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Chapter 5: Red Arrives and Senses Danger

Red paused at the threshold, knocking firmly but hesitantly on the swollen door.

The cottage smelled of lavender and earth, but there was a faint, unfamiliar musk in the air.

Red called out, her voice wavering, 'Grandmother, it's me—I've brought your broth.

Red hesitates at the doorway, clutching the steaming bowl tightly. Her eyes dart around the dimly lit cottage, searching for any sign of movement, her heart thudding louder with each moment of silence. Red hesitated at the threshold of her grandmother's cottage, shifting the basket on her arm so the steam from the covered bowl wouldn't fog her view. The old door creaked beneath her tentative knock. "Grandmother?" she called softly, her voice trembling with both hope and worry. "It's me—Red." She edged inside, careful not to spill a drop of the broth she'd carried all the way through the woods, just as her grandmother had asked. ' From inside, a weak reply echoed, oddly muffled: 'Come in, child.

Grandmother shifts in bed, her voice trembling as she tries to sit up, a thin hand reaching toward the dimly lit doorway. The grandmother lifted her head from the pillow, her movements slow and delicate. She squinted toward the doorway, her eyes clouded by years and recent illness. "Is that you, dear?" she called softly, her voice trembling with both hope and uncertainty. A gentle smile touched her lips as she reached out a frail hand, longing for the comfort of a familiar face. "My eyes aren't what they used to be," she admitted, her words edged with both apology and trust. "Please, come closer so I can see you better." ' Red gripped the basket tighter, stepping inside and glancing around.

Her eyes settled on the figure in bed, swaddled in blankets.

Grandmother's face was shadowed, her eyes glinting strangely as she beckoned Red closer.

Red set the basket down, watching Grandmother's hands tremble as she reached for the bowl.

Red moved forward, her motivation to care for her grandmother driving her actions, but she hesitated, sensing something amiss in Grandmother's voice and movements.

Grandmother, eager to alleviate her weakness, urged Red to sit nearby and pass the food, her frail fingers clutching the spoon.

Grandmother's voice trembles as she beckons Red to her side, her frail fingers trembling around the handle of the spoon, eyes searching Red's face for comfort and reassurance. Grandmother's voice, thin and wavering, carried across the small room as she looked up from her bed, fingers trembling around the handle of her spoon. She tried to steady her hand, but the effort only made her grip falter. Her eyes, gentle and a little clouded with age, lingered on Red's face—searching, hopeful and quietly pleading. “Red, dear,” she said softly, “could you come a bit closer?” The admission cost her, but she pressed on, her resilience showing through her frailty. “My hands aren't as steady as they used to be, and I find it hard to hold the spoon.” She managed a faint smile, both apologetic and grateful, and nodded toward the steaming bowl beside her. “Would you help me with the soup?” The request hung in the air, gentle as a sigh, as she waited for the warmth of her granddaughter's presence to ease the weight of her weakness. Red moves her chair closer to Grandmother, gently taking the spoon from her trembling hand and offering a reassuring smile. Red scooted her chair closer, the legs scraping softly against the worn floorboards. She reached out, her small hands steady as she took the spoon from Grandmother's trembling grasp. Offering a gentle, reassuring smile, Red murmured that she would stay right by her side and help with whatever she needed—just a word, and Red would be there. Grandmother shakily reaches out, her eyes glistening with gratitude as Red gently steadies the bowl and prepares another spoonful. Grandmother's hand trembled as she reached out, her fingers curling weakly in the air until Red gently steadied the bowl. She gazed up at her granddaughter, eyes shining with gratitude. “Thank you, my sweet,” she murmured, her voice thin but full of warmth. “It comforts me so much to feel you near, even as these old fingers struggle.” Despite her frailty, she managed a resilient smile, drawing strength from Red's presence as another spoonful was carefully prepared. As Red poured the broth, she scanned her grandmother's features, noting a peculiar sharpness to the gaze and an odd stiffness in the way she accepted the meal.

The cottage, usually a haven, felt strangely silent and thick with unease, but Red pressed on, determined to fulfill her task.

Outside, the wind rattled the shutters, carrying with it the faint echo of a disturbance Red could not yet name. As unease settled deeper into her bones, the memory of her grandmother's familiar warmth seemed suddenly distant, almost unreachable. Meanwhile, beyond the threshold, unseen forces were already at work—shadows shifting, intentions darkening, and the cottage's fragile peace on the verge of shattering.

Chapter 4: Wolf Breaks Into Grandmother's House

The Wolf, driven by hunger and cunning, approaches Grandmother's cottage, his senses alert for signs of vulnerability.

Pausing at the door, he chooses not to mimic a pitiful whimper but instead adopts the persona of a weary traveler, appealing to Grandmother's compassion and sense of hospitality.

Grandmother, frail and trusting but wary due to her poor eyesight, calls out for the visitor to identify themselves.

The Wolf answers in a gentle, pleading tone, claiming to be cold and alone, seeking only a moment's warmth.

Grandmother, moved by sympathy and her innate kindness, hesitates at the door, torn between caution and the desire to help.

The Wolf patiently waits for her to let down her guard, planning to strike once he is welcomed inside.

The confrontation is set not by stealthy entry, but by the Wolf's manipulation of Grandmother's empathy, setting the stage for his next move.

With the grandmother safely out of sight and her cozy home now under his control, the wolf wastes no time slipping into her clothes, transforming his appearance with chilling precision. The cottage, once a haven, becomes a trap as he rehearses his deception, eager for the unsuspecting visitor he knows will soon arrive. Outside, the forest stirs with Red's approaching footsteps—a new target for the wolf's cunning, and the next phase of his sinister plan begins to unfold.

Chapter 2: The Wolf Stalks and Approaches Red

Red adjusted the wicker basket on her arm, careful not to jostle the jar of broth inside, as she stepped over a tangled root.

She paused, lost in thought, her mind swirling with uncertainty about her journey and the legends she'd heard.

The old key, rumored to hold secrets in the forest, lingered in her thoughts, making her question whether her path was truly straightforward.

As she examined a cluster of wild violets, she wondered if the stories about the key were more than fairy tales—perhaps clues she'd overlooked.

Suddenly, the underbrush rustled nearby;

a large grey wolf stepped into view, its fur bristling with dew, amber eyes fixed on Red.

The Wolf halted a few paces away, lowering its head in a mimicry of curiosity, and spoke in a low, smooth voice, 'Good day, little one.

Where are you bound to so early?

' Red gripped the basket tighter, hesitating, but remembered her mother's advice to be polite to strangers.

'I'm visiting my grandmother, sir, she lives in the cottage just past the birch grove.

' Distracted by her questions about the key, Red's uncertainty was palpable in her voice.

Red brushes a strand of hair behind her ear and glances over her shoulder, listening to the quiet rustle of leaves. Red brushed a stray strand of hair behind her ear, her gaze flickering over her shoulder as the quiet rustle of leaves whispered through the forest. She nodded, shifting her feet against the soft, leaf-littered path, uncertainty swirling beneath her brave façade. If only she felt

as sure as she pretended to be—each step forward seemed to echo with questions she couldn't quite answer. Maybe the trees remembered the way better than she ever could. What if, despite all her hope and determination, she was simply wandering in circles, waiting for something to change? Red draws in a steadying breath, glancing up at the shifting patterns of light above her, then takes a tentative step forward. Red drew in a steadying breath, her eyes tracing the shifting patterns of sunlight above as they danced through the canopy. She hesitated, feeling the damp softness of leaf litter beneath her shifting feet, the forest's hush pressing in close. Yet the longer she lingered, the more the stillness unnerved her, prickling at her skin. Standing here, on the uncertain edge of the path, felt somehow worse than venturing forward—even if she couldn't be sure where the winding trail would ultimately take her. With that unsettling thought nudging her onward, she took a tentative step into the dappled shadows, heart thudding with both fear and resolve. The Wolf inched closer, ears pricked and tail flicking, sniffing the air to catch the scent of the food.

It nodded, feigning interest, and asked, 'Is your grandmother expecting you?

' Red nodded, shifting her feet on the soft, leaf-littered path.

The Wolf circled slowly, calculating, its gaze never leaving Red's face.

Red leans forward, eyes narrowed in thought, turning the mysterious key over in their hand. Red leaned forward, her eyes narrowing in thought as she turned the mysterious key over and over in her hand. The metal caught the light, glinting with secrets she felt just beyond her grasp. Why did this old key keep turning up in all the stories around here? The question pressed at her, insistent and unshakable. Was there something she was missing—some secret it was hiding, waiting for someone brave, or perhaps foolish, enough to find it? Red's curiosity burned brighter, fueling a quiet determination as she studied the key, wondering what truth might lie behind its constant reappearance. Red paces slowly, frowning in thought, turning the key over and over in their hand. Red paced slowly along the worn wooden boards, her brow furrowed in thought. The cool metal of the key pressed into her palm as she turned it over and over, the way she often did with riddles she couldn't quite solve. Could it be, she wondered, that the key wasn't just a prop or some old trinket her grandmother kept for sentimental reasons? What if it actually opened something real—something important? The possibility flickered in her mind, sparking both excitement and a hint of dread. She glanced toward the shadowy edge of the forest, feeling the weight of responsibility settle on her shoulders. Red traces the intricate designs on the key, eyes narrowed in concentration. Red traced the intricate designs on the key, her fingertip following the looping patterns as her brow furrowed in concentration. Each swirl seemed to invite a question, and her heart fluttered with the familiar thrill of possibility. What if every legend about this key was a clue, she wondered, and she'd been overlooking the pattern all along? The thought tingled in her chest—a mixture of excitement and self-doubt—while the forest's shadows pressed close beyond her window, as if waiting for her to solve the mystery they guarded. Red kept her eyes on the path ahead, determined to move on, but the Wolf blocked her way, insisting, 'The forest is full of surprises.

Perhaps you'd like to pick some flowers for your dear grandmother?

' Red's curiosity sparked;

she glanced at the wildflowers, torn between caution and the chance to brighten her grandmother's day, and the lingering mystery of the key and its legends.

The Wolf stepped aside, gesturing with its muzzle toward a sunlit patch of blooms, already planning its next move as Red crouched to gather a handful.

The Wolf's patient watchfulness, Red's conflicted hesitation, and the hush of the forest set the tense rhythm of their encounter, with Red's inner questions about the key adding a new layer of intrigue to her journey.

As Red stood among the wildflowers, the wolf's presence lingered in her thoughts, casting subtle doubt over the path she had chosen. The forest seemed to hold its breath, and Red found herself hurrying along the winding trail toward her grandmother's cottage, the mysterious key clutched tightly in her hand. With each step, uncertainty grew, and soon Red would discover that the secrets she carried were not hers alone—her grandmother had sensed danger long before Red's arrival.

Chapter 1: Red Receives Grandmother's Warning

Red stands on the worn stone step, her mother handing her a folded cloth of warm bread and repeating firm warnings about the dangers lurking in the forest—stay on the path, speak to no one, ignore strange sounds.

Red promises to remember, but her dialogue reveals an immediate internal conflict: she is openly tempted by the idea of venturing off the path, voicing her curiosity and considering a quick peek into the woods.

Mother stands at the edge of the path, her hand gently resting on Red's shoulder as she locks eyes with her, her expression serious and protective. At the edge of the winding path, Mother placed a steadying hand on Red's shoulder, her grip gentle yet unyielding. Her eyes, sharp with worry and love, searched her daughter's face as she spoke, her voice low and unwavering. The forest loomed ahead, its shadows thick with secrets, and Mother pointed toward it, her tone brooking no argument. She reminded Red that the woods harbored dangers hidden from careless eyes, and insisted she remain on the path—always, no matter how tempting the undergrowth or intriguing a distant sound. Curiosity, she warned, was a luxury Red could ill afford here. Mother's gaze did not falter as she continued: strangers were never to be trusted, and any oddities—be they voices or noises—must be ignored without hesitation. "Promise me you'll remember these rules," she pressed softly, her concern wrapping around Red as tightly as her embrace once had. She weighs the risks—wondering if straying could endanger her grandmother—yet her desire for adventure is palpable.

As she steps toward the forest, Red is less resolved than in the original plot, expressing both her intent to help and her urge to explore, setting up a greater likelihood that she might stray early in her journey.

Red hesitates at the edge of the trail, clutching her basket tightly. Her eyes flicker between the familiar, safe path and the mysterious, twisting trail that disappears into the woods. Red lingered at the edge of the trail, fingers curled tightly around the woven handle of her basket. The safe, familiar path stretched ahead, promising a swift journey to Grandmother's cottage—just as she'd been told, just as she'd promised. Yet her gaze drifted to where the trail twisted into the woods, shrouded in shadow and possibility. She remembered her mother's warning, the solemn vow she'd spoken aloud that morning: she must not stray, for Grandmother depended on her to deliver the basket unharmed.

But something tugged at Red's heart, a curious ache that made her wonder what might be waiting beyond the trees. It felt as if her own feet were restless, eager to wander off the beaten track despite her promise. She hesitated, torn between the responsibility she carried and the tantalizing mystery of the forest's depths. Red hesitates at the edge of the path, glancing back before taking a tentative step toward the shadowed trail. Red hesitated at the edge of the path, her fingers tightening around the basket as the forest's shadowed trail beckoned her forward. She glanced back, remembering her mother's stern warning, the words still echoing in her ears. Yet curiosity tugged at her, insistent and warm. Maybe just a quick peek wouldn't hurt, she reasoned silently—after all, she'd still reach Grandmother soon enough. With a tentative breath and one last look over her shoulder, Red stepped off the familiar path, her heart fluttering between caution and the thrill of discovery. Red hesitates at the fork, clutching the basket tighter, her eyes darting between the inviting shadows of the forest and the familiar safety of the path. Red paused at the fork in the path, her fingers tightening around the handle of the basket as if the woven reeds could anchor her wavering resolve. The warning her mother had pressed into her ears that morning echoed in her mind, and she whispered a promise to remember it, though the words sounded thin against the hush of the forest. Yet as she took a tentative step forward, her gaze lingered on the dappled shadows beneath the ancient trees, a question tugging at her heart: What if the warning wasn't just a tale to scare children? If she strayed, could Grandmother be put in danger too? The thought weighed heavy, stirring both fear and determination, her curiosity battling with the responsibility she so desperately wanted to prove. Mother watches anxiously, perhaps sensing Red's wavering resolve, and double-checks the door behind her.

As the door clicks shut behind her, Red stands alone at the edge of the woods, the weight of her mother's warning pressing against her curiosity. The path ahead seems reassuring, yet the allure of a shortcut tugs at her thoughts, growing harder to resist with each hesitant step. Soon, a single decision will set her journey on an unexpected course, drawing her deeper into the forest than she ever intended.

Chapter 3: Red Makes a Fateful Detour

Red adjusted the wicker basket on her arm, glancing at the winding trail ahead.

She stopped to peer into the shadowed thicket, fingers brushing the rough bark of a nearby pine.

The Wolf emerged from behind a fallen log, ears pricked, nose twitching as he circled her with deliberate slowness.

He suggested a shortcut through the elderberry grove, painting it as safer, smoother, and quicker than the main path, and emphasized his familiarity with it, even claiming to know Red's Grandmother.

The Wolf brushes the undergrowth aside with his tail, his golden eyes glinting with a mix of reassurance and sly amusement, waiting to see if his companion will follow. The Wolf brushed the tangled undergrowth aside with a lazy sweep of his tail, his golden eyes glinting with a mixture of reassurance and sly amusement as he glanced back over his shoulder. He gestured toward the dense elderberry grove, his voice slipping easily into the hush of the shadowed path. Of course the shortcut was safer—quicker too, he assured, the brambles merely putting on a fierce show for

outsiders. He had run these trails since he was a pup, he murmured, and the main path, winding three times as far, offered only half the cover. Here, through the elderberries, they'd move unseen; no one with ill intentions dared these thorns. Unless, he added with a tilt of his head that feigned concern, his companion preferred to risk the open, exposed to whatever might be watching. Red hesitated, recalling her mother's warnings, but her internal conflict grew stronger as she considered the possibility of missing something important by always being cautious.

Red lingers at the edge of the forest, glancing back toward her mother, her fingers tightening around the basket as uncertainty flickers across her face. Red lingered at the edge of the forest, her fingers tightening around the worn handle of the basket. Her mother's voice echoed in her mind, firm and cautious—never stray from the path, never speak to strangers. She glanced back toward the cottage, searching for reassurance, but the uncertainty flickering across her face refused to settle. What if someone really needed help out here? What if by being so careful, she missed something important—something only she could do? The thought pressed against her heart, heavy with possibility and worry, as she took a tentative step forward, torn between obedience and the urge to prove she was responsible enough to make her own choices. Mother gently tucks a strand of hair behind Red's ear, her eyes searching Red's face for understanding and lingering concern. Red hesitated, her fingers curling around the handle of the basket as memories of her mother's warning pressed close. Her mother reached out, gently tucking a stray strand of hair behind Red's ear. Her gaze lingered on Red's face, searching for the flicker of understanding she needed to see. "My darling," she murmured, voice soft but edged with worry, "I know your heart is kind, but the world beyond this path is not always safe." She paused, her thumb tracing Red's cheek as if trying to anchor her daughter to the moment. "Promise me you'll remember why I worry," she said quietly, her sternness tempered by love and fear, "and trust that sometimes caution is the greatest kindness you can give yourself." Through imagined exchanges with her Mother, Red's yearning to prove her maturity and independence came to the fore, matched by her desire to help others and bring joy to her Grandmother.

The Wolf, sensing her indecision, reassured her further, offering to help her pick flowers for her Grandmother along the shortcut.

The Wolf tilts his head, voice soft and honeyed, nose brushing aside a leafy branch to reveal a narrow trail, his amber eyes fixed warmly on Red, inviting trust. The Wolf tilted his broad head, the golden gleam of his eyes softening as he brushed aside a leafy branch with an absent-minded grace. His voice, low and syrupy, slid into the hush of the forest, coaxing trust. "You look weary already, little one," he murmured, watching Red's uncertain footsteps. "The path you know is long and winding, tangled with brambles and shadows." He gestured subtly with his nose, revealing a slender trail hidden beneath the gentle canopy. "But if you take this way—just here—it's safer, smoother. You'll reach your dear Grandmother's cottage before the sun even dips low." His gaze held hers, warm and inviting, the barest flicker of something unreadable beneath. "I know these woods as well as my own fur," he promised, the words as smooth as the path he offered, "You have my word, it's the best way." Red peers down the suggested shortcut, her basket clutched to her chest, uncertainty flickering across her face. Red hesitated at the edge of the tangled shortcut, her grip tightening around the basket as she peered into the shadowy undergrowth. The Wolf watched her keenly, his amber eyes glinting as he nudged a branch aside with his snout, revealing a barely-there trail winding deeper into the woods. Uncertainty flickered across Red's face. She glanced at the unfamiliar path, then back at the Wolf, her voice soft but earnest. "Oh, I didn't know there was another path—are you sure it leads to Grandmother's cottage?" The Wolf lowers his head,

his eyes warm and earnest, gesturing invitingly toward the dappled shortcut with a gentle sweep of his tail. The Wolf lowered his head, adopting a look of gentle sincerity, his golden eyes warm and inviting as he swept his tail in a graceful arc, gesturing toward the sun-dappled shortcut that wound deeper into the woods. He nudged a low-hanging branch aside with his snout, watching her closely, and let his voice drop to a soft, coaxing tone. He assured her that he knew these woods intimately, traversing them every day, and remarked, almost wistfully, that he often saw her Grandmother tending roses just beyond that very bend. Why, he mused with a hint of longing, he could nearly catch the scent of her baking wafting through the trees even now. Red steps closer to the shadowed path, peering between the trees with a mixture of curiosity and uncertainty, her basket held tight against her side. Red paused at the fork in the path, her fingers brushing the edge of her basket as she considered the options ahead. The shortcut was unfamiliar, shadowed by tangled branches, but the usual trail seemed longer than ever. She wondered aloud, voice tinged with hope, “If I take this way, Grandmother would be so pleased to see me sooner.” Her gaze lingered on the quiet woods, searching for hidden dangers as she reasoned with herself that the forest felt safer today—almost inviting. The thought of making Grandmother proud, of finally proving herself responsible, tugged at her heart and nudged her feet toward the silent, beckoning path. The Wolf tilts his head encouragingly, gesturing with his snout to the lush, flower-strewn shortcut, his eyes warm and inviting. The Wolf tilted his head with practiced encouragement, amber eyes radiating warmth as he gestured toward the lush, flower-strewn shortcut. Carefully nudging a low-hanging branch aside with his snout, he kept his gaze fixed upon her, voice dropping to a gentle, coaxing murmur. He suggested that her Grandmother would surely be delighted to see her earlier than expected—and, after all, how pleased the old woman would be if her granddaughter arrived bearing a bouquet of fresh flowers gathered from the peaceful path he pointed out. Red glances uncertainly down the shortcut, clutching her basket a little tighter as she steps closer to the edge of the path. Red hesitated at the edge of the tangled path, her fingers already curling around the ribbon-bound basket. She glanced over her shoulder, uncertainty flickering in her wide eyes. Of course she wanted to gather the prettiest bouquet for Grandmother—nothing less would do. But as she studied the shadowy trail that wound deeper into the forest, doubt crept in. If this shortcut was truly as safe as the woodcutter claimed, perhaps she could make her delivery and still surprise Grandmother with a handful of wildflowers, vibrant as promises. The Wolf steps forward, gently brushing aside a cluster of wildflowers, his eyes watchful as he gestures invitingly down the hidden trail. With a languid grace, the Wolf stepped forward, his powerful frame casting a long shadow over the tangled wildflowers at his feet. He brushed a cluster of blooms aside with the careless sweep of his snout, every movement calculated to seem harmless, almost gentle. His amber eyes never left her—sharp, patient, endlessly watchful—while a crooked smile played on his muzzle. Nudging a low-hanging branch, he gestured down the narrow, hidden trail winding deeper into the shade.

“Of course, little one,” he murmured, voice smooth as velvet and just as soft. “Nothing stirs here but the breeze.” He let the words settle between them, coaxing, inviting, and then continued with feigned warmth: “Why not let me show you which blooms your Grandmother loves best?”

The Wolf’s offer hung in the air, sweet and enticing, masking the hunger glinting beneath his gentle facade as he waited for her to step closer. Red steps hesitantly toward the shortcut, glancing back at the main path before letting her basket sway at her side. Red hesitated at the edge of the shortcut, her boots pressing uncertainly into the leaf-mulched earth. The main path lay behind her, safe and familiar as her mother’s gentle warnings echoed in her mind. But the Wolf’s amber eyes watched her with a strange intensity, and something about his low, inviting tone made her curiosity stir. Letting her basket sway at her side, she drew in a breath and tried to steady her

nerves. “All right,” she conceded, glancing once more at the safer route, “I suppose it couldn’t hurt to pick some flowers—if you’ll show me where to find the nicest ones.” Red, still torn but swayed by the Wolf’s words and her own wish to be seen as grown-up, agreed to follow him through the elderberry grove, justifying her choice as a way to make her Grandmother happy and show her own resourcefulness.

Red hesitates at the edge of the path, fingers brushing the rough bark of a tree, torn between the thrill of independence and the echo of her mother’s warnings. Red paused at the edge of the tangled path, her basket swinging gently from her arm. If she took the shortcut, she’d be home so much faster—maybe then Mama and Gran would finally stop seeing her as just a child. The thought warmed her, chasing away the chill that clung to the forest’s shadowy fringe. But Mama’s warnings echoed in her mind, soft but insistent: the woods are dangerous, full of wolves and worse. Was it really as risky as Mama claimed? Or was it just that Mama couldn’t bear the idea of her growing up, stepping beyond the safety of their little cottage? Red bit her lip, glancing between the well-worn road and the narrow path cutting through the trees, her heart fluttering with both doubt and determination. Mother’s voice echoes in Red’s memory, her words laced with both tenderness and warning as Red hesitates at the tangled entrance to the shortcut. Red hovered at the tangled mouth of the shortcut, uncertainty tightening her grip around the basket’s handle. In the hush beneath the thorny canopy, her mother’s voice drifted out of memory, carrying both the gentleness Red craved and the steel she’d grown used to. Being brave doesn’t mean ignoring danger, her mother had said, arms folded and eyes sharp with worry. It means knowing when to listen to those who care about you. The echo of that warning pressed down on Red’s hesitation, blending the warmth of love with the cold edge of caution. Red hesitates at the edge of the shortcut, glancing back over her shoulder as if weighing her mother’s words against her own longing for independence. Red paused at the tangled edge of the shortcut, her fingers brushing nervously against the prickly thorns. She glanced back over her shoulder, remembering her mother’s warning—the gentle but unyielding insistence that she stick to the safe, winding path. Yet the forest seemed to beckon, whispering promises of adventure and a chance to prove herself. If she always did exactly as she was told, how would she ever show she could take care of herself? The question tugged at her, both fierce and fragile, as she stood wavering between obedience and a yearning for independence. Mother gently places her hand on Red’s shoulder, her gaze steady and full of concern. Red hesitated at the edge of the shortcut, eyes fixed on the tangled thorns and the darkness beyond. Her mother reached out, placing a gentle but firm hand on Red’s shoulder. The touch was steady, meant to anchor her, and when she spoke, her voice carried both warmth and a note of warning. “You prove your strength not by rushing headlong into danger, Red,” she said, the concern in her gaze unmistakable, “but by showing wisdom in the choices you make.” Her words lingered in the air, a reminder shaped by years of keeping her family safe from the forest’s hidden threats. The Wolf silently padded ahead, his tail low and movements calculated, waiting to see if she would indeed follow.

As Red hesitated at the edge of the path, her heart pounded with a mix of excitement and uncertainty. The woods ahead seemed darker, the air taut with possibility and risk. With a final glance back toward the safer, well-worn route, she stepped into the shadows, letting curiosity guide her steps. Little did she know that each stride brought her closer not only to her grandmother’s cottage, but to a dangerous encounter that would test her courage in ways she could never have imagined.

Chapter 6: Red Confronts the Wolf

Red steps onto the creaking porch, her boots scraping against gritty stone as she knocks on the warped wooden door.

A muffled voice calls from inside—hoarse, unfamiliar, but insisting it is her grandmother.

The WolfThe wolf coughs, voice raspy and faltering, then clears its throat awkwardly, attempting to sound gentle yet urgent. Shadows flicker behind the door as the wolf shifts, trying to position itself where it cannot be easily seen. A raspy voice drifted from the shadowed bed, the tone tremulous yet oddly inviting. “Ah, my dear, is that you?” the figure crooned, cloaked in the fragile cadence of age. The wolf, swaddled in the old woman’s shawl, beckoned with a trembling paw, his cunning eyes barely visible beneath the bonnet. “Come closer, child, my voice is not what it used to be,” he coaxed, letting weakness seep into every syllable. “Age has made me weak—so weak.” His breath rattled out in a sigh, and he continued, “You know how your poor grandmother struggles to speak these days.” He patted the edge of the bed, letting his voice quaver as he pleaded, “Step inside, won’t you? I need to see your sweet face.” The wolf shivered for effect, clutching the blankets tighter. “Come just a bit nearer, so I can hold your hand. It’s so cold in here, and I am all alone.” The invitation hung in the air, gentle as a snare, as he watched her hesitate on the threshold. Red hesitates, pushing open the door into the dim cottage where the hearth glows weakly and shadows cluster in the corners.

The Wolf, disguised beneath Grandmother’s shawl, sits propped in the bed, narrow eyes fixed on Red.

Red sets her basket down, nose wrinkling at the sharp, musky smell in the room, and inches closer, studying the figure’s oddly large hands clutching the quilt.

She asks, voice trembling, about the size of ‘Grandmother’s’ eyes and teeth.

Red hesitates at the foot of the bed, clutching her basket tightly, her gaze flickering nervously to the shadowed contours of ‘Grandmother’s’ face. Red hesitated just inside the dim, musky room, her fingers curled anxiously around the edge of her red cloak. She took a step closer to the bed, heart thumping as she studied her grandmother’s face—so familiar, yet somehow strange tonight. The old woman’s eyes, gleaming in the half-light, seemed impossibly large, watching her with an intensity that made Red swallow. Confusion crept into her voice as she asked, “Grandmother, why... why are your eyes so big? They weren’t like that before, were they?” The question slipped out, soft but urgent, her curiosity tangled with a sudden, prickling unease. Red clutches her basket tighter, her voice wavering as she slowly inches backward, her wide eyes fixed on the unnerving smile before her. Red leaned in, her brow furrowing as she studied her grandmother’s face—so familiar, yet, in this strange lamplight, oddly changed. A shiver of uncertainty ran through her, but she steeled herself, determined not to let her nerves show. “And your teeth...” she murmured, her voice trembling between curiosity and concern. “They’re so sharp, Grandmother—have they always been like that?” The Wolf leans forward, lips curling, and finally lunges, shedding the shawl.

Red stumbles backward, knocking over a stool as she scrambles for the door, the Wolf’s claws scraping across the floorboards.

The confrontation forces Red to recognize the Wolf’s true nature and triggers her desperate escape.

Outside, the chaos inside the cottage spills into the stillness of the woods, echoing through the trees. As Red's frantic struggle rattles the tiny home, help draws near—unaware of the danger within. In the growing twilight, footsteps approach, and the fate of all inside the cottage hangs in the balance.

Chapter 7: The Huntsman Intervenes

Red, clutching her wicker basket, stands frozen at the foot of Grandmother's bed as the Wolf, disguised in Grandmother's nightgown, bares his teeth, revealing his true identity.

Red takes a hesitant step closer, her grip tightening on the basket, eyes darting between the Wolf's face and the shadows of the room. Red hesitated at the threshold, clutching her basket tighter as she peered into the dim room. Her grandmother lay in bed, half-shadowed, and something about her seemed unfamiliar—off, somehow. Red's voice trembled with uncertainty as she stepped closer, her curiosity mingling with concern. "Grandmother? Is that really you?" she asked, eyes searching the old woman's face. The words tumbled out before she could stop them. "Your voice sounds so... rough, and your eyes—they look much bigger than I remember." Doubt flickered across her features, but she forced herself to take another step, determined to prove her courage even as unease curled in her chest. The Wolf tilts his head, the nightcap slipping slightly, revealing a glint of yellowed fang beneath his lips. The Wolf tilted his head, the faded nightcap slipping askew and momentarily exposing a glint of yellowed fang at the edge of his lips. His gaze, sharp and unblinking, fixed on Red as she lingered uncertain at the foot of the bed, her wicker basket clutched tight to her chest. "Ah, my dear," he murmured, voice silken and low, "the better to see you with—these old eyes have grown keen in the twilight of age." He let the words drift between them, each syllable calculated, his expression a practiced mask of frailty that did nothing to soften the hunger flickering in his stare. Red takes a hesitant step closer, her grip tightening on the basket as she peers uncertainly at the figure in the bed. Red hesitated at the foot of the bed, her fingers whitening around the handle of her wicker basket. The shape beneath the patchwork quilt was strange—so much taller and sharper than she remembered. With a cautious step forward, she peered through the dim light at the figure wearing Grandmother's cap. Her voice wavered as curiosity and unease mingled inside her: "Grandmother, what big ears you have," she murmured, eyes drawn to the pointed shapes rising so tall beneath the faded fabric. The Wolf tilts his head, his ears twitching, as his gaze darkens, never leaving Red. The Wolf tilted his head, ears flicking as if attuned to every subtle sound in the shadowed room. His gaze, dark and unblinking, never strayed from Red, who stood frozen at the foot of the bed, wicker basket trembling in her grasp. With a slow, patient smile curling around his words, he assured her, "The better to hear you with, child; the woods have made me listen for every whisper and footstep." Red shrinks back a step, clutching her basket tighter as her eyes widen with dawning fear. Red shrank back a step, her knuckles whitening around the handle of her wicker basket. The flickering candlelight danced over Grandmother's face—or what should have been Grandmother's face—illuminating a grin that stretched too wide, revealing teeth far too large and gleaming to belong to anyone she loved. Fear crept into her voice as her eyes widened in realization. "But Grandmother," she managed, her words trembling, "what big teeth you have—so sharp and shining in the candlelight!" The Wolf grins wide, lunging from the bed as Red stumbles back in horror, her basket tumbling to the floor. The Wolf's grin stretched impossibly wide, sharp teeth gleaming in the dim light as he suddenly

lunged from the bed. Red staggered backward in terror, her wicker basket slipping from her grasp and clattering to the floor. Advancing with predatory patience, the Wolf's voice curled into a mockery of affection, savoring her fear as he declared, "The better to eat you with, my dear!" The Wolf taunts Red, relishing her fear and asserting his dominance, but Red finds a spark of defiance and courage, insisting she will fight back.

The Wolf lunges forward, claws raking the quilt as he snaps his jaws inches from Red's face, his eyes gleaming with hunger and malice. The Wolf lunged, his powerful body surging across the bed as his claws raked savagely at the quilt, tearing through the fabric with a predator's practiced ease. His jaws snapped shut, teeth gleaming dangerously close to Red's terrified face. Hunger and malice burned in his eyes as he growled, his voice a low, mocking purr. "You thought you could outsmart me, little Red? Now there's nowhere left to run." Red stumbles backward, clutching the edge of the quilt, her eyes wide with terror as the Wolf's teeth flash inches from her face. Red stumbled backward, her trembling fingers clutching the edge of the quilt as if it were a lifeline. The Wolf's teeth flashed mere inches from her face, his claws raking the fabric with a menacing scrape. Terror widened her eyes, but even as she shrank away, her voice—thin and pleading—escaped in a desperate rush. "Please, stay back!" she managed, her breath quick and shallow. "I—I didn't mean to anger you!" The words tumbled from her lips, caught between the instinct to flee and the stubborn hope that compassion might tame the beast before her. The Wolf bares his teeth in a savage grin and lunges closer, his hot breath brushing Red's cheek as she shrinks back against the headboard. The Wolf bared his teeth in a savage grin, lunging forward so close that his hot, fetid breath brushed Red's cheek. She shrank back against the headboard, the quilt bunching beneath her trembling fingers, but the Wolf only drew nearer, his claws scraping hungrily across the faded patchwork. His yellow eyes gleamed with cruel delight as he snapped at her, voice thick with long-held hunger. "Too late for apologies, girl—I've been hungry far too long!" Red stumbles backward, clutching the edge of the bed, her eyes wide with terror as the Wolf's teeth gleam inches from her face. Red stumbled backward, her trembling fingers gripping the edge of the bed as her heart thundered in her chest. The Wolf's jagged teeth flashed, gleaming just inches from her face, and his hot, foul breath washed over her. Terror rooted her to the spot, but instinct forced a desperate cry from her lips—a plea ripped raw by fear. "No—someone help!" The words escaped her before she could think, echoing in the small, shadowy room as the Wolf's claws scraped menacingly across the quilt, closing the distance between them. The Wolf bares his teeth, saliva dripping as he lunges forward, casting a monstrous shadow over Red. Saliva gleamed on the Wolf's fangs as he lunged, jaws parting in a wicked grin. His massive shadow swallowed Red where she cowered, the quilt bunching beneath her trembling hands. Claws raked across the fabric, a low growl curling from his throat. "No one will hear your cries, Red—you're mine now," he snarled, voice thick with predatory triumph, the words wrapping around her like a trap tightening in the dark. Red scrambles backward, her heart pounding as she clutches the quilt, eyes wide with terror as the Wolf's jaws snap inches from her face. Red scrambled backward, her heart pounding so loud it nearly drowned out the snarling beast before her. She clutched the quilt to her chest, eyes stretched wide with terror as the Wolf's jaws snapped inches from her face, his claws raking the worn fabric. "No—get away from me!" she cried, her voice trembling with fear but threaded through with stubborn resolve, desperate to force distance between herself and the monstrous shadow looming over her. The Wolf bares his teeth, lunging closer as Red scrambles backwards, clutching the quilt in terror. The Wolf bared his teeth, a cruel glint gleaming in his eyes as he lunged, claws scraping across the quilt in a shower of threads. Red scrambled backwards, trembling and clutching at the fabric with desperate fingers, but the Wolf only pressed closer, his

jaws inches from her face. “Scream all you want—I’ll savor every moment!” he hissed, his voice rough and gloating, the promise of violence curling in the air between them. Red grabs a heavy candlestick from the bedside table and swings it desperately at the Wolf’s snout. Red’s fingers closed around the heavy candlestick on the bedside table, her heart thudding in her chest as the Wolf lunged—claws tearing at the quilt, jaws snapping inches from her face. With a desperate cry, she swung the candlestick at his snout, her voice trembling but fierce as she declared, “I won’t let you hurt me!” The words spilled out, wavering between fear and defiance, as she braced herself for what might come next, refusing to surrender to terror. The Wolf bares his teeth, advancing with a guttural growl as his shadow looms over Red. The Wolf advanced, his lips curling back to reveal rows of sharp, glistening teeth. A guttural growl rumbled from his throat, thickening the air with menace as his shadow stretched over Red, swallowing her trembling form. Claws raked across the patched quilt, tearing threads loose as he lunged, his eyes gleaming with cruel amusement. “Brave words for trembling prey—let’s see how long your courage lasts,” he hissed, the words slithering from his mouth as he snapped at Red, savoring the fear that flickered in her wide, helpless eyes. Red grabs a corner of the quilt and swings it desperately at the Wolf’s snapping jaws, her eyes wide with fear and determination. Red snatched a corner of the quilt and swung it desperately at the Wolf’s snapping jaws, her small hands trembling but resolute. The coarse fabric brushed against his claws, buying her a precious moment as she edged backward, her eyes wide with both terror and determination. She could feel her heartbeat thundering in her ears, fear mingling with a fierce resolve that burned in her chest. The Wolf lunged again, teeth gleaming, and Red met his gaze, her voice raw and unwavering. He would not win—she would fight with everything she had. The Wolf bares his fangs, lunging closer as his shadow looms over Red, claws poised to strike. The Wolf’s lips curled back, revealing a flash of sharp, glistening fangs as he lunged from the shadowed bed, his massive form blotting out the meager light. Claws carved furrows in the quilt, mere inches from Red’s retreating form, and his hot breath rasped across her cheek. A low, guttural chuckle rumbled from his chest as he snapped at her, savoring the scent of her panic. “Fight all you want—your fear only makes the hunt sweeter,” he purred, his eyes alight with predatory delight, every word calculated to deepen her terror. As the Wolf closes in, the cottage door bursts open—pine-scented air and the sharp tang of gunpowder fill the room as the Huntsman storms in, axe raised.

The Wolf, cornered, refuses to surrender quietly, trading threats with the Huntsman.

Red, torn between her compassion and fear, pleads for mercy on the Wolf’s behalf, questioning the morality of violence even as her safety is at stake.

The Wolf bares his teeth, hackles raised, eyes darting between the window and the Huntsman’s gleaming axe, muscles tensed for another desperate leap. The Wolf’s lips curled back, revealing a flash of sharp teeth as his hackles bristled, every muscle coiled and ready. His yellow eyes flicked anxiously between the open window—a slim chance at freedom—and the Huntsman’s axe, its blade catching the dim light with a lethal promise. He gathered himself for another desperate leap, a low snarl rumbling from his throat. “Stay back!” he warned, voice ragged with fear and defiance. “I won’t go quietly into your trap!” The Huntsman steps forward, axe raised and eyes locked on the Wolf, cutting off any path to the window. “You’ve caused enough harm, Wolf—you’re not slipping through my fingers this time.” —The Huntsman

The Wolf bares his teeth, muscles coiled, eyes darting between the window and the Huntsman’s poised weapon. The Wolf bared his teeth in a wicked snarl, muscles tensed and ready to spring. His yellow eyes flicked from the gaping window to the gleam of the Huntsman’s raised axe. “You

think your axe scares me, Huntsman?" he growled, voice coiling with contempt as he crouched, preparing to leap. "I'll tear my way out if I must!" The threat hung in the air, thick as the musk of fear and blood, even as the Huntsman's blade swung down, blocking the beast's desperate path to freedom. The Huntsman tightens his grip on the axe, planting his boots between the Wolf and the window, muscles tensed for the next move. "You won't lay another paw on anyone—stand down, or I'll make sure you regret every step you've taken." —The Huntsman

The Wolf bares his teeth, crouching low before lunging toward the window, claws scraping desperately against the sill. A low, guttural snarl rumbled from the Wolf's throat as he bared his sharp teeth, his body coiling like a spring. In a blur of gray fur and sinew, he crouched and lunged toward the open window, claws scraping desperately against the sill. Glancing back with a glint of mocking challenge in his eyes, he flashed a wicked grin and taunted, "You'll have to catch me first!" But before he could vault to freedom, the Huntsman's axe swung down, blocking his escape and splintering the wood just inches from his snout. The Huntsman lunges forward, axe raised, cutting off the Wolf's path to the window. "I've hunted beasts fiercer than you, Wolf—this ends now!" —The Huntsman

The Huntsman, unwavering in his duty, insists on protecting Red at any cost, even if it means bearing her resentment.

Red clings to the chair, her voice trembling as she glances desperately between the Huntsman and the Wolf, her body half-turned as if ready to bolt, eyes wide with terror. Red darted forward, her heart pounding, and threw herself protectively in front of him. "Please—don't hurt him!" she cried, her voice trembling with both fear and determination. Her hands shook as she spread them wide, as if her small frame could shield him from harm. "He... he hasn't done anything yet!" she insisted, desperation cracking her voice. Looking up with pleading eyes, she pressed on, "Just let us go, both of us!" The words tumbled out in a rush, her breath coming quick and shallow, but she held her ground, refusing to let fear silence her. The Huntsman steps between Red and the Wolf, axe raised and eyes locked on the trembling beast. "Stay back, Red—he's fooled you once, he won't get the chance again." —The Huntsman

The Wolf bares his fangs, bracing himself low against the wall, eyes darting between Red and the advancing Huntsman. The Wolf lowered himself against the rough timbered wall, muscles tense, his fangs bared in a warning flash. His yellow eyes flicked between Red, who scrambled desperately behind a battered chair, and the Huntsman, whose boots scraped ever closer across the floorboards. A thin, mocking smile curled beneath the Wolf's snarl as he measured his foes. "You think you know what I am, Huntsman," he growled, voice silky and deadly, "but you forget—even cornered, a wolf still has teeth." Red's voice trembles as she steps between the Huntsman and the Wolf, her gaze flicking desperately from one to the other, hands raised in a futile barrier. Red stumbled backward, her fingers scraping painfully against the rough edge of a wooden chair as she tried to shield her grandmother with her slight frame. Her breath came in quick, shallow bursts, but still she forced herself to stand between the Huntsman and the trembling Wolf. With her hands raised in a desperate, futile gesture, she glanced from one face to the other—fear warring with resolve in her wide eyes. Her voice trembled, barely more than a whisper, yet edged with a fierceness she hardly recognized in herself as she asked, "If you kill him, what does that make you?" The Huntsman steps between Red and the Wolf, axe raised, eyes never leaving the trembling creature in the shadows. "It makes me the one who chose to save you, no matter what it costs." —The Huntsman

The Wolf bares his fangs, hackles raised, inching sideways along the wall as his eyes dart between Red and the Huntsman, searching for any chance to escape—or strike. The Wolf bared his fangs, hackles bristling as he edged sideways along the cabin wall. His eyes, sharp and restless, flicked between Red and the Huntsman, calculating every possible escape—or ambush. Red stumbled back, her trembling hands scraping against the rough wood of a chair as she tried to shield herself. The Wolf's voice slithered through the tense air, low and dangerous, each word a threat wrapped in velvet. "And if you force my hand, girl," he warned, the gleam of his teeth promising violence, "you'll see just how sharp those teeth can be." Red stands trembling between them, her voice quivering but her eyes fierce as she blocks the Huntsman's path, desperation forcing courage. Red stumbled backward, the backs of her hands scraping painfully against the jagged edge of the wooden chair. Her breath came in quick, shallow bursts as she planted herself squarely between the Huntsman and the frail figure slumped behind her. She could feel every tremor in her body, but her eyes blazed with a fierce, desperate resolve. "Then maybe I'd rather face his teeth than watch you become a monster, too," she forced out, her voice trembling but unwavering. The words left her lips before fear could silence them, fueled by a tangled knot of courage and dread. The Huntsman tightens his grip on his axe, stepping between Red and the Wolf, his posture rigid and unwavering as he watches the Wolf's every twitch. "If protecting you means bearing your hatred, Red, I'll take it—because monsters are made by what they do, not what they're called." —The Huntsman

The Wolf, sensing Red's inner conflict, attempts to manipulate her further, warning that the woods and their mysteries linger beyond this moment.

The Wolf's gaze lingers on Red, a mix of longing and remorse flickering in his eyes as he backs away, the Huntsman stepping between them, axe raised, protective and unyielding. The Wolf's gaze lingered on Red, a flicker of longing and something like regret softening his predatory stare as he slowly backed away. The Huntsman stepped between them, axe raised—a wall of muscle and resolve that would not yield. Still, the Wolf's eyes, cunning and bright, darted a final look at Red. His lips curled with sly promise as he murmured, almost wistful, "You think you've won, Huntsman, but the story isn't finished—not while her heart still beats with curiosity." His voice slipped into the shadows, meant for Red alone, as he added, "Remember: the woods whisper more than warnings." Then, with a flash of teeth and a knowing glance, he melted into the gloom, leaving the echo of his words to coil around Red's thoughts like a lingering mist. Red steps back, shrouded in the Huntsman's protective shadow, her hand trembling at her cloak. Red shrank back, her trembling fingers clutching at the edge of her crimson cloak as she pressed herself closer to the comforting presence of the Huntsman. The Wolf's eyes flashed, catching hers for a fleeting moment—sharp, knowing, almost mournful. Red held his gaze, feeling an uneasy knot of fear and defiance twist inside her chest. Even as the Huntsman stepped forward and drove the Wolf into retreat, Red's thoughts lingered, haunted by the possibility that whatever secrets the Wolf carried would shadow her long after the hush returned to the woods. The HuntsmanMy hand rests reassuringly on Red's shoulder as I meet the Wolf's eyes, cutting off his final, lingering glance with a barrier of resolve. "I step between Red and the Wolf, voice low but unwavering—'Your haunt ends here; she walks free, and your shadows die with the day.'" —The Huntsman

Ultimately, the Huntsman physically interposes himself between Red and the Wolf, ensuring Red's safety as he binds the Wolf.

Red's voice quivers as she hugs herself tightly, her wide eyes fixed on the subdued Wolf, searching the Huntsman's face for comfort and assurance. Red's fingers trembled as she brushed dirt from

her torn cloak, her breath coming in shallow bursts. The silence pressed in around her, thick and unnatural, punctuated only by the frantic thud of her heart. She tried to listen for any sign—any snarl or snapping twig—but the forest only echoed with her uncertainty. Swallowing hard, she whispered into the hush, “Is it... is it really over?” Even now, the memory of the creature’s guttural growl lingered in her mind, haunting the edges of her thoughts and refusing to fade. The Huntsman binds the Wolf securely, casting a firm, protective glance at Red before dragging the subdued creature away from the center of the room. “It’s over, Red—you’re safe now; the Wolf won’t harm you again, I promise.” —The Huntsman

The Wolf bares its teeth in a twisted grin, even as the iron binds bite into its fur. The Wolf’s twisted grin gleamed in the dim light, sharp teeth exposed beneath lips curled with mockery. Iron binds bit into his fur, but he seemed only amused by their restraint. His gaze flickered over Red, who clung to the chair, trembling, the scent of sweat and fear thickening the air between them. In a voice low and dangerous, the Wolf observed, almost idly, “You think chains can hold me?” His words slithered closer, promising menace even as Red flinched. “Fear lingers, Red, long after the door is shut.” Red’s hands twist the fabric of her cloak as she glances nervously at the Wolf, her voice barely above a whisper. Red’s hands twisted anxiously in the folds of her crimson cloak, knuckles whitening as she stared at the Wolf with wide, uncertain eyes. The room’s air, thick with sweat and the sharp tang of fear, pressed in around her. Clinging to the edge of the chair, her voice barely rose above a trembling whisper as she confessed the worry clawing at her heart—what if it came back? What if she was never truly safe again? The Huntsman tightens the final lock on the Wolf’s restraints, then places a reassuring hand on Red’s shoulder, his presence steady and protective. “You’re stronger than you know, Red, and I’ll stand watch—no shadow or growl will breach this cottage again.” —The Huntsman

Red remains conflicted, haunted by the encounter and uncertain whether true safety is possible, but the Huntsman reassures her that she is stronger than she realizes, and he will protect her from future threats.

The cottage, once a place of fear, now holds a tense, uneasy peace as Red grapples with the aftermath of her ordeal and the Huntsman’s difficult choices.

Outside, the forest seems quieter, but the echoes of danger still linger in Red’s mind. As the group tends to their wounds and attempts to restore order within the cottage, Red finds herself at a crossroads, wrestling with memories that refuse to fade. The events of the night have changed her, and as dawn approaches, Red must decide how to move forward in a world forever altered by fear and survival.

Chapter 8: Aftermath and Red’s Decision

Red sits at the small kitchen table, her hands wrapped tightly around a chipped mug as she stirs honey into her grandmother’s tea.

Mother stands across from her, arms crossed, her eyes tracing the mud stains on Red’s cloak and the scratch on her cheek.

Mother briskly closes the door against the chill and steps closer, her voice low and firm as she asks Red to recount what happened in the forest.

Mother shuts the door with a decisive click, wrapping her shawl tighter as she steps close, her eyes searching Red's face for answers. With a decisive click, Mother shut the door behind her, sealing out the bite of the evening air. She drew her shawl tight around her shoulders, the familiar fabric a shield against more than just the cold. Stepping close, she searched Red's face, her gaze sharp with worry and resolve. "Red," she said quietly, her voice both firm and trembling with the weight of a mother's fear, "look at me." The command left no room for evasion. "What did you see out there?" she pressed, eyes never leaving Red's. "Tell me everything—every detail. Don't leave anything out." Red wraps her arms tightly around herself, her eyes wide with fear as she stares at the floor, voice trembling. Red wrapped her arms tightly around herself, the chill of fear prickling her skin more than the cold seeping in from outside. Her eyes, wide and uncertain, fixed on the worn floorboards beneath her boots. When she finally spoke, her voice trembled, thin as the breeze rattling the windowpanes. "I—I heard footsteps behind me," she managed, willing herself to be brave, "not animal ones." The memory flickered through her mind: a shadow shifting between the trees, too tall and deliberate to belong to any forest creature. "And then I saw a shadow moving between the trees—it was following me," she admitted, her words quickening with her pulse, "but it disappeared when I ran." Mother grips Red's shoulders gently, searching her eyes for any sign of deception or detail she might have missed. Mother shut the door with a brisk motion, shutting out both the wind and any lingering shadows. She stepped forward, her hands finding Red's shoulders with a grip that was gentle but unyielding. Searching Red's face, eyes sharp with worry and something harder beneath, she kept her voice low and steady. "Are you absolutely certain it wasn't someone from the village, or a hunter?" she asked, the words edged with both anxiety and hope. "Think, Red. Did you recognize anything about the figure at all?" Red hugs her cloak tighter, shivering as she glances nervously toward the window. Red drew her cloak tighter around her shoulders, shivering as she cast a nervous glance toward the frost-laced window. The memory still lingered, sharp and vivid, making her pulse race. When her mother closed the door with a brisk snap and stepped closer, voice low and firm with worry, Red hesitated, then whispered, "No, Mother—it was too tall, and its eyes caught the moonlight like glass; I don't think it was human." Her words trembled in the hush, mingling fear with a stubborn thread of curiosity she couldn't quite suppress. Mother draws the curtains tight, her hands trembling as she peers out into the darkness, searching for any sign of movement. Mother drew the curtains tight, her hands trembling as she peered out into the darkness, searching for any sign of movement. The door clicked shut behind her, sealing out the night's chill. She stepped closer to Red, her voice low and firm, betraying both her anxiety and her resolve. "We must bolt every window and keep to the hearth," she said, eyes never leaving the window's edge. "Tell me—did you sense it meant you harm, or did it try to speak?" Red shudders and wraps her arms tightly around herself, glancing anxiously at the shuttered windows. Red shuddered, instinctively wrapping her arms tighter around herself as she cast a nervous glance at the shuttered windows. The wind rattled the frame, but the chill that seeped under the door was nothing compared to the memory prickling her skin. Her mother had just closed the door with brisk finality, stepping closer, her voice low and steady—a question lingering between them. Red hesitated, her own voice barely above a whisper as she recalled, "It didn't speak, but it reached toward me with something in its hand—a bundle wrapped in red cloth." The image lingered before her eyes, vivid and strange, and she pressed her lips together, uncertain whether she felt more fear or curiosity about the silent creature and its mysterious offering. Mother's eyes narrow, her hands tightening on Red's shoulders as she searches her daughter's face for the truth. Mother shut the door firmly behind her, shutting out the bite of the wind before striding toward Red. Her gaze sharpened with worry as she gripped her daughter's shoulders, fingers pressing just a bit too tightly. Searching Red's face for any flicker

of hesitation, she kept her voice low and steady, the edge of anxiety threading through her words as she said, “Show me exactly where you saw it, Red—did you bring the bundle home, or leave it in the forest?” Red wrings her hands together, her eyes flickering with fear as she glances toward the window, as if expecting the shadow to appear again. Red’s fingers twisted together, knuckles pale as she stared out the window, searching for any sign of the shadow that haunted her memory. Fear lingered in her eyes, but when her mother stepped closer, shutting out the cold with a firm hand on the door, Red tried to steady herself. Her voice trembled as she finally spoke, recalling each detail with quiet resolve. She’d left it behind—too frightened to touch it then—but she remembered exactly where: just beyond the old birch stump. Mother places both hands firmly on Red’s shoulders, her eyes intent and unwavering, as if bracing her daughter—and herself—for what lies ahead. Her mother closed the door with a decisive thud, shutting out the morning’s chill. She stepped forward, placing both hands firmly on Red’s shoulders, her grip steady but not unkind. Her eyes, sharp with worry and resolve, searched Red’s face as if seeking assurance that her words would be understood. “We’ll go together at first light,” she said, her voice low and unwavering. “There’s something in that forest that wants to be found.” Red, voice trembling, describes hearing footsteps behind her and seeing a tall, shadowy figure with eyes shining in the moonlight, which followed her and disappeared when she ran.

Red’s voice falters as she looks down at her scraped knuckles, her hands trembling in her lap. She blinks back tears, guilt and fear etched into her face. Red’s fingers twisted in the hem of her cloak as she tried to steady her breath. She hadn’t meant to wander so far; really, she hadn’t. All she’d wanted was to gather a handful of wildflowers for Grandma—just a few, bright and fresh, something to make her smile. It should have only taken a moment. But the forest seemed to pull her deeper, and before she’d realized, she’d lost sight of the familiar path.

That was when she saw him—the Wolf. At first, he looked almost gentle, with a smile that seemed warm and a voice that softened as he asked where she was headed. It was easy, in that moment, to believe he truly cared; she’d told him everything, her reason for being in the woods, her grandmother’s cottage, even the basket she carried on her arm. Now, recalling it all, Red’s heart hammered with regret and fear. She hadn’t known, she couldn’t have guessed what would happen next. Red’s hands tighten around her basket, her eyes glistening with tears as she hugs it close to her chest. Red’s fingers clenched tighter around the woven handle of her basket, knuckles paling as she pressed it to her chest. Tears shimmered in her eyes, threatening to spill, but she blinked them back, determined to stay strong. Her voice was barely more than a whisper as she stared down at the mossy ground beneath her feet, her words tumbling out between shaky breaths. She couldn’t help replaying it all—the way she’d stepped off the familiar path, the way the Wolf’s gentle words had seemed so trustworthy. How could she have been so easily fooled? The thought gnawed at her, and the weight of everything that had gone wrong pressed heavily on her heart. She tells Mother the figure reached out with a bundle wrapped in red cloth, but she was too frightened to touch it and left it beyond the old birch stump.

Mother lifts Red’s chin, inspecting her face for scrapes, her fingers gentle as she brushes a smudge of dirt from Red’s cheek. She sighs, her brow furrowed with worry. Mother listened in silence, her jaw set and eyes sharp with concern. She reached out, lifting Red’s chin with careful fingers, turning her daughter’s face this way and that as if searching for hidden scrapes. Her thumb brushed a streak of dirt from Red’s cheek, lingering for a moment longer than necessary. With a weary sigh, she murmured, “I told you—never leave the path.” The words were firm but laced with worry, her brow creased as she studied Red’s face. “You know how dangerous the woods can be,” she

continued, voice tight. “What if something had happened? You could have been hurt.” Red lowers her gaze, twisting her fingers together as she tries to explain herself, her voice small but earnest. Red lowered her gaze, her fingers twisting together in a nervous knot. The words tumbled out, small but earnest, as she tried to explain herself. She hadn’t meant for any of this—to worry her mother or to cause such a commotion. “I’m sorry, Mother—I just thought I saw something in the trees, and I didn’t mean to worry you.” Her voice barely rose above a whisper.

Her mother’s jaw was set, a mixture of worry and frustration etched into every line of her face. Yet, even as she admonished Red, she reached down, gentle but firm, lifting Red’s chin to inspect her for any sign of injury. Red held still, heart thumping with a conflicted blend of guilt and defiance, wishing she could somehow make her mother understand. Mother’s voice tightens, but she smooths Red’s hair back from her forehead, her touch lingering with unspoken relief. Mother’s jaw was set, her worry barely masked by sternness as she tilted Red’s chin upward, scanning her face for any hint of injury. Her hand, rough from years of work yet gentle in its care, lingered to smooth a stray lock of hair from Red’s forehead. “Thought isn’t enough to keep you safe, Red—you must listen, even when you’re curious.” The admonition came quietly, her voice tight with anxiety, but the relief in her touch spoke of a love that ran deeper than fear. Red lowers her eyes, voice quiet, her fingers twisting the edge of her cloak as Mother gently smooths the dirt from her sleeve. Red kept her eyes lowered, her voice scarcely more than a whisper as her fingers nervously twisted the edge of her crimson cloak. Mother’s hands were gentle but firm, brushing the dirt from Red’s sleeve, her jaw tense with worry. Red felt the weight of Mother’s scrutiny as she tilted her chin upward, searching for any scrapes or bruises. “I know,” Red murmured, her words almost lost in the hush between them, “but I didn’t want to ignore it if someone needed help.” The confession lingered in the air, earnest and uncertain, a stubborn thread of compassion woven through her trembling resolve. Mother smooths Red’s hair, her fingers trembling ever so slightly as she fights to steady her voice. Red’s mother pressed trembling fingers to her daughter’s hair, smoothing the tangled strands with a gentleness that belied the tension in her jaw. She lifted Red’s chin, eyes scanning for any hint of injury, her gaze sharp and searching. “There are times to help and times to heed warnings, Red,” she murmured, voice tight but loving. The weight of her worry pressed between them—not just for her daughter, but, as she glanced past Red toward the shadowed woods, for whatever might be waiting beyond the path. Mother questions whether it could have been a villager or hunter, but Red insists it did not seem human.

Deciding they must bolt the windows and keep to the hearth, Mother says they will return to the spot together at first light.

Mother gently presses a folded clean cloth into Red’s palm and kneels down beside the scattered fruit, beginning to mop up the spilled juice and gather the bruised apples. Mother finally fetched a clean cloth, her movements brisk but careful. She pressed the folded square into Red’s palm, her gaze steady and expectant, then knelt beside the scattered fruit. As she began blotting up the sticky puddles of juice, she murmured, “Hold this tight and help me blot up the juice before it stains.” Her tone was firm, but there was reassurance woven through it—an unspoken promise that, despite the mess, things would be alright. With practiced hands, she gathered the bruised apples, her protective presence enveloping Red in quiet certainty. “We’ll get this sorted, don’t worry,” she added, almost more to herself than to Red, her voice softening as she worked. Red presses the cloth to the spill, her shoulders hunched as she glances at Mother’s face, searching for forgiveness. Red pressed the cloth to the spreading spill, her small shoulders hunched with guilt. She dared a glance at Mother’s face, searching for any sign of forgiveness in her tight-lipped

expression. When Mother finally fetched a clean cloth and pressed it into Red's palm, Red's voice came out in a hurried whisper, her words tumbling over themselves as she tried to explain: "Okay, Mother, I'm sorry—I didn't mean to knock it over." Mother crouches beside Red, guiding her hand as they dab at the spilled juice together, her tone gentle despite the frustration flickering in her eyes. Mother crouched beside Red, her hands steady as she guided Red's small fingers over the sticky spill. The tension in her jaw softened for a moment as she murmured, "It's all right, dear—accidents happen." She pressed Red's hand gently into the puddle, demonstrating the careful motion. "Just press gently, like this, and we'll have it cleaned in no time." Despite the flicker of frustration in her eyes, her voice remained reassuring. Finally, she stood and moved to fetch a clean cloth, pressing it into Red's palm and nodding for her to help, her protective instinct never wavering even in the smallest crisis. Red then confesses she left the path to pick flowers for Grandma and encountered the Wolf, who seemed kind but deceived her.

She expresses regret for trusting the Wolf and for straying.

Mother admonishes Red for her risky curiosity but comforts her as they work together to clean up the spilled basket.

Both move carefully around the room, their actions deliberate, navigating the new tension and understanding between them.

As dawn crept softly through the shutters, Red and her mother stood side by side, stronger for what had passed, ready to face whatever waited beyond the path—together.