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Chapter 1: Red Receives a Warning

Red sits at the heavy oak table, tying her red cloak under her chin while her mother sharpens a silver knife with measured strokes.

Red tugs the hood forward, her fingers trembling only a little as she watches the edge of the blade catch the morning light. Red sat at the heavy oak table, her fingers tugging the hood of her cloak forward as she tied it neatly beneath her chin. The morning light caught on the edge of the blade in her mother's hands, sending a silver flash across the worn tabletop. Red watched, her breath held and her fingers trembling only a little as the ritual sharpening continued. She glanced at the pale sliver of sun beginning to slip over the treetops outside the window. "Is it sharp enough yet, Mother?" she asked quietly, her voice careful but edged with anticipation. She didn't want to linger; the woods were safest before the sun climbed too high. Red's MotherShe tests the knife's edge with her thumb, eyes lingering on Red's anxious hands. Red's mother pressed her thumb against the edge of the silver knife, testing its sharpness with practiced care. Her gaze lingered on Red's hands, which fumbled anxiously with the knot of her cloak beneath her chin. The steady rasp of the whetstone had filled the kitchen all morning, but now she set the knife down between them, its blade catching the lamplight.

"Patience, Red," she said, her voice firm but gentle, betraying more concern than admonishment. "Haste dulls more than blades ever do; remember, the woods watch those who rush."

Red nodded, swallowing the urge to hurry, feeling the weight of her mother's hard-won wisdom settle over her shoulders with the cloak. Red squares her shoulders, fingers tightening around the basket's handle as her mother inspects the knife's edge one last time. Red squared her shoulders, fingers tightening around the basket's handle as her mother inspected the knife's edge one last time. The steel caught the morning light, a silent warning. At the heavy oak table, Red tugged the red cloak's ties beneath her chin, feeling the familiar, comforting weight settle across her shoulders. She met her mother's wary gaze, sensing the worry that lingered there, and drew in a steadying breath. If the eyes in the woods watched her today, so be it—she would let them see she wasn't afraid to be watched. Red's MotherShe tests the blade's edge against her thumb, eyes flicking to Red with a worried crease between her brows. Red's mother drew the silver blade across the whetstone, the scrape echoing in the quiet kitchen. She paused, testing the sharpened edge against

her thumb, eyes flicking to Red with a worried crease between her brows. At the heavy oak table, Red fumbled with the knot of her red cloak, determined but nervous. Her mother's voice was gentle but edged with warning as she set the knife on the table, within easy reach. "Bravery's no shield against teeth in the dark, dearest," she said, her gaze steady and unyielding. "Keep your wits keener than this knife." Red slips the knife into her belt and gathers her cloak tight, eyes fixed on the dim line of forest beyond the window. Red slipped the knife into her belt, the cold weight both a comfort and a reminder of what waited beyond her door. At the heavy oak table, she gathered her cloak close, tying it beneath her chin with careful fingers. Her mother's steady hands worked the silver blade, the rhythmic scrape of metal on stone filling the hush between them. Red kept her gaze on the thin, uncertain line where the forest pressed against the glass, her heart thudding with anticipation and caution. When her mother's warnings echoed through her mind, Red nodded, her voice firm but gentle. She promised herself she would remember every word when the shadows in the woods began to stir. Red's mother hands her a small wicker basket lined with linen, filled with fresh bread and a jar of honey, instructing her to avoid the northern path and keep to the trail.

Red cradles the basket in both hands, glancing nervously toward the shadowy treeline as she prepares to set out. Red cradled the basket in both hands, the linen lining brushing softly against her fingers as she glanced toward the shadowy treeline. She could feel her mother's gaze lingering on her, a mixture of pride and worry. "Thank you, Mother," Red murmured, careful not to jostle the precious bundle of bread and honey nestled inside. She promised herself—again—that they would reach Grandma just as her mother had packed them. With a steadying breath, she offered a reassuring smile. Of course she would stay on the main trail, just as her mother had instructed. The memory of last spring, when she'd strayed too close to the north woods and the trouble that followed, was still fresh in her mind. She wouldn't let that happen again. Red's MotherShe gently smooths Red's hood and presses the basket into her hands, her gaze lingering with worry. Red's mother paused to gently smooth the folds of her daughter's crimson hood, her fingers deft but tender, as if she could ward off the world's dangers with a single touch. She pressed the small wicker basket—lined with linen and fragrant with fresh bread—firmly into Red's hands. Her eyes, sharp and weary from years of hardship, lingered on her daughter's face, searching for any sign of uncertainty. "Your grandmother counts on these comforts," she said quietly, her voice steady with the weight of responsibility, "and I count on you to mind my warning about the northern path." As she presses the knife into Red's palm, her voice is low and urgent: "The woods are watching.

Trust no stranger.

' Red pockets the knife, adjusts her cloak, and promises to return by sundown.

Red slips the knife into her pocket, pulls her red cloak tighter around her shoulders, and meets her mother's anxious gaze with a steady, determined look. Red slipped the knife into her pocket, the weight of it a small reassurance as she tightened her red cloak around her shoulders. Her mother's anxious eyes searched her face, but Red met her gaze with quiet determination. She tried to smile, softening her tone as she spoke, "Don't worry, Mother. I promise I'll be back by sundown." She reached out, squeezing her mother's hand with gentle confidence. "I know the path, and I won't stray. I need to do this—Grandmother is counting on me." With one last, steadying breath, Red turned toward the edge of the woods, her heart beating with both caution and resolve. Red's MotherShe gently tugs Red's cloak tighter around her shoulders, her eyes lingering with a mix of worry and pride. Red's mother reached out, her hands steady as she gently tugged the cloak tighter around Red's shoulders. Her gaze lingered on her daughter—a mixture of pride and the

ever-present worry that hardship had carved into her features. “Remember, Red,” she said quietly, her tone imbued with both warning and love, “the woods can be unforgiving. Keep your wits about you, and trust no shadow, no matter how familiar.” She watched as Red slipped the silver knife into her pocket, the old, silent lessons between them settling like a second skin. The cottage door creaks open, letting in a rush of cold, earthy air as Red steps out, glancing back at her mother’s watchful eyes before she disappears into the shadowed trees.

Red pulls her cloak tighter around her shoulders, offering her mother a reassuring smile before stepping into the chill, her boots sinking softly into the moss at the forest’s edge. Red pulled her cloak tighter, the rough wool comforting against the morning chill. At the threshold, she paused, her boots pressing into the soft moss that clung to the forest’s edge. The cottage door groaned behind her, sending a gust of cold, earthy air swirling around her ankles. She glanced back at her mother, offering a small, reassuring smile—one meant to quiet the worry that always flickered in her mother’s eyes. She understood the dangers waiting in the shadowed woods, but she knew these paths better than anyone. She had promised to be careful, to stay where the light touched the ground, and she would keep that promise. Still, as she stepped forward, determination steadied her breath. This was important, and Red knew she had to do it. Red’s MotherShe wraps Red’s cloak tighter around her shoulders, her fingers lingering for a moment before letting go, her eyes shimmering with worry and pride. Red’s mother wrapped the cloak snugly around her daughter’s slender shoulders, her hands lingering at the crimson fabric as if reluctant to let go. Through the dim light of the cottage, her eyes shimmered—a mix of worry and pride etched into every line of her face. As Red paused in the open doorway, a rush of cold, earthy air swirling in, her mother’s voice was low but firm, shaped by years of hardship and vigilance. She reminded Red, not with indulgence but with steady care, that even the bravest could stumble. “The forest listens,” she said, meeting Red’s gaze with a stern gentleness, “and so should you.” With a final squeeze, she pressed the silver knife into Red’s palm, her silent hope gleaming brighter than the blade itself.

Red stepped forward, the weight of her mother’s words settling over her shoulders as surely as the cloak itself. With the silver knife tucked carefully at her side and the basket of provisions in hand, she took her first cautious steps into the shadowed woods. The path stretched ahead, winding deeper into the forest’s heart, and as Red moved beyond the safety of home, the familiar trees seemed to shift and whisper, hinting at secrets and things unseen. Each careful footfall carried her further from the warmth of her mother’s gaze and closer to whatever awaited her among the tangled branches.

Chapter 2: A Strange Encounter on the Path

Red, gripping her wicker basket and the silver knife hidden in her cloak, steps carefully over tangled roots as she heads toward her grandmother’s cabin.

She pauses to listen for movement, alert to her mother’s warnings.

Suddenly, a tall stranger emerges from the bracken, his cloak shadowing sharp, yellow eyes.

The stranger tips his hat and addresses Red, inquiring about her destination and commenting on the fullness of her basket.

The Wolf (Stranger)The stranger tips his hat with a sly smile, eyes lingering on the basket before

meeting Red's gaze. The stranger lingered at the edge of the path, tipping his hat with a sly, practiced smile. His gaze drifted deliberately to the basket cradled in Red's arms, lingering there a moment too long before he returned his attention to her face. "Afternoon, miss," he drawled, the words smooth as velvet. "That's quite the basket you're carrying—looks heavy for someone so small." He cocked his head, feigning concern, and with a flicker of curiosity that seemed almost genuine, he added, "Mind if I ask where you're headed with it?" Red shifts the basket to her other arm and offers a polite but cautious smile, glancing briefly at the path behind the Wolf. Red shifted the weight of the basket to her other arm, the woven handle digging slightly into her palm as she offered the stranger a polite, cautious smile. She kept a careful eye on the narrow path behind him, measuring the space between herself and the Wolf with the instinctive wariness learned from years of traversing these woods. "I'm just heading to my grandmother's cottage," she explained, her voice gentle but steady. "It's right on the edge of the forest. She's not been feeling well lately, so I thought I'd bring her some treats and tea to cheer her up." The Wolf (Stranger)The Wolf leans in slightly, eyes glinting with curiosity as he studies Red's expression. The stranger tipped his hat, a faint smile curling at the edges of his mouth as he leaned in, eyes glinting with a curiosity that felt almost predatory. "A thoughtful gesture," he remarked, his gaze flickering briefly over Red's basket before returning to search her face. "The woods can be unpredictable, though—do you often make the journey alone?" The question lingered in the hush between them, threaded with a hint of concern that seemed genuine, yet somehow sharpened by something else lurking beneath the surface. Red tightens her grip on the basket and glances warily at the stranger, taking a small step away. Red tightened her grip on the basket, the woven handle digging into her palm as she took a cautious step back. Her eyes flickered over the stranger's shadowed face, searching for any hint of danger beneath the polite tilt of his hat. "I walk this path most days," she admitted quietly, her voice steady despite the thrum of nerves in her chest. "But Mama always tells me to keep to the trail and not talk to strangers." As she spoke, her gaze drifted to the familiar ribbon of earth winding through the trees, the words of warning echoing in her mind, anchoring her resolve. The Wolf (Stranger)The Wolf tilts his head, eyes lingering on Red's basket before glancing at the shadowy trees. The stranger—tall, with a rakish smile and eyes far too sharp for comfort—tilted his head as he regarded Red, his gaze lingering just a moment too long on the wicker basket clutched in her hands. He tipped his hat in a gesture that was both courteous and strangely predatory, then let his attention drift to the shadow-soaked trees lining the path. "Wise advice from your mother," he mused, voice low and smooth, almost reassuring. His eyes flickered with a glint of amusement. "Still, not every stranger means harm," he added, as if confiding a secret, "though some paths do twist where you least expect." RedThe Wolf leans in slightly, his eyes glinting with curiosity as he gestures subtly toward a shadowed fork in the path. The Wolf leaned in, eyes glinting with an almost playful curiosity as he gestured subtly toward a shadowed fork in the path ahead. Red's heart gave a cautious flutter; she was used to the well-trodden way, the one her mother insisted upon, but something in the stranger's gaze invited her to consider otherwise. His voice dropped to a gentle murmur, almost a secret shared between old friends. "Red, have you ever wondered what lies beyond your usual trail, or do you prefer the comfort of the familiar?" The question lingered in the dappled sunlight, tugging at her curiosity even as her mind recalled every warning she'd ever been given about straying from the path. Red clutches her basket a little tighter, her gaze drifting warily to the dense trees beyond the path. Red's fingers tightened around the handle of her basket as she measured the stranger with a cautious gaze, the shadowy woods pressing close on either side of the path. She offered a polite but guarded smile, edging her weight away from the thicket's reach. "I think I'd rather stick to what I know," she said, recalling her mother's gentle warnings. The memory of those words—Mama says the woods

are full of surprises, and not all of them are kind—echoed in her mind as she glanced warily at the tangled undergrowth, her curiosity tempered by a healthy respect for the secrets the forest might be hiding. The Wolf (Stranger)The Wolf leans in just a little, his eyes glinting with curiosity, as if inviting her to question her routine. The stranger tipped his hat, eyes glinting with a curiosity that felt almost predatory. He leaned in just a little, as though inviting her to challenge her own routine. “A sensible choice, Red,” he remarked, his voice smooth and coaxing, the hint of a smile curling at the edge of his lips. “Yet sometimes,” he continued, as if sharing a secret meant only for her, “the most memorable adventures begin with a single step off the beaten path.” Red grips the basket a little tighter, glancing warily at the stranger before edging one cautious foot further down the trail. Red gripped her basket a little tighter, the woven handle pressing into her palm as she eyed the stranger with wary curiosity. His hat dipped in greeting, but she didn’t let her guard down; instead, she edged one cautious foot further along the trail, glancing back toward the familiar path to her grandmother’s cottage. “Maybe so,” she replied, careful to keep her voice steady, “but I promised Mama I’d come straight to Grandmother’s and not dawdle; she says promises are meant to be kept.” Even as the words left her lips, Red felt the weight of her mother’s instructions, a gentle reminder echoing in her mind to stay safe and true to her word. Red answers cautiously but more openly than before, revealing her purpose and engaging the Wolf in a wary yet extended conversation.

The Wolf, intrigued by her candor and boldness, presses her with philosophical and tempting questions about curiosity and straying from the path, suggesting a shortcut through the ferns with increasing insistence.

Red’s gaze flickers over the Wolf, her fingers brushing the hilt of her knife beneath her cloak. She keeps a careful distance, planting her feet in the soft earth as if ready to move at a moment’s notice. Red’s eyes darted over the Wolf’s hulking form, every muscle in her small body coiled for flight. Beneath her faded cloak, her fingers hovered just above the hilt of her knife, the familiar weight grounding her. She kept a careful distance, boots pressed into the mossy path, ready to spring away if need be. Still, her voice was steady as she spoke, cautious but not unkind. “Evening,” she said, her tone guarded. “I don’t see many travelers on this path.” Her gaze settled on the Wolf’s eyes, searching for some hint of his intentions. “What brings you out here alone?” The Wolf (Stranger)The Wolf offers a slow, disarming smile, hands visible and relaxed, eyes studying Red’s stance with quiet interest. The Wolf let a slow, disarming smile unfurl across his lips, his hands deliberately visible and relaxed at his sides. His gaze, sharp and unblinking, traced the subtle shift in Red’s stance—her fingers hovering near the knife at her belt, her weight balanced for flight or fight. “Just passing through, same as you,” he said smoothly, voice low and easy, as if they were nothing more than two ordinary travelers. Yet beneath that calm veneer, his eyes gleamed with quiet interest. “Though I hear the woods hold more secrets than most believe.” Red’s eyes flicker to the shadows behind the Wolf, her fingers tightening on the hilt of her knife under her cloak. Red’s eyes flickered toward the shadows that pooled just behind the Wolf, her muscles tensing beneath her cloak. One hand remained hidden, fingers curled tightly around the hilt of her knife, while her weight shifted almost imperceptibly, ready to spring away if she must. She kept her voice even, but a steely caution threaded through her words as she replied, “Secrets often come at a price—one I’m not interested in paying tonight.” The Wolf (Stranger)He offers a disarming smile, hands visible, but his eyes linger a moment too long on the basket at her side. The Wolf offered a smile so disarming it almost seemed genuine, his hands in plain sight, though his gaze lingered just a fraction too long on the basket nestled against her hip. Sensing the weight of his attention, she shifted subtly, her fingers never straying far from the hilt of her

knife. He watched her with an amused glint in his eye, voice low and smooth as velvet. “Fair enough,” he conceded, the words slipping out with deceptive ease. Then, as if sharing a private joke, he added, “Though sometimes, it’s the ones who aren’t looking for trouble who find it all the same.” The suggestion hung in the air, unsettling in its casual menace, as the Wolf let his smile widen just enough to show the trace of something sharp beneath. Red’s eyes flicker over the stranger’s hands, her fingers flexing near the knife hilt as she takes a careful step back. Red’s gaze lingered on the stranger’s hands, her own fingers unconsciously flexing near the hilt of her knife. She shifted her weight, subtly edging backwards, every sense alert for movement or change in tone. With a voice low and careful, she answered, “Trouble usually gives warning, if you know how to listen for it.” Her words hung in the air, edged with caution and the quiet confidence of someone who had learned, in the shadowed woods of her childhood, that danger rarely arrived without signs—if only you paid close enough attention. The Wolf (Stranger)She narrows her eyes, her grip tightening subtly on the handle of her knife as she studies the stranger’s face for any sign of intent. She narrowed her eyes, fingers tightening almost imperceptibly around the handle of her knife as she studied the stranger’s handsome, inscrutable face. “And sometimes,” she answered, her voice steady but edged with caution, “it comes on padded feet, hoping you won’t notice until it’s too late.” As she spoke, she shifted her weight, ready to spring at the slightest hint of danger, unwilling to let the wolf’s smile lull her into carelessness. Red’s eyes flicker briefly to the Wolf’s hands, her grip tightening on the knife’s hilt beneath her cloak. Red’s eyes flickered warily to the Wolf’s hands, her grip tightening around the hilt of her knife hidden beneath the folds of her cloak. She kept her posture loose, ready to move if she had to, and answered in a steady, cautious tone, “I’ve learned to notice even the quietest footsteps—and to keep my knife sharp, just in case.” Every word was measured, her gaze unblinking, as she subtly shifted her weight, poised between fear and defiance. The Wolf (Stranger)The Wolf offers a thin, measured smile, hands visible and empty, eyes watching Red’s every move for signs of weakness or trust. The Wolf offered a thin, measured smile, keeping his hands in plain view—empty, unthreatening, or so he wanted her to believe. His gaze tracked Red’s every subtle movement, weighing her caution, cataloguing the way her hand hovered near her knife and how she shifted her stance, ready to spring away or into action. “Sharp senses and a sharper blade,” he observed, his voice smooth and low, a compliment laced with something predatory. “Seems you know these woods better than most.” Red tightens her grip on the knife handle, eyes narrowed as she subtly shifts her stance to keep the stranger in her peripheral vision. Red’s fingers tightened around the worn handle of her knife, the blade hidden but ready at her side. Her eyes narrowed, tracking every movement of the stranger as she subtly shifted her weight, keeping him in the corner of her vision. The woods around her were familiar, but their shadows held secrets—she knew that well. With a cautious steadiness in her voice, she spoke, her words edged by hard-earned wisdom. “Familiar paths teach hard lessons,” she said, never letting her guard drop. “I’ve learned not to trust what moves in the shadows.” The Wolf (Stranger)He raises his empty hands slightly in a gesture of peace, his eyes watching Red’s every move. With a slow, practiced ease, the stranger lifted his empty hands, palms open in a gesture of harmlessness. Yet his eyes, sharp and unblinking, tracked Red’s every subtle shift—how she kept her hand hovering near her knife, how her stance shifted ever so slightly, ready to bolt or strike. He offered a reassuring smile that never quite reached those predatory eyes. “The shadows aren’t always what they seem,” he remarked, his voice smooth as silk and just as hard to grasp. “Sometimes they’re just travelers trying to find their way.” Red’s eyes narrow slightly, her grip tightening on her cloak as she subtly angles her body to keep the path behind her clear. Red’s eyes narrowed as she scanned the shadows, her fingers tightening around the edge of her red cloak. Without seeming to move, she shifted her stance just enough to keep the path behind her in

view—a habit learned from years of cautious walks through the woods. Her hand hovered close to the hilt of her knife, ready for anything. “Or sometimes,” she said quietly, voice steady but edged with wariness, “they’re hiding something they don’t want found.” The Wolf (Stranger)The Wolf tilts his head, voice soft, eyes watching her hands with a flicker of curiosity. The Wolf tilted his head, his voice slipping into a soft, almost caressing tone as he watched her hands with a flicker of curiosity. “That sounds like someone who’s had reason to be wary,” he murmured, the words floating between them like a challenge. His gaze lingered at the place where her fingers hovered near the knife, reading every subtle movement as she shifted her weight—cautious, calculating. For a moment, the air thickened, his smile sharpening just enough to hint at something predatory beneath the surface. “Are you sure you’re not the one with secrets to keep?” he asked, the question threading itself into the tension, as if he was already certain of the answer. Red narrows her eyes, fingers tightening subtly around the hilt of her knife as she takes a slow step back, maintaining a careful distance. Red narrowed her eyes, her fingers tightening almost imperceptibly around the hilt of her knife. She took a slow, measured step back, careful to keep a safe distance as she regarded the shadowed figure before her. The woods had taught her caution, and she had learned long ago that secrets could be as valuable as any weapon. “Everyone has secrets,” she said quietly, her voice steady but edged with wariness. “Mine just aren’t for sharing with strangers who linger too long in the dark.” Even as she spoke, Red’s weight shifted subtly, ready to spring or flee if the need arose, her senses straining for any sign of threat. The Wolf (Stranger)He offers a faint, almost reassuring smile, but his eyes flicker to her hand on the knife, gauging her resolve. He offered a faint, almost reassuring smile, but his eyes betrayed him, flickering to the hand she kept poised near her knife. He seemed to measure her resolve with every subtle movement. “And yet here we are, both lingering—maybe it’s the night that keeps secrets, not us,” he murmured, letting the words drift between them as she shifted her weight, careful not to expose her vulnerability. The darkness pressed in, thick with unspoken danger and the wolf’s predatory charm, as if the moon itself conspired to hide their true intentions. Red shifts subtly, positioning herself where moonlight catches her features, eyes never leaving the Wolf’s silhouette. Red shifted, positioning herself so that the moonlight spilled across her face, its pale glow illuminating the determination in her eyes. Her fingers hovered near the handle of her knife, every muscle poised for movement, yet her voice remained measured and careful as she answered, gaze fixed unwaveringly on the Wolf’s shadowed form. “Maybe,” she said, her words edged with caution and quiet conviction, “but I trust the night more than those who hide their faces from it.” Red repeatedly declines, reinforcing her loyalty to her mother’s warnings and her promises, but the exchange becomes lengthier and more nuanced, with both parties testing each other’s intentions and trustworthiness.

The Wolf (Stranger)The Wolf leans in, his eyes gleaming beneath hooded lids. He gestures with a graceful paw toward the tangle of ferns, lips curled in a smile that doesn’t reach his eyes. The Wolf leaned in, his eyes glinting slyly beneath the shadow of his brow as he inhaled the subtle scent of his companion. With a languid, almost graceful gesture, he extended a paw toward the tangle of ferns nearby, lips curving into a smile that never quite softened his gaze. “You know,” he murmured, his voice a silken thread winding through the undergrowth, “the path you’re taking is dreadfully dull.” His gaze flickered to the thicket. “Through those ferns—just there—is a secret way, swift and shaded.” He seemed to savor the words, as if tasting each for their effect. “The forest’s heart beats stronger off the beaten track.” His tone dropped to a conspiratorial whisper, coaxing yet edged with hunger. “Why not let me show you? I’d hate for you to tire yourself out before reaching Grandmother’s.” Red clutches her basket a bit tighter, glancing at the tangled ferns with a flicker of doubt before looking back at the Wolf, trying to sound braver than she feels. Red’s fingers

tightened around the handle of her basket as she eyed the tangled ferns, uncertainty flickering in her gaze. The Wolf's suggestion hung in the air, tempting and silken, but she forced herself to steady her voice as she replied, "Thank you, sir, but Mama says to keep to the main path—she says shortcuts can be tricky in these woods." Even as she spoke, Red glanced back at the familiar trail, remembering all of her mother's warnings about the dangers that lurked just out of sight. The Wolf (Stranger)The Wolf tilts his head, a glint of promise in his eyes, and gestures invitingly toward the shadowy ferns. The Wolf tilted his head, the glint in his eyes promising secrets just out of reach. He drew in the air with a languid sniff, the gesture somehow both intimate and predatory. His hand swept toward the shadowy ferns, beckoning. "Your mother's warnings," he murmured, voice silky and reassuring, "are meant for those who wander alone." He leaned closer, letting his words curl through the dusk like smoke. "But you're in luck tonight—you have me to guide you, and I know every secret this forest keeps." Red grips her basket a little tighter, glancing at the dark ferns with a flicker of uncertainty in her eyes. Red gripped her basket a little tighter, her gaze flickering toward the shadowy tangle of ferns that loomed just off the trail. The Wolf leaned in, his words curling through the air, smooth and alluring as he suggested a shortcut. Red hesitated, the warning her mother had repeated since childhood echoing in her mind. Even if the Wolf's voice was gentle, almost kind, she knew better than to be lulled. "I appreciate your offer," she replied carefully, her tone polite but edged with caution. "But Mama also says strangers can be tricky too, even if they sound friendly." The Wolf (Stranger)The Wolf flashes a slow, toothy smile, inching closer as his tail brushes softly through the ferns, eyes fixed on Red with unsettling intent. The Wolf flashed a slow, toothy smile, inching ever closer until the ferns quivered beneath the gentle sweep of his tail. His eyes, gleaming with unsettling intent, never left Red's face as he leaned in, nostrils flaring to catch her scent. "Oh, but surely I'm no stranger now," he murmured, voice silky and persuasive, the words curling around her like mist. "See how we're already talking like old friends," he coaxed, head tilted in feigned camaraderie, "and friends look out for each other, don't they?" Red clutches her basket a little tighter, taking a small step back while glancing toward the sunlit path ahead. Red's fingers tightened around the wicker handle of her basket as she edged back a cautious step, wary eyes flicking toward the dappled path where sunlight danced between the trees. The Wolf's breath brushed her cheek, warm and sweet as overripe berries, his suggestion of a shortcut curling through the air with deceptive ease. Yet Red stood her ground, voice gentle but sure. "Maybe," she conceded, glancing up at the creature's gleaming eyes, "but friends earn trust with time—and Mama says hurrying is how you miss what matters most." The Wolf (Stranger)The Wolf tilts his head, flashing a smile that doesn't quite reach his eyes, his shadow stretching long across the mossy ground. The Wolf tilted his head, a smile curving his lips—charming at first glance, but hollow at its core. His shadow stretched long and thin across the mossy ground, melding with the tangled undergrowth. Leaning closer, he inhaled deeply, as if savoring the scent of fear in the air. His voice slipped through the ferns, smooth as silk and just as treacherous. "Ah, but time slips away in these woods, little one," he murmured, the words coiling around her like mist. "And sometimes what matters most is reaching your destination safely—let me help you, just this once." Red clutches her basket tighter, glancing sideways at the dense undergrowth, her feet planted firmly on the trail. Red's fingers tightened around the wicker handle of her basket as she glanced warily at the tangled ferns flanking the trail. The Wolf loomed closer, his snout twitching with curiosity, voice smooth as velvet as he gestured toward a shadowy shortcut. Red hesitated, planting her feet more firmly on the leaf-strewn path, the promise she'd made to her mother echoing in her mind. The ferns ahead looked forbidding—dark and tangled—and she wasn't about to risk the wildflowers Mama loved by straying from the sunlit route. Cautiously, she shook her head and replied, her tone polite but resolute, that she'd promised her mother to gather blossoms only from the bright, open

trail. The Wolf (Stranger)The Wolf tilts his head, eyes glinting as he gestures invitingly toward the shadowed ferns, his smile stretched just a bit too wide. The Wolf tilted his head, a glint flickering in those uncanny eyes as his smile stretched just a shade too wide. Leaning closer, he let the scent of moss and wildflowers fill his lungs, then gestured with a languid sweep toward the shadowed tangle of ferns. His voice slipped through the hush between them, smooth as velvet, coaxing and intimate. He spoke of secrets lurking deeper in the shade—rarer blossoms, he promised, ones her mother had never seen, waiting just for a clever girl willing to trust a friend. Red clutches her basket a little tighter, edging away from the tangled ferns, her gaze flicking uncertainly between the Wolf and the dappled main path. Red clutched her basket a little tighter, edging away from the tangled ferns. Her gaze darted between the Wolf, whose breath came warm and close, and the dappled safety of the main path. Though his suggestion of a shortcut curled through the air like an invitation, Red hesitated, remembering her mother's words. "Maybe," she said quietly, voice steady despite her nerves, "but Mama always told me the brightest flowers don't grow where it's cold and hidden—and I promised I'd pick only what the sun can see." Ultimately, Red remains steadfast, politely but firmly refusing the Wolf's offers, keeping her hand near her knife and her mind alert to the danger, while the Wolf masks his frustration with charm before withdrawing into the undergrowth.

Red grips her basket a little tighter and glances warily at the Wolf, taking a careful step forward along the narrow trail. Red tightened her grip on her basket, the woven handle pressing into her palm as she glanced warily at the Wolf blocking her path. She took a cautious step forward, her boots crunching softly on the narrow trail. Memories of her mother's careful warnings echoed in her mind, and with quiet resolve she shook her head. "I'm sorry," she said, her voice gentle but firm. "I really can't. My mother told me to stay on the path and not talk to strangers. It's important that I listen to her." The words lingered between them, Red's gaze steady, determined not to waver despite the Wolf's unsettling presence. The Wolf (Stranger)The Wolf tilts his head, eyes glinting with sly curiosity as he steps just a little closer, his tone gentle but coaxing. The Wolf tilted his head, a sly glint flickering in his eyes as he inched a little closer to Red. His voice softened, coaxing, almost tender as he remarked, "Ah, such a dutiful daughter—though sometimes the woods hold more wonders than a well-trodden path ever could." The gentle cadence of his words belied the sharpness of his gaze, as if he were weighing her every hesitation, searching for a crack in her resolve. Red tightens her grip on her basket and glances warily at the shadows between the trees. Red tightened her grip on the basket, her knuckles whitening just a touch as she glanced warily at the shifting shadows between the trees. The memory of her mother's gentle warning echoed in her mind—how easily the woods could turn treacherous for those who let curiosity lead them astray. She drew a slow breath, steadying herself, and shook her head. However tempting the unexplored paths might be, she had promised her mother she wouldn't wander. For now, she would keep to the trail, just as she had been taught, and trust that caution would guide her safely through the forest's depths. The Wolf (Stranger)The Wolf leans in slightly, his voice low and inviting, eyes glinting with a hint of mischief. The Wolf leaned in ever so slightly, closing the space between them with a predatory ease. His voice dropped to a low, inviting tone, as if sharing a secret meant only for Red. Eyes glinting with a mischievous spark, he smiled—a smile just a bit too wide, just a bit too hungry. "Of course," he murmured, conceding her caution. But then, with a tilt of his head, he let the words slip out like silk, "even the most careful travelers sometimes miss what lies just beyond their sight—are you never curious what secrets the forest keeps from the path?" The question hovered in the air, tempting, his gaze searching hers for a flicker of doubt or wonder. Red grips her basket a little tighter and glances warily at the trees beyond the path,

her resolve firm. Red gripped her basket a little tighter, the familiar weight grounding her as she cast a wary glance at the tangled shadows beyond the path. Temptation tugged at her—curiosity always did—but she remembered her mother’s words and the promise she’d made. Better to be safe than sorry, she reminded herself, her resolve settling firm and steady beneath her cautious heart. Even as the woods whispered their secrets, Red kept to the narrow track, determined not to stray. Red resumes her journey, footsteps quickening, acutely aware of unseen eyes tracking her progress.

But as Red pressed on beneath the shifting canopy, the forest seemed to thicken, shadows lengthening with every step. Though the path ahead appeared unchanged, a subtle tension hung in the air—a warning that her encounter was far from over. Unbeknownst to her, other plans were already unfolding among the tangled roots and hidden trails, drawing her ever deeper into the Wolf’s cunning game.

Chapter 3: The Wolf’s Deception

Red walks a narrow, muddy path, clutching her basket and the silver knife her mother gave her. She pauses by a fallen log, scanning the underbrush for movement.

Suddenly, The Wolf, disguised as a hunched, cloaked traveler, emerges from the thicket and blocks her way, his eyes glinting.

The Wolf greets Red with a smooth, hypnotic voice, engaging her in conversation and repeatedly offering to accompany her or guide her via a shortcut through the birch trail, describing it as safer and more direct.

The Wolf (Stranger)The Wolf steps from behind a twisted tree, his eyes glinting, voice velvet-smooth and inviting, as he offers a slow, courteous bow to Red. From behind a gnarled, ancient tree, the Wolf emerged, his presence almost liquid in its smoothness. His eyes caught the sunlight in a predatory glint, yet his smile was all charm—a velvet mask stretched over something far more dangerous. With deliberate elegance, he offered Red a graceful, courteous bow, as though she were royalty rather than a solitary traveler.

He straightened slowly, voice rich and hypnotic as it curled through the hush of the woods. “Such a lovely day for a walk,” he remarked, the words sliding from his tongue like silk. His gaze lingered on the basket tucked beneath her arm, then flicked back to her face. “All alone in the woods, just you and your basket,” he observed, each syllable heavy with feigned admiration. The Wolf tilted his head, curiosity sharpened to a point. “Tell me, little one—where might you be headed on this fine morning?”

Red felt the question settle around her like mist, the Wolf’s tone so gentle, so inviting, that for a moment, danger seemed nothing more than a distant echo. Red clutches her basket a little tighter, glancing toward the winding path ahead. Red clutched her basket a little tighter, her fingers pressing into the woven handle as she eyed the winding path that disappeared beneath the shadowy canopy. The Wolf’s smooth, almost hypnotic voice curled around her like mist, filling the quiet between the trees. Suppressing a flicker of unease, Red lifted her chin, summoning courage shaped by years in these woods. “I’m just visiting my grandmother,” she replied, careful not to

reveal too much, “she lives in a cottage at the edge of these woods.” The words slipped out with practiced caution, her gaze steady, but a tremor of concern lingered in her chest as she measured the intent behind the Wolf’s smile. The Wolf (Stranger)The Wolf leans in just a touch closer, his smile widening as his eyes flicker with interest. The Wolf leaned in just a touch closer, his smile widening with practiced ease, eyes gleaming with a flicker of predatory interest. His voice, smooth as silk and almost hypnotic in its cadence, curled through the cool air. “Ah, how devoted you are—such a sweet granddaughter, venturing so far,” he remarked, each word carefully chosen, as if taste-testing the innocence before him. He let the compliment hang for a moment, then added with a soft, coaxing curiosity, “Does your dear grandmother know how brave you are to stroll these shadowed paths alone?” Red tightens her grip on the basket and glances down the path, her voice steady but her eyes searching the stranger’s face for any sign of trouble. Red’s fingers tightened around the handle of her basket as she glanced down the shadow-dappled path. The Wolf’s words lingered in the air, smooth and unsettling. She kept her voice steady, though her eyes flicked over the stranger’s features, quietly searching for any hint of danger. “Oh, she worries sometimes,” Red admitted, thinking of her mother’s anxious instructions, “but I know these woods well—and I promised to be quick.” The Wolf (Stranger)The Wolf leans in ever so slightly, his gaze lingering on Red’s basket as a sly smile tugs at the corners of his mouth. The Wolf leaned in ever so slightly, the sly curve of his smile barely concealed as his eyes lingered on Red’s basket. His voice slipped into the hush between the trees, smooth and hypnotic, wrapping around her like mist. “You know,” he murmured, as if sharing a secret, “even the cleverest traveler can lose their way when the forest whispers secrets.” His gaze flickered up to meet hers, dark and inviting. “Are you quite certain you won’t let me walk with you, just to be safe?” Red grips her basket a little tighter and glances down the winding trail, her voice polite but with a hint of nervousness. Red’s fingers curled a little tighter around the handle of her basket as she glanced down the winding trail, the thick woods pressing in on either side. The Wolf’s greeting lingered in the hush between the trees, unsettling in its smoothness. Red managed a polite smile, though a nervous flutter danced beneath it. She shook her head gently. “Thank you,” she said, careful to keep her voice steady, “but I wouldn’t want to trouble you.” Her mother’s warnings echoed in her mind, urging caution. “Grandmother says it’s best to walk alone and keep to the path.” The Wolf (Stranger)The Wolf steps a little closer, his eyes glinting as he offers a courteous, almost too-smooth smile. The Wolf edged closer, the movement subtle, as if he were merely seeking a patch of sunlight rather than shrinking the distance between them. His eyes caught the light, glinting with a peculiar sharpness that belied the warmth of his smile—a smile just a touch too smooth, too practiced. He inclined his head in a gesture of old-fashioned courtesy and spoke in a voice so velvet-smooth it seemed to ripple through the air, almost hypnotic. “Ah, but sometimes the path twists when you least expect it,” he murmured, his gaze never leaving Red’s face. “Perhaps a stranger’s company is a comfort, not a trouble.” Red clutches her basket a little tighter, her gaze flickering to the trees as if searching for familiar landmarks. Red’s fingers tightened around the handle of her basket, her eyes darting to the tangled woods in search of any familiar marking—anything to anchor her. The Wolf’s smooth voice drifted over the hush of the trees, inviting and unsettling all at once. Red hesitated, the memory of her grandmother’s words echoing in her mind. She offered a small, cautious smile, her tone gentle yet resolute. “I appreciate your kindness,” she replied, never quite letting her guard down, “but Grandmother always says strangers may have secrets hidden beneath their smiles.” The Wolf (Stranger)The Wolf leans in slightly, his eyes glinting with an unsettling curiosity as he flashes a disarming smile. The Wolf leaned in just enough to blur the line between cordiality and intrusion, his eyes glinting with an unsettling curiosity. A disarming smile flickered across his lips as he regarded Red, his voice smooth and almost hypnotic. “Secrets, my dear,” he

purred, each syllable carefully measured, “are simply stories waiting to be told.” He paused, as if savoring the words, and let his gaze linger just a beat too long. “Perhaps you and I could share a few before your journey’s end.” Red grips her basket a little tighter, taking a cautious step back as she glances down the path toward her grandmother’s cottage. Red’s fingers curled tighter around the wicker handle of her basket as she took a cautious step back, eyes flickering down the winding path that led to her grandmother’s cottage. The Wolf’s voice—smooth as river stones, unsettling in its calm—slipped through the shadows between the trees, inviting her closer. But Red hesitated, recalling her mother’s warnings and her grandmother’s gentle wisdom. She offered a small, polite smile, voice steady despite the thrum of nerves beneath her skin. Grandmother would be expecting her soon, Red explained, and she’d always said stories were best saved for when everyone was safe and warm inside. Red, though tempted and momentarily considering his suggestion, ultimately recalls her mother’s warnings, expresses doubt about the shortcut, and firmly declines to leave the main path despite The Wolf’s persistent persuasion.

Red keeps the knife hidden in her cloak, her knuckles white around the handle. She stands tall, voice steady, but her eyes never leave the Stranger’s face, watching for any sign of danger. Red kept the knife concealed beneath her cloak, her knuckles whitening around the handle as she faced the Stranger. Though her voice remained steady, she could feel her heart pounding in her chest. “I’m just on my way to see my grandmother,” she said, her gaze never wavering from the stranger’s face, searching for any flicker of threat. She forced herself to stand tall, projecting a calm she didn’t entirely feel. “She lives at the end of the lane. Now, if you’ll excuse me, I really should be going.” Even as she spoke, every muscle in her body was poised to move, ready to protect her grandmother at any sign of danger. The Wolf (Stranger)The Wolf steps from the shadows, his eyes glinting as he blocks a portion of the path, forcing Red to slow her pace. The Wolf emerged from the dense shadows, his silhouette stretching across the narrow path and forcing Red to slow. His eyes glinted with a predatory gleam, but his voice was all charm, soft and almost concerned as he blocked her way. “The forest can be dangerous for a girl alone—are you sure you know the way?” he inquired, the words rolling off his tongue as he studied her grip tightening on the knife. Red shifts her stance, keeping the knife hidden but ready, her eyes never leaving the Wolf’s face. Red shifted her weight, the handle of her knife cool and solid against her palm, hidden beneath her cloak but ready should she need it. Her gaze was unwavering, fixed on the Wolf as she measured the distance between them. Though her heart thudded with a cautious rhythm, her voice carried steady resolve as she replied, “I know these woods better than anyone, and I don’t need help finding my way.” The words rang with the quiet confidence of someone who had grown up beneath the shadow of the trees, every path and thorny thicket as familiar to her as her own breath. The Wolf (Stranger)The Wolf tilts his head, eyes flickering with interest as he steps just close enough for Red to notice the tension in his posture. The Wolf tilted his head, eyes glinting with predatory interest as he closed the distance between them, just enough for Red to feel the coiled tension in his frame. His voice, smooth as velvet and edged with something darker, slipped from his lips as he watched her grip tighten around the knife. “Ah, but even those who know the path,” he murmured, a wry smile curving his mouth, “can stumble when something unexpected crosses it.” Red narrows her eyes, shifting her stance protectively, the knife held steady at her side as she studies the stranger’s face for any sign of danger. Red narrowed her eyes, shifting her stance so that her body angled protectively between the stranger and the cottage door. The knife in her hand felt reassuringly solid, its blade catching a glimmer of late afternoon light as she studied the man’s face for any hint of threat. Her voice, steady despite the tension in her shoulders, carried a quiet resolve. “Thank you for your concern,” she replied, her grip tightening

on the worn handle, “but I’ve learned to watch for things that lurk where they shouldn’t be.” She kept her gaze fixed, alert for the smallest flicker of danger, unwilling to let her guard down with her grandmother so near. The Wolf (Stranger)The Wolf tilts his head, eyes narrowing as he steps just slightly closer, his gaze lingering on the knife in Red’s hand. The Wolf tilted his head, a predatory glint sharpening in his narrowed eyes as he inched just a little closer. His gaze lingered on the knife clenched in Red’s determined fist, but his voice remained smooth, almost amused. “A wise lesson—though sometimes what lurks is simply curious who else walks these woods so late,” he murmured, as if the shadows themselves might eavesdrop on his words. Red narrows her eyes, shifting her stance to keep the knife visible as she subtly steps between the Wolf and the faint trail leading to her grandmother’s cottage. Red narrowed her eyes, shifting her stance so the glint of her knife remained clear—subtle, but unmistakable—as she edged herself between the looming Wolf and the faint trail that led to her grandmother’s cottage. The air was thick with tension, but she tightened her grip and spoke evenly, her voice steady despite the thrum of nerves beneath her skin. Curiosity, she reminded herself, wasn’t always harmless. She let that warning hang in the space between them, the words edged with caution and resolve: she’d rather not find out which kind of curiosity the Wolf possessed. The Wolf (Stranger)The Wolf’s eyes narrow, flickering with an unreadable glint as he steps just close enough to test Red’s resolve. The Wolf’s eyes narrowed, a predatory glint flashing beneath his human mask as he eased forward, closing the space between them just enough to test the boundaries of Red’s resolve. His voice, velvet-smooth and edged with something dangerous, carried a quiet amusement as he observed the way she tightened her grip on the knife. “Perhaps,” he remarked, his gaze unblinking, “but sometimes curiosity keeps one alive—especially when the woods hide more than shadows.” Red narrows her eyes, taking a cautious step back while keeping the knife visible at her side. Red narrowed her eyes, edging a cautious step backward, the glint of her knife unmistakable at her side. She tightened her grip, her heart steady but aware of every rustle in the shadowed room. Her voice was low but unwavering as she met the stranger’s gaze. It was best, she said, that they each minded their own paths—her words measured and deliberate, her curiosity tempered by the dangers she knew too well. There were places, she reminded them both, where curiosity could lead and no one could ever truly return. The Wolf tries several times to convince her, but Red remains cautious and polite, refusing to trust a stranger and making it clear she will stick to her mother’s advice.

The Wolf (Stranger)The Wolf paces a slow, gentle circle around Red, ears pricked in feigned alertness, casting glances into the dark trees as if searching for hidden threats. The Wolf moved in a slow, deliberate circle around Red, his movements deceptively casual as his sharp ears twitched with feigned alertness. Now and then he lifted his nose, sniffing at the air, casting wary glances into the dense shadows between the trees as though he expected danger to emerge at any moment. “What a lonely path you walk, dear child,” he remarked, voice honeyed with concern that didn’t quite reach the predatory gleam of his eyes. “The woods can be frightful for someone so young—have you heard the growls in the shadows?” He let the question hang, gaze lingering just a moment too long on the darkness beyond before returning to her face, the corners of his mouth curling in a sympathetic smile. “I would hate for anything to happen to you.” He paused, lowering his head in a conspiratorial manner, as if sharing a helpful secret. “If it were me, I’d take the little trail through the birches just ahead. It’s much quicker, and far safer, I assure you.” Red peers down the birch-lined trail, clutching her basket a little tighter, her eyes wide with curiosity and a hint of caution. Red hesitated at the fork in the birch-lined trail, her fingers tightening around the handle of her basket. The Wolf’s heavy pawsteps circled her, his nose twitching as if genuinely concerned for her safety. Red’s eyes darted to the unfamiliar path he gestured toward—one she hadn’t noticed

before. Heart fluttering with both curiosity and caution, she managed a polite, measured tone, careful not to betray her unease. "I appreciate your concern, sir," she said, studying the shaded path. "I hadn't even seen that trail before... Do you really think it's safer than the usual road?" The Wolf (Stranger)The Wolf leans in, lowering his voice conspiratorially, and gestures invitingly toward the narrow birch-lined path. The Wolf circled Red with an almost theatrical concern, his eyes glinting as he sniffed the air, feigning a nervous glance toward the tangled thicket. Leaning in conspiratorially, he lowered his voice so that only Red could hear, gesturing with a sly flourish toward the slender, birch-lined trail. He murmured, "But of course, little one—the usual road is full of twists where wolves may lurk unseen, while the birch trail keeps everything in plain sight." His words, honeyed and reassuring, seemed to dance with hidden meaning as he coaxed her attention toward the path he'd chosen. Red pauses, glancing uncertainly down the suggested path, clutching her basket a little tighter. Red hesitated, her gaze flickering uncertainly down the path the Wolf had indicated. The birch trail looked narrower, shadows tangled among the white trunks. She tightened her grip on the basket nestled in the crook of her arm, remembering her mother's warnings and Grandmother's gentle advice. Still, she tried to sound polite, even as caution prickled beneath her curiosity. "It does seem reassuring," she ventured, voice quiet, "but Grandmother always tells me to stay on the main road..." Red's eyes met the Wolf's, searching his expression for sincerity. "Are you quite sure the birch trail leads all the way to her cottage?" The Wolf (Stranger)The Wolf leans in closer, his voice smooth and low, gesturing invitingly toward the pale trunks of the birch trees. The Wolf leaned in, his voice a smooth, intimate rumble as he circled closer, the sharp glint in his eyes half-hidden by an easy smile. He gestured invitingly toward the pale, slender trunks of the birch trees, their bark almost glowing in the dappled light. "Why, I pass by your grandmother's cottage often," he murmured, feigning the warmth of a trusted guide. "I can promise you—the birch trail brings you straight to her door, with hardly a shadow to trouble you." The words slid from his tongue like silk, each syllable meant to soothe, to lure, as he sniffed the air delicately, pretending concern for dangers that, in truth, paled next to himself. Red glances down the birch trail, hesitating, then steps closer to its entrance, peering curiously between the pale trunks. Red hesitated at the edge of the birch trail, her boots crunching softly in the undergrowth as she peered between the pale trunks. The Wolf circled her, his dark shape weaving through shafts of sunlight, nose twitching as if testing the scent of danger on the breeze. She glanced at him, wary but curious—the shortcut he suggested shimmered with possibility and risk alike. "Well," she began, her voice cautious but steady, "if you're certain it's safe and leads to Grandmother, perhaps I'll try your shortcut just this once." The words hung in the forest air, a mixture of bravery and careful doubt as she took a tentative step closer to the unfamiliar path. Sensing he cannot sway her, The Wolf flashes a toothy grin and vanishes into the trees, leaving Red to hurry down the main trail, her senses heightened and her objective clear: reach her grandmother's cabin safely.

Red shakes her head firmly and steps away, her boots squelching in the mud as she puts more distance between herself and the Wolf. Red shook her head, resolute, and stepped back, her boots sinking into the slick mud with each careful movement. She remembered her mother's words—warnings whispered countless times before she set out. Never stray from the main path. Never trust the strangers lurking beneath the trees. Compassion warred with caution inside her, but her mother's advice won out. Keeping her distance from the Wolf, Red turned her gaze toward the winding trail ahead, and reminded herself, silently, that she was not to talk with strangers, nor to linger where danger might find her. The Wolf (Stranger)The Wolf tilts his head, his smile widening as he takes a slow, deliberate step closer, eyes gleaming with sly curiosity. The Wolf tilted his

head, a slow, predatory smile spreading wider across his lips as he took a deliberate step closer. His eyes glimmered with sly curiosity, never leaving Red's face. "Ah, but sometimes the most interesting things lie just beyond the main path, Little Red—are you sure you want to miss out?" The words slithered from his mouth as Red instinctively recoiled, boots squelching in the damp earth, her mother's warnings echoing in the back of her mind. Red takes another cautious step away, clutching her basket tighter as she glances warily at the Wolf. Red took another cautious step back, the handle of her basket pressed tight against her palm as she eyed the Wolf warily. The damp earth squelched beneath her boots, a reminder of the path she was determined not to leave. Her mother's warnings echoed in her mind, stronger than any spark of curiosity that flickered in her chest. She shook her head, voice steady but gentle as she said, "I'm sure." Trusting her mother's words more than her own inquisitiveness, Red edged closer to the main trail, resolute in her choice to heed caution over temptation. —————

As Red finally parts ways with the stranger, the lingering unease refuses to leave her. The forest seems quieter now, every shadow stretching longer in the late afternoon light. Yet, as she approaches Grandmother's cottage, a subtle sense of wrongness prickles at the edge of her awareness—a feeling that will soon prove impossible to ignore.

Chapter 4: Red's Suspicious Arrival

Red approaches the weather-beaten door of her grandmother's cabin, her boots squelching in the mud as she steps carefully around tangled roots.

She pauses, gripping the silver knife concealed in her cloak, and knocks three times, her knuckles scraping the rough wood.

The door creaks open, revealing the Wolf disguised as Grandmother;
his eyes glint oddly in the fading light.

Red squints, scanning his face and the room beyond, noting the ashy smell of an unlit hearth and the faint, sour scent of wet fur.

The Wolf, voice trembling to mimic the old woman, beckons her inside, urging her to set down her basket.

The Wolf, concealed beneath the covers, tries to steady his voice, but it quivers with an uneasy tremor as he gestures weakly toward the bedside, urging Little Red Riding Hood to step deeper into the dim room. "Oh, my dear. come closer, won't you? Set your basket down by the bed, child. My eyes aren't what they used to be." —The Wolf

Red edges across the threshold but keeps her hand on the knife, her gaze darting to the unfamiliar, deep scratches on the floorboards.

She asks, 'Grandmother, why are your hands so large?

' The Wolf responds, curling his fingers around the quilt, 'So I may hold you close, child.

' Red edges backward, feigning innocence but calculating her next move, determined to protect her grandmother and herself as she listens for any further sign of danger.

Red's unease grows with each calculated answer, the air thickening with tension as she senses the wolf's patience thinning. The silence between them stretches, punctuated only by the wolf's heavy breathing and the distant creak of the settling cabin. Red realizes that her window to act is closing, and the danger she suspected may soon reveal itself in full. With her questions met by unsettling responses, she steels herself for what might come next, bracing for the moment her suspicions give way to action.

Chapter 5: The Attack and Escape

Red crouches behind a fallen log, clutching her silver knife as she scans the shadowy forest for movement.

The Wolf, disguised as a weary traveler, stalks closer to the cabin, nose twitching to catch Red's scent.

Red quietly snaps a twig under her boot, drawing the Wolf's attention.

The Wolf circles the log, sniffing and growling low in his throat.

Red darts from her hiding place, hurling a stone at the Wolf's flank to distract him, then sprints toward the cabin door.

The Wolf lunges, swiping at Red's cloak, but she slips inside and bolts the door, panting as she listens to the Wolf's claws scraping at the wood.

Outside, the wolf's furious howls rattled the cabin walls, each moment stretching Red's nerves thinner. Inside, shadows flickered as Red pressed herself against the door, heart racing, the silver knife slick with blood trembling in her grip. The pantry felt like a fragile haven, but Red knew she couldn't stay hidden forever; her grandmother's muffled cries reminded her of the danger still lurking close. With the wolf wounded yet relentless, Red realized she would have to risk everything to turn the tables and attempt a rescue—before time ran out.

Chapter 6: Rescue and Confrontation

Red enters the cabin, clutching her silver knife, her boots leaving muddy prints on the threshold.

She immediately notices Grandmother's empty chair and the faint, musky scent lingering in the room.

The Wolf, disguised in Grandmother's shawl, reclines on the bed, eyeing Red with predatory intent.

Red edges closer, scanning the room for signs of her grandmother.

The Wolf, voice low and silky, beckons Red to approach, urging, 'Come closer, child, so I may see you better.

' Red, motivated by her mother's warnings and her desire to protect her grandmother, grips the knife tighter and asks probing questions, trying to expose the Wolf's deception.

Red stands at the foot of the bed, her knuckles white around the handle of the knife hidden behind her back. Her gaze darts from the wolf's snout to the oddly large eyes staring back at her, suspicion flickering across her face as she inches closer, careful and alert. Red hesitated at the threshold of her grandmother's dim cottage, her gaze lingering on the figure nestled beneath the patchwork quilt. Something was off, though she couldn't quite name it. Edging closer, she searched her grandmother's face—were her eyes always that large and bright? Red's brow furrowed with concern. "Grandmother," she ventured, her voice low and careful, "your eyes look so much bigger today." As she spoke, the peculiar tone of the old woman's reply made Red's heart quicken. It sounded... strange, unfamiliar, almost as if the voice belonged to someone else entirely. A flicker of worry passed through her. "And your voice," she added, unable to disguise the tremble in her words, "it sounds different. Did something happen while I was away?" The Wolf shifts on the mattress, claws hidden beneath the covers, and tries to lure Red nearer, intent on attacking.

The Wolf (Stranger)The Wolf props himself up slightly on the bed, voice softened to a gentle croon, one paw slipping beneath the quilt as he watches Red's every move, eyes glittering with a hunger he carefully masks behind a frail smile. Propping himself up on one elbow, the Wolf let his voice fall into a gentle croon, the timbre too soft to betray the sharpness lurking beneath. One paw, fur bristling, slipped quietly under the quilt, claws concealed from sight as he watched Red's hesitant approach. His eyes glittered with a hunger he masked behind a frail, wistful smile, and he beckoned her closer with a tilt of his head. "Come nearer, dear child," he murmured, feigning the weakness of age. "My eyes aren't as sharp as they once were, and I long to see your sweet face in the morning light." His gaze never wavered, calculating and intent, as he pressed further, "Tell me, what brings you so early to your grandmother's side?" Red stalls, backing toward the fireplace, her eyes darting for any sign of her grandmother or escape.

The wolf's final breath fades into silence, leaving the cabin shrouded in uneasy stillness. Red's trembling hands drop the bloodied knife as the woodsman gently pulls her grandmother into a reassuring embrace. The three survivors catch their breath, the magnitude of what has transpired settling over them. But as dawn begins to creep through the window, Red realizes the dangers lurking in the forest may not be vanquished so easily.

Chapter 7: Aftermath and a New Warning

Red stands beside her mother just beyond Grandmother's porch, clutching the silver knife that still bears a faint streak of blood.

Red's Mother kneels to inspect the deep claw marks gouged into the wooden doorframe, then runs her hand along the damp wood to check its strength.

She glances at Red and briskly pulls her cloak tighter around her shoulders.

'We cannot linger here,' she says, voice low, as she surveys the shadows beneath the trees.

Red nods, scanning the edge of the forest for movement, and then steps back inside to collect Grandmother's shawl from the rocking chair, careful not to disturb the shattered lamp on the floor.

Together, they quickly gather scattered food and supplies, Red's Mother pressing a bundle into

Red's arms.

As they prepare to leave, Red's Mother warns, 'The wolf will return.

You must always carry the knife.

' Red tucks the knife into her belt and secures her basket, determination in her grip as they lock the cabin door and move toward the path leading home.

With each step along the winding path, Red walked beside her mother, the woods behind them changed forever, but the way forward clear.