red took a measured step back, her grip tightening on the familiar edge of her red cloak. She let her fingers fuss with the hood, using the motion as an excuse to keep her wary gaze pinned on the Wolf. Her voice was steady, though a cautious undertone threaded through it as she spoke. “You know, it’s not often I see anyone else wandering this far from the path.” She let the words linger, studying him carefully. “What brings you out here, if you don’t mind me asking?” The Wolf’s eyes linger on Red just a shade too long, a faint grin curling at the corners of his mouth. The Wolf tilted his head, a sly glimmer in his pale eyes as he surveyed the tangled shadows around them. With a voice that slithered through the hush beneath the trees, he mused, “Ah, sometimes the deeper woods offer opportunities you

can't find where everyone else treads." His words lingered in the air, subtle and inviting, as if promising secrets to those daring enough to stray from the well-worn path. Red glances around, tightening her grip on her basket as she measures the distance back to the path. Red took a cautious step backward, feigning nonchalance as she tugged at her hood, her eyes never leaving the stranger's face. The woods were thick with evening shadows, and she tightened her grip on her basket, calculating how quickly she could dart back to the path if she needed to. Still, she forced her voice to sound curious rather than wary. "Opportunities?" she echoed, her gaze flickering over his hands and boots, searching for any sign of threat. "That sounds a bit mysterious—what kind are you looking for?" The question hung in the air, gentle but edged with suspicion, as she tried to read the intent behind his presence in these lonely woods. The Wolf's eyes glint as he tilts his head, watching Red closely, a faint smile curling at the edges of his mouth. The Wolf's eyes glinted with a sharp, predatory brightness as he tilted his head, studying Red with unsettling focus. A faint smile curled at the edge of his mouth, never quite reaching his eyes. When Red stepped back, feigning a casual adjustment to her hood, and inquired why he wandered so deep into the woods, the stranger's grin widened just enough to betray hidden intentions.

"I have a particular interest," he replied smoothly, his voice velvet and edged with something dangerous, "in those who stray from the ordinary trails. They so often carry the most intriguing stories."

He watched her reaction closely, every subtle movement catalogued, as if searching for the hint of a secret worth devouring. Red shifts her basket to her other arm, keeping a cautious distance as she studies the Wolf's expression. Red shifted the weight of her basket to her other arm, careful not to let her wary gaze stray from the Wolf's face. As she stepped back, fingers fussing with the edge of her scarlet hood in feigned distraction, her tone remained steady—brave, but edged with suspicion. "Stories can be dangerous things, especially out here," she remarked, her eyes narrowing just slightly as she searched his expression for any sign of deceit. "Are you sure you're only interested in what people have to say?" The Wolf tilts his head, eyes glinting as he takes a slow step closer, the silence between them stretching taut. The Wolf tilted his head, a glint of knowing mischief flickering in his gaze as he drifted a step closer. The space between them seemed to quiver with unspoken tension. Red, feigning nonchalance, adjusted the edge of her crimson hood and inquired, her voice light, why he might be wandering these woods alone. His lips curled just enough to suggest a secret, and in a voice smooth as silk and dangerous as a drawn blade, he replied, "Danger is only a matter of perspective—sometimes, it's the listener who shapes the story's end." Red tilts her head, tightening her grip on her basket and subtly edging a step away from the Wolf. Red tilted her head, her grip on the basket tightening as she subtly edged a step back from the Wolf. She pretended to fuss with her hood, buying herself a moment to study him, her eyes never leaving his face. Brave enough to stand her ground but wary of his intentions, she masked her suspicion with a polite tone, asking, "Maybe, but I like to know who my audience is before I share too much—are you sure you're just passing through?" The question hung in the air, gentle yet edged with determination, while she remained poised to retreat if his answer gave her reason to doubt. The Wolf's eyes glint as he takes a slow step closer, the underbrush whispering beneath his paws. The Wolf's eyes glinted with a sly amusement as he slipped a slow step closer, the underbrush whispering beneath the weight of his paws. Red edged back, fingers fussing with her hood in a practiced gesture of feigned nonchalance, her voice light and curious as she asked him what business brought him so deep into the woods.

He let a smile curl across his lips—something sharp and knowing—and his gaze lingered on her a fraction too long. "Let's just say I rarely pass through anywhere without a reason, Red,"

he drawled, the words sliding out easy and smooth, almost intimate. “Some company is worth lingering for.” Red tightens her grip on her basket, her gaze steady as she studies the Wolf’s expression for any hint of his intentions. Red’s fingers tightened around the wicker handle of her basket as she took a measured step back, feigning interest in the scarlet hood she readjusted over her hair. Her eyes never left the Wolf’s, searching for the flicker of motive behind his sly smile. “Company can be more trouble than comfort,” she remarked, her voice calm but edged with caution, “especially when you don’t know what they’re truly after.” The Wolf grins, stepping just close enough for his shadow to stretch across Red’s path. The Wolf’s grin widened, teeth flashing as he drifted closer, just enough for his shadow to splice across Red’s path like a warning. Red retreated a half-step, fingers fussing with her hood as if it needed adjusting. She kept her voice steady, asking why anyone would choose to linger in these woods at dusk.

He tilted his head, eyes glinting with predatory amusement. “But isn’t it the unknown company that makes a walk in the woods memorable, Red?” he murmured, letting the words curl in the thickening air between them. Red tightens her grip on her basket, keeping the Wolf in her peripheral vision as she slowly resumes walking down the path. Red’s fingers tightened around the worn handle of her basket, knuckles blanching as she kept the Wolf firmly in her peripheral vision. Careful not to break eye contact completely, she stepped back and feigned a casual adjustment of her crimson hood, the familiar fabric giving her a small measure of comfort. Her voice was steady, edged with a quiet suspicion as she asked, “So, what brings you out here anyway?” The Wolf’s golden gaze lingered on her, unsettling in its intensity. Red’s heart thudded, but she held her ground—brave as ever, unwilling to show fear. “Memorable, maybe,” she added, her words carrying a pointed weight, “but sometimes memories are warnings we wish we’d listened to sooner.” The air between them tightened, the path ahead seeming longer and darker than before, but Red’s resolve only sharpened as she resumed her slow, deliberate pace down the forest trail. The Wolf tilts his head, his gaze lingering on Red with a glint of challenge in his eyes. The Wolf tilted his head, eyes narrowing with a glint that danced somewhere between challenge and menace. He let his gaze linger on Red, as though weighing her every movement—the way she stepped back, feigning a preoccupation with her hood, the trembling edge of curiosity in her voice as she asked why he prowled these woods alone. A crooked smile curled at the edge of his lips, and he spoke with deceptively casual ease, “And sometimes it’s the warnings that make the story worth telling at all.” As the words hung in the cool forest air, they felt less like reassurance and more like a promise—one threaded with danger, meant for clever prey. Red tightens her grip on the basket, her eyes scanning the shadows behind the Wolf. Red tightened her grip on the basket, the woven handle digging into her palm as she studied the shifting shadows behind the Wolf’s hulking form. Feigning a casual air, she took a careful step back and fussed with her crimson hood, every muscle tensed for flight. Her gaze flickered from the Wolf’s yellow eyes to the undergrowth beyond, weighing the risks. “Then I suppose,” she said, voice steady despite the thrum of her heart, “we’ll have to see what kind of story we’re telling, won’t we?”

Red watched the shadows swallow the stranger, her heart thudding with unease as she pressed onward. The forest seemed to close in around her, each step drawing her further from the encounter and closer to the safety she hoped to find. Yet as the trees thinned and her grandmother’s cottage finally came into view, Red sensed that the tension of the woods had followed her. Inside, another struggle was already unfolding—one that would demand all of Red’s courage.

## Chapter 5: Grandmother's Struggle

Grandmother stands firm at the threshold, confronting the Wolf with unwavering resolve.

She refuses to let him pass, clearly stating her intent to protect Red and challenging his motives.

The Wolf, instead of immediately crashing through the door, engages in verbal sparring, expressing that his interest lies as much in the thrill of the chase as in the meal itself.

Grandmother counters his taunts, emphasizing her own experience and resilience.

This exchange escalates the tension, with the Wolf becoming increasingly intrigued by Grandmother's defiance.

Rather than launching a direct physical assault, the Wolf toys with the idea of a clever hunt, suggesting he might prefer outwitting both women over brute force.

Eventually, the Wolf withdraws for the moment, leaving the cabin in psychological turmoil, Grandmother determined but anxious, and Red forewarned of the Wolf's cunning intent.

Grandmother quickly fortifies the cabin, knowing that the Wolf will attempt a more sophisticated approach when he returns.

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As dusk settles around the battered cabin, tension lingers in the air, each shadow a reminder of the threat lurking just beyond the door. While Grandmother braces herself for the wolf's inevitable return, her thoughts turn to Red—innocent, trusting, and walking straight into danger. Determined to outsmart her adversary, Grandmother devises a desperate plan to send word of warning, setting in motion the events that will soon reach Red on her forest path.

## Chapter 1: Red Receives a Warning

Red stands at the table, tying a checkered cloth over a basket of bread and herbs.

Her mother paces nearby, folding a worn shawl and placing it in Red's hands.

She leans in, her voice low but urgent, warning Red to stay on the path and not to talk to any strangers.

Red's MotherShe gently places her hands on Red's shoulders, searching her daughter's face for understanding, her brow furrowed with worry. Red's mother placed her hands gently on her daughter's shoulders, her fingers pressing just a little tighter than usual as she searched Red's face for the reassurance she so desperately needed. Her brow was knit with concern, the lines deepened by too many sleepless nights and the persistent rumors that drifted through the village about disappearances in the woods. Drawing closer, she kept her voice low but urgent, as if volume alone might draw unwanted attention. "Listen to me carefully," she murmured, her tone edged with both love and anxiety. "You must stay on the path, no matter what happens." She paused, as if weighing every word, willing her daughter to understand. "And promise me, Red—don't speak to anyone you don't know. There are dangers out there, more than you realize." The plea hung between them, heavy and unyielding, as she waited for Red's solemn nod. Red shifts her basket from one arm to the other, glancing toward the shadowy trees with a spark of curiosity in her

eyes. Red shifted her basket from one arm to the other, the woven handle pressing into her palm as she glanced warily toward the shadowy fringe of trees. A spark of curiosity flashed in her eyes, undimmed by the familiar warnings drifting from her mother's lips. Leaning in, she lowered her voice, the words edged with both defiance and gentle reasoning. "But Mama, what if I just say hello—what harm could that do?" Red's MotherShe gently but firmly takes Red's hand, searching her eyes for understanding. Red's mother reached out, her grip gentle but insistent as she drew Red closer. Her eyes, searching and serious, lingered on her daughter's face, making sure she was truly listening. Leaning in so that her words wouldn't drift beyond them, she spoke in a low, urgent voice. "It's not just a simple hello, Red—sometimes talking to the wrong person can lead to trouble you can't imagine." The warning hung between them, shaped by the anxiety that had shadowed her ever since the disappearances in the woods. Red is initially uncertain, questioning why a simple greeting could be dangerous, but her mother insists the woods hold unpredictable threats.

Red squares her shoulders and holds the basket tight, her eyes steady and earnest as she looks up at her mother, determined to show she's ready. Red squared her shoulders, fingers tightening around the woven handle of the basket as if it anchored her resolve. Her eyes, steady and earnest, met her mother's worried gaze. She needed her mother to see that she was ready, truly ready, and not just a child anymore. "I promise, Mama," she said, her voice firm but gentle, "I can do this." She drew in a determined breath, recalling every twist and turn of the forest path—she knew it by heart, and she wanted her mother to believe that. "I know the path through the woods," Red assured her, compassion softening the edge of her determination. "I'll be careful." For a moment, her independence warred with the tenderness she felt for her mother, but she held her gaze. "Please trust me." Red's MotherShe gently tucks a loose strand of hair behind Red's ear, her fingers lingering as if reluctant to let go. Red's mother reached out, her hand steady but gentle as she tucked a loose strand of hair behind Red's ear. For a moment, her fingers lingered, as if reluctant to let go, and her eyes—sharp with worry—held Red's gaze. "It's not that I don't trust you, Red," she said quietly, her voice tinged with both sternness and love. "But the woods hold more than winding paths." She hesitated, searching her daughter's face, then continued, her tone firmer, "You must promise me you'll stay on them, no matter what." Red lifts her chin, determination blazing in her eyes as she clutches the basket close to her chest. Red lifted her chin, determination blazing in her eyes as she clutched the basket tight against her chest. She met her mother's worried gaze head-on, refusing to let uncertainty creep into her voice. "I promise, Mama," she said, her words steady and resolute. "No matter what I see or hear in those woods, I won't stray from the path." For a moment, the weight of her mother's concern pressed against her, but Red squared her shoulders, eager to show she was ready for whatever the forest held. Red, reassured by her mother's concern, promises more firmly than before that she will not stray from the path or talk to anyone she doesn't know.

Her mother, still anxious but comforted by Red's promise, presses a silver whistle into Red's palm. Red tucks it into her pocket, squares her shoulders, and moves toward the door, determined to prove herself.

As she steps onto the porch, the cold air bites her cheeks and the distant caw of a raven echoes from the treetops, foreshadowing the dangers that wait beyond the safe ring of the cottage.

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Red lingered for a moment on the threshold, the weight of her mother's warning heavy in her chest.

Yet, as the cottage faded behind her and the forest beckoned ahead, the familiar path seemed longer than ever. With each step, her resolve to follow the rules was tested by the whispering wind and the shadowed trails that split off from the main road. The shortcut, with its promise of adventure and forbidden speed, began to tug at her thoughts, tempting her with the chance to prove she was ready for more than just obedience.

## Chapter 3: The Shortcut's Temptation

Red stops at the fork, her grip tightening on the wicker basket.

She glances down the well-trodden main path, then studies the overgrown shortcut, brushing a nettle aside with her boot.

A faint rustle draws her attention—The Wolf, disguised as a tall, dark-haired traveler with a heavy cloak, steps from behind a tree, feigning a friendly smile.

He nods toward the shortcut, suggesting in a lilting tone that it could save her time.

The Wolf tilts his head with a courteous smile, gesturing gracefully toward the darker, narrow trail, his eyes glinting with a hint of something unspoken. The Wolf tilted his head, a courteous smile curling over his lips as he gestured gracefully toward the shadowed, narrow trail threading through the trees. His eyes glinted with a sly, unspoken promise as he addressed her in a voice smooth as silk. If she was truly in a hurry, he suggested, perhaps she might take the little path just there—see how prettily it wound beneath the boughs? It would bring her out far sooner than the old, winding road ever could. Why, he wondered aloud, should she waste precious daylight when there was a gentler, swifter way waiting for her under the cool shelter of the woods? Red narrows her eyes and shifts her weight, recalling her mother's warnings, but steps a pace closer, challenging his advice with a pointed question about the safety of the shortcut.

Red narrows her eyes, her brow furrowing with doubt, yet she steps forward, arms crossed, her voice steady but edged with suspicion as she confronts the advice head-on. Red narrowed her eyes, doubt flickering across her brow as she shifted her weight and crossed her arms. The familiar echo of her mother's warnings rang in her mind, urging caution, but determination pressed her forward. She stepped a pace closer, her voice steady though edged with suspicion. If this was truly the quickest way, she thought, why had her mother always insisted she never stray from the main path? What made this shortcut so different? The questions hung between them, her gaze sharp and unyielding as she confronted the advice head-on, unwilling to take it at face value. The Wolf leans on his walking stick, gesturing smoothly toward the shadowed route, his voice low and persuasive, insisting he has used it himself many times without trouble.

The Wolf taps his walking stick on the packed earth, a sly smile flickering at the corners of his mouth as he nods encouragingly toward the shadowed route. The Wolf tapped his walking stick against the packed earth, the sound sharp in the hush beneath the trees. A sly smile flickered at the corners of his mouth as he inclined his head toward the shadowed path, his eyes glinting with a peculiar warmth. "Ah, don't let the darkness fool you," he murmured, his tone low and coaxing, as if sharing a confidence among old friends. "That path? I've walked it more times than I can count—never so much as a scratch." His gaze never left his companion's face, the encouragement in his nod both reassuring and insistent. "Trust me, it's the quickest, safest way through these woods, if you know where to step." He paused, letting the hint of a predatory grin curl his lips.

“And I do.” Red scans his face, catching the odd glint in his eyes, and fingers the handle of her basket, her mind racing as she weighs his suggestion against her own suspicions.

A cold breeze stirs the leaves at their feet, carrying the sharp scent of pine sap as Red edges back toward the fork, her jaw set, decision hanging in the balance.

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As Red steps onto the narrow path, the forest seems to shift around her, shadows lengthening with every hurried stride. Each snap of a twig and whisper of wind gnaws at her resolve, but the urgency in her heart propels her forward. Unbeknownst to Red, the shortcut is more than just a path—it is the first move in a carefully laid plan, and with every step, she draws closer to the jaws of danger awaiting in the deepening gloom.

## Chapter 4: The Wolf’s Trap

Red strides quickly along the winding path, her basket clutched tight and boots sinking into mud patches.

She glances over her shoulder at the stranger trailing her, noting his unnaturally smooth gait and the way his eyes linger on her.

The Wolf, disguised in a battered cloak, mirrors her pace and suddenly veers closer, his voice low and coaxing, ‘Is it safe for such a clever girl to walk alone?’

’ Sensing danger, Red feigns a stumble and drops her scarf, using the distraction to dart off the main trail and into dense underbrush.

The Wolf lunges after her, cloak snagging on thorns, his growl barely muffled.

Red shoves aside brambles, scraping her arms, and scrambles up a mossy log, forcing herself toward a narrow animal track leading deeper into the woods.

The Wolf pauses, nostrils flaring as he sniffs the air for her scent, lips curling in frustration.

Red’s objective: escape pursuit and reach her grandmother’s cabin.

Outcome: Red temporarily eludes the Wolf, but leaves clues of her passage, and the Wolf’s predatory interest intensifies.

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Branches snapped behind her as Red pressed on, heart pounding with the knowledge that the Wolf was still somewhere close, relentless in his pursuit. Every hurried step left fresh evidence of her flight, but there was no time to double back or cover her tracks. With trembling hands and stinging arms, she finally glimpsed the familiar outline of her grandmother’s cabin through the thinning trees. As the Wolf, guided by her lingering scent, loped in the same direction, Red steeled herself for what awaited within those wooden walls. The safety she hoped for was now shadowed by the predator drawing ever nearer.

## Chapter 6: Red Enters the Cabin

Red grips the basket tight, nudging open the warped cabin door with her boot.

She listens for her grandmother's voice, but hears only the soft ticking of the mantle clock and a slow, deliberate breathing from the shadowed bed.

She steps inside, scanning the room, her eyes darting between the cluttered shelves and the figure beneath the quilt.

The Wolf, disguised as Grandmother, shifts under the covers, forcing a hoarse greeting: 'Come closer, child.

' Red sets the basket down with a deliberate thud on the table, her fingers tracing the edge of a heavy iron pan.

She asks pointed questions about Grandmother's health, her eyes narrowing on the stranger's unfamiliar movements and the musky, animal smell rising from the bed.

Red stands a cautious distance from the bed, her eyes flickering over the figure's hands and face, searching for familiar features. She wrinkles her nose at the unfamiliar odor, gripping her basket tighter as she waits for a reply. Red stepped quietly into the dim cabin, her basket swinging lightly at her side. She paused just inside the doorway, studying the hunched figure beneath the quilt. "Grandmother," she ventured, her voice gentle but edged with concern, "are you feeling alright today?" Something was off—she couldn't shake the uneasy sensation prickling at the back of her neck. Red's gaze lingered on her grandmother's face, searching for familiar comfort but finding only shadows. The woman's voice, when she responded, sounded strangely rough, not at all the tremulous softness Red remembered. She hesitated, sniffing the air and wrinkling her nose as an odd, unfamiliar scent drifted past. "Your voice sounds a little rough," she noted, peering closer, "and—have you changed your perfume? There's a rather odd scent in the room." Red's fingers tightened around the handle of her basket, her quick mind sorting through possibilities, her suspicion growing with every breath. The Wolf, calculating, drags a clawed hand beneath the quilt, watching Red's hesitation and offering clipped, unnatural replies, eager to lure her closer.

The Wolf shifts beneath the quilt, the curve of a claw briefly scraping against the fabric, eyes glinting as they fix on Red, voice low and thick with false warmth. Beneath the quilt, the Wolf shifted, the subtle scrape of a claw tracing a dangerous arc beneath the fabric. His eyes, catching the faintest glimmer of light, fixed hungrily on Red's uncertain form. His voice oozed with a syrupy warmth, cunningly inviting as he murmured, "Come closer, child. The shadows make it hard to see you. I wish to gaze upon your sweet face." The words curled through the dim room, disguising their intent behind a veneer of gentle longing, while his predatory gaze never wavered. Red edges toward the bed, every step measured, her senses alert to the sour stench and the way the lamp's light glints off a yellowing tooth.

The scene ends with Red pausing just out of reach, her hand on the iron pan handle, voice steady as she demands to see Grandmother's face.



Red stands at the threshold, knuckles whitening around the iron pan, her gaze fixed on the shadowed figure in the bed. Her voice is measured, but a tremor betrays her unease as she inches no further, ready to defend herself if the truth proves as terrible as she fears. Red lingered at the threshold, the iron pan gripped so tightly in her fist that her knuckles blanched. Her eyes, sharp and unblinking, never left the shadowed figure nestled beneath the blankets. She refused to take another step, not until her suspicions were satisfied. With a voice as steady as she could muster—though a tremor slipped through—Red called out, “Show me your face, Grandmother. Now.” Her stance was resolute, every muscle ready for the worst, and she added, “I won’t come any closer until I see you, and hear your voice as I remember it.” The words hung in the air, both a warning and an appeal, as Red’s thumb rested on the pan’s handle, bracing herself for whatever truth waited beneath those covers.

A tense silence settles over the cabin, the air thick with anticipation as Red waits for any sign that her grandmother is truly the one beneath the covers. The flickering lamplight casts restless shadows, and every heartbeat seems to echo Red’s mounting dread. As the figure begins to stir, Red steels herself for whatever truth the darkness holds, knowing that the moment of reckoning has finally arrived. With her resolve hardening, she prepares to face the danger lurking just beyond the threshold of certainty, propelling her into the final confrontation.

## Chapter 8: Final Confrontation

Red crouches by the hearth, gripping a heavy iron poker, her eyes fixed on the battered door.

Grandmother, hidden beneath a patchwork quilt, slides a small hatchet across the floor towards Red, her gnarled hands trembling.

The Wolf, disguised in Grandmother’s shawl but his eyes glinting yellow, pushes the door open with a low growl and padded steps.

Red stands, blocking his path, and thrusts the poker at his chest, forcing him to snarl and recoil.

Grandmother, motivated by her need to protect Red, distracts the Wolf by banging a tin cup against the iron bedstead, making a sharp metallic clang.

The Wolf, torn between lunging at Red and silencing Grandmother, bares his teeth and lunges, claws scraping the wooden floor.

Red swings the poker, connecting with his shoulder, while Grandmother hurls the lantern, flames licking up the Wolf’s matted fur.

The Wolf howls and stumbles toward the door, smoldering.

Red slams the door shut and jams a chair beneath the handle as the Wolf flees into the stormy

night, leaving scorched fur and the acrid scent of smoke behind.

Grandmother, coughing, pulls Red into a tight hug as rain drums against the roof.

Their coordinated defense forces the Wolf to retreat, securing their survival until morning.

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As dawn broke and the storm subsided, Red and her grandmother remained entwined by the hearth, their courage forging a bond that would endure long after the night's danger had passed.