

ALPHA'S BETRAYAL

SKYE WILSON

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Chosen By The Alpha: Book 1

Skye Wilson

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Chapter 1

Luna

Stable, Claw Mansion
Woodward County, Oklahoma

He said he loved me. He said we'd always be together; that he'd build me a swing under a big weeping willow and we'd sit there every night. That we'd watch the sunset.

Why the hell did I believe him?

I gritted my teeth, jaw aching. Tipping my head to one side, I spit some of the blood still slowly pooling in my mouth. None of my teeth felt loose as I prodded my mouth with my tongue, but I wouldn't be confident in my assessment until I could look in a mirror — or at least touch my mouth. Instead, I was forced to watch as my saliva slipped through the golden strands of hay at my feet, disappearing onto the wooden stable floor.

I shifted again, rattling the chains that bound me to one of the large beams holding up the barn. I stared at the beam directly across from me, looking for anything that might be of some use...but it was just a plain, ordinary beam. I could practically imagine it still being a tree, it was so large and tall. It was even still circular; whoever raised this barn hadn't taken

the time to plane four straight sides. Why bother? It was perfectly strong as it was.

Which was great, if you were worried about barn construction.

Not so great if someone had bound you to said beam with the tractor chains a person might use to tow a truck out of a ditch. I shifted again, and the cold steel bit into my arms and clutched against my ribs like an overtight hug. The pain blossoming on my left side made me gasp, spots forming before my eyes. The barn seemed to swim around me, like I was looking at it through a film of water. My exhale turned into a whimper and I bit the inside of my lip, trying to keep quiet. The links weren't going to give. The hooks were arranged properly, too; I couldn't hear anything that would suggest they were so much as slipping, much less sliding free.

My shoulders dropped and my gaze fell back to the prickly hay beneath me. I was running out of ideas. The side of my face still throbbed. My ribs were complaining with every inhale and moaning with every exhale — but that wasn't the worst of it. In the middle of my chest, my heart lay in ten thousand tiny shards and slivers. It was a glass trinket dropped from a hundred stories, exploding upon impact.

My eyes burned and my vision went watery again. I sucked in a shaky breath and shook my head. A few hours ago, *only a few hours ago*, I had thought everything was perfectly fine. I'd still thought I would be getting married — maybe the end of this year, but most certainly by the end of next. I'd thought he was my one and only...and I'd thought he'd felt the same about me. I sniffled and tried to fight back the well of tears. He wasn't going to make me cry. I wasn't going to cry, I couldn't let him make me cry...I racked my mind for anything other than the hurt. Any thought or memory or wish, anything that wasn't focusing on *this*.

“Soon, baby, I promise. Soon you'll be all mine, for the rest of our lives. Nothing will change that.”

I smiled softly as I traced my fingernail over Marnet's broad chest, drawing lines like constellations between his sparse freckles. His chest rose and fell slowly, rhythmically, already settled despite what we had been doing not even five minutes ago. My heart still felt like it was stuttering, trying to figure out how to beat normally after all the attention he had just given me. The thought of it made heat well up in my gut, even if I was nowhere near ready to go again.

I must have twitched, because Marnet chuckled underneath me, tucking me beneath one of his arms. His large hand spread across my spine, fingers warm and anchoring as he leaned in to press a kiss to the top of my head. My heart soared and my eyes flickered downwards as I tried to hide my smile.

"How long?" I murmured, finally settling down, my cheek resting against his pec. I splayed my hand across one shoulder, comfortable as I used the man as my pillow.

Marnet huffed and I could feel the pillow depress as he lay back. His fingers drummed against my skin. "I don't have a date or anything picked. I told you, it has to be an organic moment. It takes away from it if you know it's coming, Luna."

I smiled at the familiar argument. It was sweet that the man thought he was going to surprise me somehow, but he was my mate. I'd known for the past three years; he'd known for just as long. We had sensed the bond at the exact same moment, after all. Still, there was something endearing about the fact that he wanted to make it somehow more special than it already was. I squeezed him a little closer, feeling affection bubble up in my chest. I felt like a bottle full of soda, ready to burst and fizz over the lid. "You're so cute," I murmured. I could practically see him scrunching his nose at the word and giggled, unable to help myself.

"Not cute," he protested, half-hearted. "Just doing things the right way. I still have to get permission from my father anyways. The alpha has to approve anything, bond or fate or...I dunno. Whatever anyone else does."

"Marnet..."

He shrugged. "Protocol, Luna. And I'm not going to ask my father to do something that might cause strife because it looks like he's favoring his child."

I sighed and bit my tongue. This entire song and dance I knew well. I knew Marnet was right, that our alpha needed to give his blessing before any sort of official anything were to take place, but it felt like Marnet had been dragging this out. I wondered if he was afraid his father might deny us, but I couldn't see why he would, unless... I bit my lower lip.

There was the illegitimacy of my birth. But I'd lived with my father and our pack since I was twelve years old; even if my parents hadn't been married or mated or... I don't know, hand-fastened or whatever, I had been nothing but a loyal, well-behaved member of the pack. (Or I tried my best to be, anyways. I thought I was. I was, wasn't I?)

"Luna, you're thinking too loudly."

I startled, lifting my head to look at Marnet. He'd tucked his other hand behind his head, propping himself up to watch me. I opened my mouth to apologize and he laughed, shaking his head. He squeezed me a little closer with the hand settled on the small of my back. "That was a joke, Luna. Seriously, though. I told you I would take care of everything. You trust me, don't you?"

I couldn't help myself — I smiled. I just loved when he looked at me like that, his green eyes as warm as the grass on a sunny hill in early summer. That expression made me feel like the only woman in the room — no, the only woman in the world. I cuddled up a little closer, snuggling back against his chest. "Of course I do, babe." I tugged the blanket over us.

"Then why are you in such a hurry, sweet thing? We have all the time in the world."

I believed him. For three years, I believed him. I should have been smarter than that. I *was* smarter than that, but when he smiled at me with those pretty green eyes and perfect white teeth... Hell, I was a damn fool, allowing Marnet to string me

along like that, but I really, truly had faith in him. In his promises. In our future together.

I opened my eyes as I exhaled and leaned against the column, staring up at the barn's ceiling. As stupid as I felt now, how was I supposed to see it coming? The other fated mates I'd met in our pack accepted each other openly and publicly, even if they were otherwise private people. The same went for the wolves I'd encountered from other packs. A fated mate bond was just that — fated. I'd never heard of anyone *rejecting* their mate before, and I'd never heard of anyone being rejected, either. Fights? Sure, all couples fight sometimes. Falling out? Yep. Sometimes they lasted weeks, months even, but in the end, the mated pair always found their way back to each other. They found a way to heal. No ill will was permanent.

The chains jingled softly as I lifted my shoulders, as if to remind me they were still there. I couldn't help but roll my eyes. *Yeah, yeah, I know.* Being chained up by the man you loved? I was pretty damn sure that was the sort of thing that fostered permanent ill will.

Three years ago, I'd thought things would never change.

“Hey, Marnet?”

The man beneath me made a sleepy noise and my heart flip-flopped in my chest. I smiled, propping my chin up on his sternum as he murmured his response. “Hm? What’s up, Luna?”

“Would we...would we still be like this, if we hadn't met when we did? On my eighteenth birthday, I mean.”

His emerald eyes blinked open, and his expression was still soft with sleep. He tipped his head to one side. “Well, yeah,” he said, and dropped his head back down. Clearly, he thought that was answer enough, but I wasn't satisfied. I squirmed against his side.

Marnet exhaled. “You aren't going to let me sleep, are you, you little minx?”

“Nope.” I shook my head. “Humor me, okay?”

He sighed again, then slung a heavy arm around my middle and pulled me closer. “Don’t you think there’d be a lot fewer fated mates overall if they had to meet when she turned eighteen?” He raised a brow. “Because the bond doesn’t work when he turns eighteen, so that’s one single day across two lifetimes.”

I frowned a little, mouth turning down into a pout. “Well... I guess, but fate’s a pretty powerful thing, isn’t it?”

Marnet shrugged one thick shoulder. “I guess? I dunno. It’s not like some hands reached down from the sky and smashed us together.”

“No...”

“I think, actually, some hands were smashing something else.” Marnet turned his smirk on me.

I started to turn pink. “You’re never going to let me forget that, are you?” I asked, feeling the skin on the back of my neck prickle. It hadn’t been my best moment. His sister, Sophia, had been nasty to me since we were in elementary school. The conflict had come to a head during our senior year of high school, when I’d edged her out as salutatorian. I’d bumped her off some podium — there was only room for two. Why she didn’t feel robbed by the valedictorian too, I’d never been sure.

I had thought it would be over after we graduated. I hadn’t seen much of Sophia that summer, but on my birthday in late August, I was planning to meet some friends at a local diner for a celebratory dinner. It wasn’t much, but that was the best we had. Who did I run in to on the way but Sophia. She was dead set on humiliating me right there on the sidewalk, as if ruining my eighteenth birthday would somehow make up for the fact that she didn’t get to speak at our graduation.

I never fought in school, and I’d always done did my best to ignore Sophia. I don’t know what changed that day. I didn’t want to hear all the nasty things she had to say — I wasn’t

going to hear the things she had to say. When Sophia swung at me, well, I swung right back.

It wasn't a long fight, but I had gotten a few good punches in before someone hauled me back off Sophia. I'd been so upset, I hadn't even realized Sophia wasn't trying to fight back. Someone had hands on her too, separating us even as I continued to kick and swing. I still remember, clear as day, whirling around and coming face to face with those gorgeous green eyes. I'd met Marnet before, of course, he'd only been two years ahead in school, but it felt like the first time I had really seen him. My heart skipped three beats and he caught my hand easily, looking more puzzled than any man breaking up a fight ought to.

"Earth to Luna."

A singsong voice shook me out of the recollection. Marnet was wearing a shit-eating grin, pleased as punch. "You're never going to forget that day either, you know. Because that's the day you met me."

"I already knew you."

"Did you, though?" His grin only widened as he tugged me back into his warm embrace. "C'mon, enough with this. Of course I would have found you. That's what happens, that's just what happens. There's no other way. Now go back to sleep, Luna. I need at least a few damn minutes of shuteye."

I jerked upright, as if standing could rid me of the memory. Even just this morning, I had considered it a tender moment; something special to treasure as we embarked on the rest of our lives together. Again, I jolted against the chains. They rattled against the wood and dug into my skin. No amount of wiggling seemed to change that.

My cheeks felt hot and my eyes started to prickle, blurring my vision as I sucked in a sharp, shuddering breath, trying to force my lungs to operate normally. Sadness was welling up in the back of my throat like something sticky sweet, something I couldn't swallow back down no matter how hard I tried. I

opened my mouth to yell, to scream, to howl — anything to get someone's attention and get me out of this freaking barn — and instead a broken sob escaped.

Marnet was going to kill me. He'd said I would be put to death, and I knew that would be his doing. He was the alpha. Pack wolves lived and died by the alpha's whim.

Tears rolled down my cheeks, falling freely off my chin. I heard them drop softly against the hay in the moment of silence before I exhaled another wounded noise. My chest hurt as if someone had punched me, held me down, and beaten me. It was no such thing, but I was starting to believe a person could die of a broken heart. I couldn't go on like this. I couldn't *live* like this, with a Marnet-sized hole burned into my chest, leaving me with an empty place and jagged edges.

My heart tripped and stumbled; it felt like my very soul lurched, then went another direction. Like I was on a path, and my feet decided we would all take another trail without my brain's consent.

Anger joined the sorrow as I slid back down, gritting my teeth until my jaw ached. I had already spent hours crying over this man — over this *relationship* — hell, I had spent so much of my *life* crying. Marnet was just another member of a long line of assholes who'd ripped my heart out of my chest only to crush it on the sidewalk under a heel. There was Marnet's sister, Sophia. Jared, my weasel of a high school boyfriend. My sophomore history teacher, my half- and step-siblings, my stepmom...even my dad. The last person on that list solicited a soft sigh.

I had thought Marnet Claw was the answer to all that misery. I was freshly eighteen, a newly minted adult, and I was certain the world was at my feet. I could get *out*, and I wouldn't even have to suffer to do it. I had found my mate. *He* would be my new family. My found family. My *chosen* family.

The pack wouldn't harass me anymore, regardless of the fact that my father had, evidently, sired a daughter before taking a mate and rising to one of the senior positions within

the Lupus Claw pack. I didn't ever see *him* get bullied, and he was the one actually responsible for my existence.

But it wouldn't matter. My mate was the future alpha. Even when his father died and Marnet took over the pack, I knew it would only get better. Even when he had less and less time for me. Even when he was cold and distant when we met in public, like he hardly knew me. I just looked past it, so confident he would take me as his mate, and everything would be fine.

Shame on me, for swallowing down that lie like that. Shame on Marnet, though, for underestimating me so thoroughly. The man didn't know me at all, for all the time we spent together, and I knew so damn much about him. I'd believed he would save me, but he'd made it abundantly clear he was no savior at all.

He said he loved me. He said we'd always be together; that he'd build me a swing under a big weeping willow and we'd sit there every night. That we'd watch the sunset.

The memory bounced back to the forefront of my mind, but this time, it didn't dampen my rage — it only stoked it. I wasn't just going to save myself. “You'll fucking pay for this, Marnet Claw.”

Chapter 2

Remus

Woodward Airport, Oklahoma

Twelve hours earlier

I stared out over the rim of my glass through the window of my jet as we taxied, withholding what would only be a withering sigh. The skyline was dismal — if you could call a single traffic control tower and endless rolling hills a *skyline*. There were about a dozen places I'd rather be than Oklahoma. Maybe more. I was pretty sure I'd rather be at the dentist getting a cavity filled than in this desolate town.

It wasn't the flight that bothered me — not at all. I kept Johnny Walker Blue Label on the jet, actually. It was an excellent hiding place. I swirled the amber liquid and the whiskey stones clinked gently against the glass. Honestly, maybe if I went to Oklahoma City or Tulsa, I'd have a better time. Civilization! Restaurants! Something to actually *do* with my time rather than stare at faces I'd be perfectly happy never to see again.

Instead, I was in the Middle of Nowhere, Oklahoma, and scheduled to socialize with a rival pack, and whoever their other *honored guests* might be. And oh, it couldn't just be a meet 'n greet, it was a whole damn Moonmate ceremony. The thought made me shudder. I lifted my tumbler, tossing the rest

of my drink back in one healthy swallow. The idea of spending hours not just socializing, but pretending to *like* these people, made my skin crawl. That dentist appointment? I'd rather have a damn root canal. Awake. Without a sedative. Or a painkiller!

In fact, I would rather get rid of the pack altogether.

Which is exactly what I plan to do, I thought with a huff. The whole region would be better off if the wolves of Lupus Claw joined the Silverstreak pack. It was only a matter of time, of course, but it was an idea I'd been rolling around in the back of my skull for ages. The longer I mulled it over, the wiser it seemed.

“Sir? We are ready to disembark.”

I glanced up to see the air hostess hovering nearby, already picking up my empty cup and collecting my debris. I flashed her a winning smile. Oklahoma or not, I had planned ahead for the visit to the Lupus Claw pack. One could never simply trust their rival pack, after all; I had sent a few trusted packmates ahead to scout out the location. The city. Sniff around and report back if they found any interesting data points. We could not afford to be caught off guard tonight if it was indeed more than a Moonmate ceremony, and I always preferred to be as prepared as possible.

My mother called it being anal. I simply called it having foresight. After all, I wouldn't invited Marnet Claw to so much as a birthday party, much less something as stogy as a Moonmate ceremony. The man was not to be trusted.

The cabin opened; my stewardess had already finished tidying. I stood and straightened my vest. A stern gaze arrested mine and I paused, just for a moment. “You made the right choice, coming to Oklahoma,” my mother said, her green eyes never leaving mine.

I straightened up but didn't move from my seat. “Thank you, Fiona,” I grumbled. I didn't remember inviting her assessment of the matter.

The woman pinched her brows together, breathing slowly through her nose. She did the same thing when I was a little

boy who was getting on her last nerve. It seemed I was good at that. Honestly, I had only gotten better with age.

“I hate to think of what the other alphas might say, were you to miss it. Your poor father is probably rolling over in his grave just at the mere suggestion. His only son, and not a care in the world for tradition.”

The mention of my father made my stomach sink, as if we were still in the air and we hit a particularly rough patch of turbulence. “My father might have been a traditionalist, but not in matters like this,” I shot back, shoving my hands into my pockets. “He’d be the first to say this was a complete waste of time.” I met my mother’s gaze steadily. I could think of a hundred different things we could be spending pack time and energy on, back at home in Texas.

Fiona leveled her unblinking gaze at me. I did not waver, ignoring the air hostess as she quietly crept around whatever familial dispute she imagined this to be. The woman was clearly uncomfortable, but she’d only joined the Silverstreak pack last year. Believe it or not, there weren’t many shifters who were also trained air travel professionals.

Finally, my mother looked away, glancing out the window instead. “If that were the case, he would be denying that they worked. I met your father at such a ceremony, Remus.” She sighed, wistful. “That’s how your grandparents met, too, you know.”

It was my turn to sigh and look away. We’d had this conversation at least a dozen times already. We’d been having it for the last five years. No matter how many times my mother brought this topic up, it did not change the facts; I was not that type of guy, and my mother couldn’t see it. Maybe she was determined to see whatever it was she was missing in my father in me instead, but all I needed was a temporary liaison, at best. A weekend fling. A week in paradise. Something with a set shelf life, and no one holding any illusions otherwise. I was an adult, and I *associated* with other adults. It was a beneficial system, really. The idea of having to entertain the same person for the rest of my life?

Internally, I shuddered. *No thank you.*

My mother stood and closed the rest of the gap between us, then reached out to squeeze my hand. I tipped my head, looking over at her. The corner of my mouth lifted. “You were the exception,” I told her. Even I couldn’t argue that she and my father had clearly had a special relationship; I could see it even when I was a boy of five years.

Fiona simply studied my expression for a moment. “Remus,” she sighed softly. “Please try to remember that this is an important ceremony. A very important ceremony. It might not be your style, or whatever your argument is — don’t give me that look — but it is very meaningful to our pack and most of our people. They still believe in it, because it *works*. Finding a mate wouldn’t just benefit you, but it would benefit our entire pack. I know you know that, Remy, even if you won’t say as much.”

I bit my tongue before I could fire off another quip, bristling as my mother dredged up my boyhood nickname. Before I could argue, my mother continued. “I can’t expect you to understand, my love, not until you meet your own mate. You could not possibly imagine how deep the bond goes. Even I had doubts, you know, though I was a bit younger than you when I met Remington.” She paused, gaze going distant for a moment. My irritation softened as I watched her reminisce. “Your lifelines become tangled. It is the single most wonderful, intense thing — and you will have your mate for the rest of your life. Or theirs.” Her voice thickened and she cleared her throat, looking away again. I could see the hint of moisture peeking over her lower lashes and despite our tiff, I still had the urge to embrace my mother. She seemed determined to finish this talk now that she had started it. “I knew the moment he died, Remus. I wasn’t with him, but I knew. I miss that man every moment of every day, but even with this, I would *never* trade having known him. Having been his mate. Do you understand me, Remy? There is nothing more sacred, nothing more *beautiful* than that. Please do not brush it off as an old woman’s fancy.”

Fiona was just trying her best to help. She just couldn't understand that I wasn't, I don't know, as old-fashioned or naive as some of the others. Still. The emotion still brimming in her voice had sucked most of the fight out of me.

"I won't embarrass you," I said instead of something sharp and biting, trying to placate her. I had had enough of this familiar argument for today. I certainly didn't want my mother to devolve from misty-eyed to outright teary.

Unfortunately, my mother knew me better than that. She fixed me with a frown, her silvering brows knitting together. Her earthy green eyes searched my face and I sighed, knowing I'd been found out. "I still don't want a mate, Mom, but for you, I'll keep an open mind," I said, squeezing her hand. "We'll be the strongest clan in the southern United States regardless of my relationship status." The pack's stability wasn't in danger — if anything, we were only getting stronger — but I didn't linger on the topic, or my mother might think I was inviting another lecture. "But I will look, and I won't say anything untoward. All right?"

"That will be all right," she agreed, giving my hand one last squeeze before letting go. At least we could both recognize a stalemate when we reached one.

I stepped to the side, allowing my mother to gather her jacket before walking off the plane. I followed her and a moment later, my beta, Bane, fell into step behind me. Both he and my chief financial officer at Silverstreak Motors, Tala, had the good manners to pretend they hadn't witnessed any of that conversation.

Instead, Bane stepped around me as soon as we had descended the steps, striding out ahead of me. A black limo was already waiting on the tarmac. Before I could ask, the driver opened the door and out stepped Marnet Claw and his mother, Kate. I stiffened, the hair on the back of my neck prickling as my wolf bristled. Now that we were off the plane, I quickly got the sense we were not alone, and it wasn't just my dislike of Marnet setting off the warning flag in my head. He had wolves watching us.

“Remus Silverstreak,” Marnet drawled, shoving a callused hand in my direction. I fought down the urge to bare my teeth, even if my wolf was now on high alert. Bane had sidestepped seamlessly, suddenly at my mother’s shoulder instead of acting as a makeshift meat shield. “So glad you could make it.”

“I wouldn’t miss it for the world,” I replied, offering a wolf’s smile in return. Marnet’s eyes gleamed as he squeezed my hand; I gripped right back, uncowed by whatever he thought he might be displaying. Behind him, his mother cleared her throat, and Marnet finally looked away, withdrawing his hand to offer it to my mother instead.

“Fiona,” he murmured, dipping his head in her direction. “You look lovely, as always.”

My mother beamed as she leaned in to kiss both of the man’s weather-worn cheeks, using his handshake to keep him from escaping. “Marnet,” she cooed, as if he were a nephew rather than the alpha of a rival pack. “You look just stunning today. A spitting image of your father. I am sure Noah would have been delighted to see what a wonderful young man you’ve grown into over the past year.”

She sounded honest in her assessment. I glowered at the side of my mother’s head, but she’d already moved on from exchanging pleasantries with Marnet to embracing Kate. Admittedly, I didn’t have much of an issue with the Claw matriarch (outside of the fact that she had spawned Marnet, but fate could be cruel, so I wasn’t sure I could hold that against her, either), and I supposed it was good for my mother to have other wolves who could relate to her grief. My understanding was that Kate had almost entirely disappeared from her pack’s social structure after Noah died, and Marnet took over his father’s role as alpha. I had no idea how much truth there was to that, but I wasn’t sure how I felt about that...other than that I still didn’t trust her, no matter how happy my mother seemed to see her.

The two women stood side by side, hands and arms entwined as they looked the both of us over. Heat prickled on

the back of my neck; even my wolf took notice of Fiona's and Kate's appraisal, his focus torn between seeking out potential threats and feeling the need to preen.

I shoved the instinct down and straightened my shoulders. Marnet, in turn, did the same, drawing his shoulders back enough to display exactly how broad his chest was, like managing a construction firm had the same effect on a body as working on the build site itself. It took a lot of effort not to roll my eyes; who the hell did this oaf think he was impressing, exactly? Me? If I were to go for another man, I could certainly do much better than that. Hell, even Bane managed to look more attractive than this posturing asshole, and all my second was doing was being as unassuming as possible. If Marnet thought he was impressing Tala, well, he was barking up the wrong tree entirely. That thought was almost laughable. Unless... My eyes darted to where my mother stood. I exhaled slowly, nostrils flaring. If that man thought, for one fucking second—

“Darling, save it for the ceremony later,” Kate murmured, her soft voice barely penetrating the boiling rage threatening to spill over inside of my skull. She turned, bumping her shoulder against my mother's. “Goodness.” She ducked her head closer. Fiona tipped her chin, as if they were sharing a secret. “These boys! I don't remember Moonmate ceremonies being nearly as tense when we were girls.”

“Oh, no,” my mother agreed, bobbing her head. “Nerve-racking, perhaps, but it was all about making a good impression! The gentlemen tried to woo us with *manners*, none of this silly posturing business. It's not as if we weren't sure who was an alpha and who wasn't.”

My wolf grumbled, unsure if he ought to be irritated or flustered to be spoken about as if we weren't all standing on the same tarmac. Frankly, I couldn't blame him. Even Marnet looked marginally abashed, if he was even capable of such a thing. He glanced at me and narrowed his eyes. My upper lip twitched as my wolf snarled.

Bane cleared his throat, sensing the tension about to boil over. “Mrs. Silverstreak. Mrs. Claw,” he hummed, trying to

draw the women's attention away from us as he opened a door. "I hate to interrupt, but I suspect the airport would prefer if we got off the tarmac. It's not a terribly large one."

The corner of my mouth twitched. Always sensible, Bane. Which was exactly why he was my beta. I nodded, breaking away from Marnet to turn my attention fully to my mother. "I'm afraid he's right." I casually herded my mother towards the limo. Thankfully, neither she nor Kate seemed inclined to argue, and allowed themselves to be helped in.

Tala, who continued to be as silent as could be, allowed me to help her in next. Bane followed her, leaving only myself and Marnet standing on the asphalt, staring each other down once more.

"After you," Marnet purred, flourishing a hand as if I were his date instead of an equal. No, not even a date. Just some fucking fling. I stiffened all over, fighting the urge to put a fist in his smug teeth and fix that expression once and for all.

"Remus?" my mother called, tipping her head. "We don't want to be late."

I swallowed hard and nodded. It took everything I had to step into the limo, arranging myself next to my mother before Marnet finally stepped in, closing the door behind him. The man sat directly across from me. I folded my hands in my lap, lest my fingers curl into fists without my permission.

Soon, I thought, venomous, I'll wipe that smug look off your face for good.

Chapter 3

Luna

Several Miles from the Claw Mansion
Woodward County, Oklahoma

Hey, Kitten,

See you at the usual spot.

Friday.

Same time.

I eyed the yellow note before tucking the crumpled piece of paper back into my pocket, glancing around. There was no sign of anyone but me in the area — even when I lifted my chin, sniffing at the wind, I detected no one. My wolf rolled her ears back and my shoulders slumped. From my other pocket, I checked my phone again. No messages. Marnet was now two hours late, which was unlike him. He wasn't the most punctual of people in general, but when he said we'd meet, we met.

I couldn't even think of enough instances he was *really* that late to count on one hand. And he'd texted or called each one of those times. My wolf whined softly, concern radiating off of her. She wanted to get up and pace, scent the bushes for any hint of the man we were waiting for.

Shoving my phone into the back pocket of my jeans, I resumed my pacing, trying to determine if I'd interpreted the

message wrong. Marnet was my *mate*, and surely my wolf would have felt some kind of disturbance if something truly bad actually happened to him. While he hadn't actually claimed me yet, and that would strengthen our bond, we still had *something*. Bonds were powerful, but I was pretty sure they didn't cover getting held up at home or having car troubles or something.

What if it was just some mundane issue?

I frowned deeper, fighting the urge to grab my phone again. It had only been half a minute since I put it away. I had more self-control than that, even if I hadn't been able to meet up with Marnet for a few weeks. He'd been increasingly busy since his father passed and he'd taken over as alpha of Lupus Claw last year. I understood that, but it was starting to feel like we'd gone well past 'busy' and somewhere into the 'abject neglect' territory.

My wolf whined again and I sighed. She was starting to wear me down. It was easier for her to forgive him. After all, he *was* our mate. There was no denying the magnetic tug we'd felt when I reached the age of majority. Our fates, our lifelines, they were inextricably tangled now. Unfortunately, the fact that he was being distant didn't seem to impact her in the same way; my pride was wounded, and she simply seemed content to wait out whatever phase he was in.

I chewed on my bottom lip, still not fully convinced this *was* a phase. Marnet had never been a man for public displays of affection. But on the other hand, my father and stepmother never did anything more than walk side by side in public. It wasn't *that* weird. I hadn't seen Marnet's parents – the pack alphas – do much more than share a chaste kiss on the cheek, and only at pack events.

Sometimes, I wondered if it made *me* strange that I wished he would at least hold my hand. But maybe he didn't consider that acceptable. My father was a ranking official, not me. Maybe I wasn't understanding the intricacies of social expectations, and Marnet was the alpha now. There were undoubtedly some appearances he needed to keep up.

Still, there had to be some middle ground we could find. I didn't need fireworks and the top of the Eiffel Tower. I didn't need to make out in the park like horny teenagers, either, but it would be nice to actually be able to go on a date to a local diner or something.

My wolf huffed, clearly in some sort of conundrum. She was always happy to bask in the presence of her mate, but the changing status quo concerned her, and it was hard for me to ignore that sort of anxiety. I wasn't entirely sure why. After all, asking Marnet to make it official would only make things better, right? Sure, I had no idea what it took to be an alpha's mate. His mother still lived in the Claw family home with him, though, and I couldn't imagine why she wouldn't give me a few pointers, if only to make her son's life easier.

It would be nice if she actually, like, you know, accepted me as her daughter-in-law, but I didn't want to get ahead of myself. One thing at a time. Today, I'd ask Marnet if we could take the next step, and if he tried to talk me out of it — I wouldn't let him.

I nodded to myself, pleased with the decision I'd come to and certain we'd be able to come to a compromise.

My wolf did not agree. She whined plaintively, leaving me staring sightlessly into the middle distance. Marnet was our mate, and she wanted nothing less than to be publicly introduced as such. It was her right. It was *our* right. I could feel her frustration building, that I wasn't willing to force the issue, that I got hung up on silly things like his public behavior. I sighed and shook my head, trying to shake off her unhappiness. It was so hard to make her happy — really, *truly* happy — and it was easier to cordon off her disappointment to one corner of my mind instead.

I was so tangled up in my thoughts that I hadn't noticed another wolf approaching until I heard the snap of a twig only a few lengths away. I grinned, whirling around to sweep Marnet into an embrace and I took two strides before I stopped dead in my tracks. The scent was all wrong. "Mar—"

“Hah!” a familiar voice crowed. A cold sweat burst over my skin and I took a step back. A lanky form bounced out of the forest, a shit-eating grin plastered on his face.

Fuck. “Where’s Nyx?” I growled at Nox.

I didn’t need to ask after my half-brother. Not a breath later, the boy’s identical match stumbled out of the woods, mirroring his twin right down to the grin. They both looked like a pair of cats who’d caught the canary and gotten the cream, too.

“Right here,” the second boy cooed. I don’t know how an eleven-year-old managed to sound so condescending, but if any child could do it, it would be Lynn’s. Frankly, I wasn’t even sure how we were related, even if we all had the same father. The twins weren’t regular little bratty kids, they were full-on menaces. I scowled.

“How the hell did you even find me?” I demanded. This had been my secret spot to meet with Marnet for years! I was pretty sure I’d always been careful when I had snuck out to our place to meet with Marnet.

“Does it matter?” Nox asked, raising his brows. Not only were they little jerks, but they had the super annoying habit of alternating when they spoke, finishing each other’s sentences like we lived in some sort of prime-time sitcom. (I made sure I never mentioned as much, though. It could be worse. They’d absolutely find a way to make it worse if they knew it irritated me.)

I opened my mouth, about to tell the pair of boys off when I realized they were probably smart enough to figure out I wanted them out of here because I was supposed to be meeting someone. I had to think fast.

Putting my hands on my hips, I gave them the best annoyed-older-sister look I could. “I dunno, maybe I just see enough of you guys on a day-to-day basis. Going out for a run by myself doesn’t feel like I’m asking for a lot, here. I have to go to the city to meet someone in a bit.” Maybe the idea of exercise would make them get bored and wander off. That was my hope, at least.

Nox mirrored me, hands on his hips as he did his best impression of an ‘annoying girl’ while his brother spoke. “You only run like twice a year,” Nyx snorted, shaking his head. “Who’re you meeting?”

“Friends,” I snapped, waving a hand.

“Pfft. You don’t have any friends!” Nox replied.

I scowled, but didn’t argue. It didn’t matter what I said. Any name I listed, they’d find a reason why that person wasn’t my *actual* friend. Frankly, I didn’t want to hear it. The truth of the matter was, while I had a handful of acquaintances around town, I didn’t feel *close* to anyone. I certainly didn’t hang out with anyone enough, which made it even harder to argue with Nyx and Nox. And while I certainly did spend more time with Marnet than anyone else, we never *went* anywhere. He was always so tired or whatever, he just wanted to stay in the little cabin we met in. (It might have been a hunting cabin at one point, I wasn’t sure. But it had definitely taken a bit of effort to make it a comfortable place to meet.) No one ever *saw us* together, so even if I did list him, why would they believe me?

My wolf grumbled and I folded my arms over my chest, fighting the urge to take an even more defensive posture. They were eleven! Annoying. Badgering. Obnoxious. But still, only eleven! “I have a fitting for the Moonmate ceremony later,” I sniffed.

Unfortunately, trying to distract them with dresses and other so-called ‘girly’ things didn’t work, either. Nyx fixated on me with a laser-like focus. They never missed a chance to tease me for dying to dress up for a night out, arguing I wasn’t a girly girl at all. There was no winning with them. I wasn’t sure why I tried to argue with eleven-year-old logic, anyways.

“Liar,” Nyx said, looking entirely too smug. “You aren’t getting a new dress. I heard Mom tell you so.”

“Yeah,” Nox chimed in. “Mom said. No new clothes if you have no good reason.”

“You were eavesdropping?” Of *course* they had overheard that conversation. I didn’t want to have to ask Lynn, but

getting anything more than a dress from the discount rack at the local department store required more than I had in my clothes budget. I really wanted Marnet to claim me officially this time — and I *really* wanted to look like a woman who belonged next to the pack alpha, too. “You little shits. You know your mom hates a snitch.”

Nox stuck out his tongue and blew a raspberry at me.

“Whatever,” Nyx said, rolling his eyes more dramatically than any teenager I’d ever met. I resisted the urge to roll my eyes right back — the longer I engaged with these two punks, the less time I’d have with Marnet. Hell, if he chose now to show up with my half-brothers still here, he might turn back around, and I couldn’t even blame him for that.

I didn’t want to risk anything right before this year’s Moonmate ceremony. Last year, his father had only just passed away; he was overwhelmed with the alpha’s duty of escorting pack members seeking mates to the Moonmate ceremony. York Rock had hosted it last year, over in Shadow Rock territory. I was pretty sure that was in New Mexico. It was a neighboring state, sure, but that was a lot of work to take on last minute. There were wolves who depended on him, and Marnet didn’t want to let them down. I couldn’t get frustrated with him for that. The year before, his father was sick. Before that, he wanted his father’s blessing.

This year, though. He *was* the alpha. There was no one to ask for permission. He already got the first one under his belt as the leader. There was no reason not to claim me. My wolf’s tail wagged hopefully and I barely swallowed down my smile, not wanting to let my brothers on to anything.

I was running out of time, and I couldn’t waste any more on these two. I turned back on my half-brothers, and curled my upper lip back to expose my teeth. My wolf surged up towards the surface, her irritation rumbling deep in my voice. Perhaps my eyes had flashed to her brilliant gold because suddenly, all the color drained from the twins’ faces. One peeped and the other yipped, and two lanky pups stood where the twins had moments earlier as their wolves pushed to the surface and took control. I could practically smell the fear and adrenaline

pouring off of them. I'd never actually lay a finger (or a claw) on them, but maybe Lynn's harsh manner had left a deeper impression on them than I'd realized. They didn't waste a second to run off, tails tucked so deeply between their legs they were practically curled against their bellies.

I sighed, shoulders dropping as I watched them disappear. Oh, I was plenty glad to be rid of them, but I'd definitely hear about this later. Lynn might not care one way or another for me, but her boys? It didn't matter that all I did was give them a little scare; I wasn't even *mean* to them. Honestly, I didn't even *want* to be mean to them. The house could be hostile enough. By the time it got back to me, the twins would surely spin a tale so terrible Lynn would have 'no choice' but to punish me.

I had gone through *so much* through middle school and high school. It wasn't my fault my mother died; I certainly would have preferred to stay with the woman who'd raised me since birth and stayed in the school where I'd had friends since my very first day. I'd never asked to be put into my father's custody, and I'd never wanted a replacement mother, regardless of what Lynn thought of me and what she thought I wanted. My father's wife made it quite clear that her own children came first, then my father, the house, probably a whole bunch of things I'm forgetting about just now, and then, finally, me.

If she had a choice, she would have pruned me off that list altogether, but her marriage to my father must have meant something to her. I was so inconsequential. Never mind I was a grown woman. I was 'still her step-daughter' when it was convenient for her, and a 'woman who needed to figure herself out' when it wasn't.

I stared in the direction the twins had run off for a few more seconds. *Should I go after them?* After another moment, I shook my head. There was nothing I could do to change whatever story the boys had decided on.

More importantly, Marnet still hadn't shown up. I reached for the phone in my back pocket. Only twenty minutes had passed, but there were still no new messages. Sighing, I

shoved it back in my jeans. Maybe Marnet had come and heard the voices, but... I was fairly confident that even if I didn't notice him, my wolf would have. She was sensitive, even more so to the presence of her mate. She had no choice, really. If Marnet had shown up, she would have noticed, even if he immediately high-tailed it out of here. I frowned; I needed to talk to him before this year's Moonmate ceremony.

Turning around and heading out, I made up my mind.

I have to go find him.

Chapter 4

Remus

Claw Mansion
Woodward County, Oklahoma

Marnet hadn't been jerking my chain when he'd implied I was the last alpha to arrive. The Claw family home practically roiled with testosterone, and there were only five alphas inside. There were whatever guests might have attended, I supposed, but they didn't even register on my radar. The only thing worse than having to witness a Moonmate ceremony was having to do it in company like this.

All eyes followed me as I entered the mansion's sitting room, each and every one sensing my presence as keenly as I sensed theirs. Marnet had only arrived a few minutes before I did – my mother needed a few minutes to freshen up, and by freshen up, she actually meant she needed to lecture me, *again*, about what I could gain if I found a mate – but Marnet was now deep in conversation with Gith, alcohol already in their hands. The dark-skinned alpha barely blinked as Marnet droned on at him. Stoic silence was one of the Black Thorn pack alpha's strongest talents.

York barely gave me a look before he leaned back over the bar. Of course Marnet had an entire wet bar installed into his sitting room the moment he inherited the house. York seemed uninterested in us all, though, his shaggy brown hair hiding his pale face as he made small talk with the man tending the bar.

I weighed my desire for a whiskey on the rocks against the notion that I would inevitably be dragged into a conversation I had no interest in, with a wolf I had even less interest in. The liquor might do a little to settle my short temper, but was it really worth it?

“Always knew you were a wallflower, deep down,” Marnet said, ice clinking in his glass. “Can’t even participate in peace talks, huh, Silverstreak?”

I didn’t roll my eyes, but it was a near thing. Clearly, being left to observe the others and enjoy the quiet of my own thoughts was not going to happen, so I may as well dive in. A few moments later, I had my whiskey, and I turned to face the others as I rested against the bar top. “What’s the deal this time, Marnet?” I replied, unbothered by his jab. It felt like there was a new alliance or peace proposal every damn year. They never lasted. Someone encroached on someone else’s territory border. A favored pack member decided they’d rather be with the Silverstreak wolves instead of a member of the Black Thorn pack. A Red Paw wolf might take a Lupus Claw member as their mate without consulting either Seff Blazepaw or Marnet. And ancestors help them if one alpha was consulted but not the other.

None of them would admit to violence or bloodshed, but it happened. We all knew it happened. Casualties were rare, but they weren’t completely unheard of. Werewolves weren’t so common that a loss should be entirely disregarded.

“My beta’s daughter will be joining Lupus Claw after tonight,” York grunted, having joined Gith and Marnet. “Marnet will be sending two brats to Shadow Rock in exchange once they turn eighteen.” My brows knit together. York sounded like he had a bit of a slur already. While I had no doubt that Marnet would provide alcohol strong enough for werewolves, it still required a man to drink a fair amount before it really started to affect him. I’d never known York to be a lightweight, either. After all, his pack ran and was largely supported by the income from Rock Distillery; the man was around alcohol (both for humans and that graded for shifters) constantly.

“Mhm,” Gith weighed in. Always talkative, that one.

Marnet fixed his cold green eyes back on me, as he sized me up. “The only packs that haven’t given some sort of token are Red Paw and Silverstreak.” His gaze only flickered to Seff for a moment. I wasn’t sure if he just thought he needed to intimidate me, or if he thought the black-haired alpha was a pushover. Both were a fool’s thoughts.

“Maybe I don’t see the need to send a token,” I said, eyeing Marnet. “What sort of token was it you said Gith and Black Thorn pack were sending?”

“Nothing,” the oldest alpha grumbled, his silvering brows pushing together.

I hid my smirk as I sipped at my whiskey. “So, this is just between you and York then.”

“No!” York blustered, pale cheeks already turning a bit ruddy. “No, Gith’s gonna, aren’t you, Gith?” He turned to face the almost-silent shifter. When Gith just blinked back at him mildly, he cursed under his breath and turned on Seff instead. “C’mon, Seff, don’t be a fucking pussy. I don’t know what Remus thinks he’s playing at. This pact is gonna last.”

Seff exhaled slowly through his nose. “Unfortunately, in my past experience—”

“Past shmast!” York growled. To Seff’s credit, the other alpha simply looked annoyed at the interruption, as if a drunkard’s insults weren’t worthy of his ire. “Don’t be such a Switzerland, Seff, take a side.”

“Sorry, I didn’t realize we were still on the playground,” Seff growled back, his upper lip finally curling. A scowl settled over his golden features; he looked like he’d had enough of York’s pointless goading, and I couldn’t blame him. “I have better things to do with my time than argue with a drunk fool. Drinking this whiskey, for instance. Greeting the other guests. Pondering the meaning of life. *Taking a shit.*”

I snorted. This was why I liked Seff the best of the local alphas. He said the last sentence with such a straight face, I’d almost missed it.

“You little — you little fucker,” York snarled. He slammed his tumbler down on the mahogany bar with such force I was surprised it didn’t shatter on impact. Marnet must have sprung for thicker glass when he built his wet bar. Made sense, when most of your guests were werewolves. “You take that back... or I’ll make you.”

York took a defensive stance, and I figured we had about three seconds before he shifted when Marnet clapped a heavy hand over York’s shoulder. “Now, now, York, none of that,” he said, as if this were a little disagreement and not about to come to blows. He picked up York’s glass with his other hand, miraculously refreshed by the silent bartender. “Today is a day for celebration and friendships, not fighting.” Marnet handed the glass back to York.

The other alpha took the glass, eyeing Marnet for only a moment. He took a sip, and his hackles seemed to drop right before our eyes. “Guess so,” he agreed, sounding a bit mulish. “Thanks, Marnet.”

“Besides, you never know,” Marnet continued, clearly not knowing when a man should just *stop*. “Your mate might be right around the corner.”

York snorted and tipped the glass to his lips. I frowned and watched him drink, unsure how I felt about the company I was currently keeping.

After exchanging a few pointless pleasantries with Seff, I stepped away from the others, retreating to the corner of the bar. As the bartender refilled my glass, I smiled to myself. It was almost impossible to get several alphas under one roof for more than a few hours without some sort of scuffle, so it was no surprise that several of them were already on edge. Perhaps York’s confidence was more fragile than I thought.

The Silverstreak clan was already on the biggest territory in the southern United States, but I wasn’t raised to be interested in accepting the status quo. The packs around me were frangible, and I wasn’t a fool. Why wait for a packless alpha to swoop in and topple one of these men when I could

simply do it myself? I had Bane and Tala here for a reason — and they weren't the only Silverstreak wolves in Oklahoma tonight. I had planted several of my other packmates to scout out the area. There was only one way to grow a pack. One of these boys had to go. If everything went according to plan tonight, I'd have a few hundred acres to add, and a handful of wolves to go along with it.

I lifted my glass, turning my head to thank the bartender when I caught sight of a new attendee out of the corner of my eye. Intrigued, I stepped away, pretending to be interested in the art hung on Marnet's sitting room wall. Given the man's formal wear — he looked like more of a penguin than Marnet or Gith, and both were sticklers for 'dressing up' when the occasion called for it — I suspected the man was a part of Marnet's household, but not a member of it.

A moment later, Marnet stormed over and the stranger paled, confirming my initial impression. Marnet looked *furious*. He made a sharp motion with one hand, and I followed the path to look back at the door the butler had come through. I hadn't noticed at first, but there was a she-wolf standing there. She was dressed as if she'd just wandered in here, her jet-black hair a bit tousled and... Was that a stick in her hair? I almost laughed, disguising the nose with a small cough before I could draw any attention to myself.

The woman was of average height, and she was dressed like... Well. *What the wolf dragged in* wasn't very generous of me, but given the event of the evening, she was seriously underdressed. Marnet only had the one sister, as far as I was aware, and I was unfortunately all too familiar with Sophia. This one was definitely someone else, thank the ancestors.

She was dressed like an average wolf in an average pack, but that was the *only* average thing about her. Her dark hair framed her delicate face, highlighting how pale her skin was. Her eyes were the purest silver I had ever seen. If a man could sing down the moon and distill it into a color, it would be the same shade as this woman's gaze. I could get lost in those eyes.

I lifted my chin, slightly intrigued. Was this woman looking for a mate, or something to keep her occupied for the night? Because if it were the latter...

Marnet whirled around, waving the butler off with his free hand. The muscle on the side of his jaw throbbed as he stormed back across the room; my gaze fell back to where the woman stood, watching as two men grabbed either arm to escort her rather forcefully away. I raised my eyebrows. *Interesting.*

Perhaps she hadn't been a guest at all — it wouldn't be the first time a lone wolf crashed a Moonmate ceremony in hopes of finding a mate and joining a pack. She didn't smell mated, and she looked perfectly reasonable. She didn't have the stench of cortisol either — even just a few weeks as a lone wolf was so stressful, other shifters could pick them out from the stench alone. It made me wonder why she wasn't participating in the festivities... and Marnet's reaction towards her. Oh, yes, that was terribly interesting.

Maybe she's trying to catch Marnet's eye tonight? I tried to hide my amusement at the idea. Why anyone would want to attract *him*, I hadn't the faintest idea. *Well, there's no accounting for taste.*

Sensing potential gossip, I wondered if I could find my mother before the festivities really began. Idle hearsay didn't interest me, but if it was something Marnet was upset about...

Someone tapped my shoulder. I turned around to see Seff. He inclined his head to one side. "Bad time?" He glanced over my shoulder for whatever might have been distracting me.

I shook my head. "Not at all. What's on your mind, Seff?" I asked, mirroring his look. We'd exchanged a brief greeting when I first arrived, but nothing else.

Seff hummed, lifting one shoulder. "The company around here isn't...ideal," he replied, and I had to bite back a small smirk. I knew Marnet didn't have a lot of fans among the local alphas, but it was gratifying to hear one admit it. Especially since Seff was a wolf I'd known for quite some time. "I thought we could catch up. There's a balcony." He paused,

nodding to a large, full-wall window a few lengths away. I hadn't been paying attention, but now that Seff mentioned it, I noticed that there were handles, indicating that these 'windows' were actually doors.

"That sounds like a fine idea," I decided. Marnet in a sour mood might be even worse company than York when he was cruising steadily from 'mildly buzzed' to 'drunk.'

We lapsed into silence as we walked, Seff pausing to close the door behind us. I leaned against the stone railing, taking a moment to admire the architecture of the balcony before I realized there was something going on below us.

Curious, I leaned over the rail. One person was being escorted across the house grounds towards the stables by two others. I'd never understood why Marnet or his father tried to keep horses. They could be pretty, sure, and women certainly liked them, but they were still prey animals at the end of the day. They also weren't damn fools; a horse knew a predator when it saw one, and a werewolf was most certainly a predator.

I'd never met a horse I liked, and I suspected the horses felt the same way. A mutual dislike was fine by me.

The sound of a sharp gasp nearby ripped me from my equine musings. The third person was a woman? I tipped my head slightly, trying to be discreet as I sniffed the air. To my surprise, I recognized the scent. It was the silver-eyed she-wolf that had been standing in the doorway just a few minutes prior. Whatever had gone on between her, the butler, and Marnet, the Lupus Claw alpha hadn't been pleased. But they'd gone the stable?

Seff cleared his throat and I turned, taking a sip from my whiskey to disguise my interest in whatever was going on in the yard. "So. It's been a while."

Did the black-haired man really drag me out here for small talk? I had assumed he had wanted to discuss something of consequence with me. Sure, I appreciated the fresh air, and I

was quite curious about what was going on below, but Seff couldn't have known that. Some of the hair on the back of my neck began to bristle as my wolf stirred, and I had to fight back the urge to growl at the man for wasting my time. "How are you?" Seff asked, and I couldn't avoid an answer.

"I'm doing fine," I said, trying to settle my wolf back down. It wasn't Seff's fault that something more interesting was going on nearby. But seriously, hadn't he heard it too? Wasn't he curious?

When I wasn't any more forthcoming than that, Seff sighed and provided another question. "And your mother? How's she?"

My frustration eased slightly. I had known Seff since we were pups; he had known Fiona back in her glory days, before my father... Before my father had died. "Fiona is fine. Finding some poor wolf to harass about her dress just now, I'm sure. She has to keep up on the latest trends. You know how it is."

That got a smile out of Seff. I paused for a moment, feeling the pressure to continue this awkward, stilted conversation. "And how are you?"

"Doing well, thank you," he said. There was the hint of a smile on his lips, and nothing more.

"And the Red Paw pack?"

His hazel eyes brightened by a degree, the sleepy wolf locked away inside waking with interest. "Red Paw is doing well," he hummed, unable to hide the hint of pride warming his voice. "Several of the younger members have reached the age of majority over the past few years. Quick learners. Taking on a lot of responsibility." He nodded to himself as he spoke, clearly replaying something in his mind. Whatever the memory was, it pleased him, and a small smile lifted the corner of his lips. Even his brown cheeks looked a little warmer as he reflected on his pack. "Yeah. Red Paw is doing real well these days."

I paused, briefly thinking on my own pack, on the younger members. *I wonder how they'd stand up against Red Paw's*

newest members. I got caught in thought and let the silence stretch on too long. Seff's expression morphed into something that resembled actual concern. "Are you sure you're okay, Remus? I know we haven't seen much of each other over the past few years, but that doesn't change anything between us. You know that, right?"

I paused, my eyes flickering back to his face. Here I was, trying to rush through this conversation so I could snoop on Marnet's guests, and Seff was making an earnest attempt to catch up with me. *As much as you give your mother a hard time for her incessant gossiping, Remus, you aren't behaving any differently right now.*

I straightened my shoulders, trying to rein my attention back in and offer it in full to Seff. We had been friends in childhood and in high school, too; my summer camping trips with my packmates always took us to Arkansas. Spending time with my old man and camping in the woods with Seff and his father had always been something I'd looked forward to when I was young.

For better or worse, adulthood was different; I had Silverstreak Motors to look after, and Seff had Red Rock Logistics over in central Arkansas under his care. If nothing else, the distance became challenging when we had actual work to fill our days, much less an entire pack of werewolves counting on us.

My face fell a little. "I told you, I'm doing fine." What I meant to be a reassurance came out much sharper, even to my ears.

Seff's expression shifted by a few degrees; even if he didn't move, I could feel a chasm start to open up between us. "Okay, Remus. Well, no worries. I just wanted to check in, you know? There aren't a lot of wolves I'd go chase the moon with. You remember that one time we accidentally caught Jyllian Smythe skinny dipping? I thought..." He trailed off, shaking his head. For a moment, he stared into his tumbler, then gave me one last look, his mouth slanted to the side. "Well, don't worry about it. I'll leave you to it."

I opened my mouth, struggling for something to say, but Seff slid by me. He clapped a hand over my shoulder before reaching for the door and letting himself back into Marnet's sitting room. I remained on the balcony, staring at the door for a moment. Aggravation warred with guilt as I watched Seff meander over to York, attempting to engage the other alpha as they got their glasses refilled.

What the hell was I supposed to say, anyways? We weren't teenagers anymore. I was a busy man. Was I supposed to apologize for the fact that we had grown apart? It wasn't just me. Besides, so much time had passed.

The guilt continued to chew at me, and I reached into my pocket, fiddling with the phone there. I had half a mind to text Tala and ask her to pass the word to spare Seff—

Something glinted in the distance and I turned, staring back across the yard. To my surprise, it was *Marnet* who was storming out from his party and towards to the stable now. Was he going to meet the mystery woman for a little liaison of his own, then, or did the man have something more devious up his sleeve?

Interesting.

I would definitely need to keep an eye on the both of them.

Chapter 5

Luna

Stable, Claw Mansion
Woodward County, Oklahoma

Before I could even ask what the heck was going on, Marnet's butler shoved me to the ground. I yelped, startled, as I hit the hay; my hands flew out in front of me to break my fall. Though the man was just one member of Marnet's squad of servants (and grooms and cooks and cleaners and the rest of the small army of minions he employed), I had never had any bad interactions with him. In fact, Marnet never had me over to his home. It made no sense for this person would be so hostile towards me.

Seriously, all I had done was ask if he could call Marnet over for me! It was obvious my mate had a lot of guests already over; my wolf was certain he'd simply gotten tied up with the arrival of the other alphas. She thought it was obvious: he had wanted to sneak out to spend time with us to fortify himself before the Moonmate ceremony began.

I wasn't entirely sure that was true, but it *was* possible some of the visiting alphas had arrived earlier than planned. It didn't take a genius to notice they liked messing with each other. Would it really have killed the man to text, though?

I started picking myself up from the stable floor. "You stay here," the butler barked, pointing at the interior of the barn.

My brows knit together as I glanced around. None of the horses were in here, even though it was near dusk. They were probably overnighing in one of the large paddocks surrounding the property. In fact, there wasn't anything in here, so there was nothing to explain what I was supposed to be doing. Scowling, I turned back to the butler. "For how long?" I folded my arms over my chest. The back of my neck prickled uncomfortably. "What am I even—"

The butler waved a hand, cutting me off. "The alpha will grant you an audience when he sees fit," he replied, voice sharp and haughty. His eyes were stony in the low light. Something cold settled in the pit of my gut as I watched his face; I barely recognized this person in front of me. I couldn't say I was particularly friendly with anyone in Marnet's household, on the rare occasions we crossed paths, but none of them had ever spoken to me like that, even though they had no idea who I was. Marnet insisted on *manners* among his staff.

My wolf growled, ears lowering closer and closer to her skull each time this man opened his mouth. My confusion paled in comparison to her growing anger, her frustration being subducted beneath the plate of injured pride. The molten mass did nothing to soothe her, and Marnet's butler was well on his way to making an enemy out of us both. Did this man know who he was talking to? There was no way Marnet would stand for this behavior, even if he hadn't claimed me publicly yet.

"Stop it," I said, not entirely sure if I was speaking to the rude butler or my wolf. The man was clearly just trying to do his job, but he was crossing a line, and I was starting to have trouble keeping her anger at bay. "I just need to talk to Marnet for a moment. I promise it will be quick, and regardless of what he's told you about tonight, he'll want to see me."

"Oh, come off it," the butler replied, folding his arms over his chest as he took something of a defensive stance. "You aren't special. If there was an exception to be made for you, then Mr. Claw would have told me." He pulled his lips back in a toothy grin, but there was nothing mirthful there.

The feeling of ice water dripping down my spine returned and I stiffened, trying not to let this man see me shudder. “Actually, if you just—”

“I know who you are,” the butler snapped, the last threads of his patience giving way. “I am a trusted member of the Claw Household, after all. Marnet’s made no secret to us that there are several women who would do just about anything to be with him. The last thing this party needs is another gold digger trying to get her grubby claws on the Claw family’s fortune.”

The revelation stunned me into silence. *Trusted member of the household...? Gold digger? Exactly how many women are showing up on Marnet’s door?*

My wolf hesitated for a moment, temporarily blindsided by the information. I had a hundred different questions, but I didn’t think the butler could answer any of them — and if he could, he probably wouldn’t, judging by the sneer on his face. *Is this what Marnet told people about me? There was no way — if he really thought I was just after his money, why would he keep seeing me? Did everyone in the Claw Household think I was some sort of gold digger? What about Sophia and Kate? Did that include them, too?* I felt like the foundation of the barn had given way out from under me and I was suspended in midair, falling, falling, *falling*, and I had no idea where the bottom actually was. I had no idea when I’d make impact.

Something colder settled over me like a funeral shroud. *Had Noah Claw known about me, too? Had Marnet told his father? If our alpha had known, why the hell had he kept putting off claiming me publicly?* The haze made my vision turn cloudy; *I will not cry*. I had always been one to tear up at the drop of a hat. It didn’t matter what sort of emotion I was feeling — happiness, confusion, grief, frustration — as long as it was powerful enough, my eyes started to prickle and it was only a matter of time before fat, wet drops were rolling down my cheeks.

The butler seemed to sense my confusion and opted to capitalize on it. His sneer grew wider. “I’ve heard about you, you know. Luna...Highhorse? High...? Oh, whatever.

Everyone knows Arden's oldest daughter is a wreck; it only makes sense you'd come sniffing around Marnet in an attempt to salvage your reputation."

"What?" I asked, hating how shaky my voice sounded. Some of the popular girls had given me a hard time back in high school, deciding I was a skank when I'd kissed one of their boyfriends — no one had believed I didn't know he was taken — but I had thought that reputation had been left behind when I'd graduated.

Something my stepmother said to me suddenly stood out in my memory. *Your reputation does so much damage to this family, Luna. You really need to watch your behavior more closely. It's like you were raised by wild animals.*

The butler snorted. "Don't play a fool. It doesn't help...but I guess the apple doesn't fall far from the tree, does it? Your mother was the one who tried to woo Arden away from his mate, after all."

In my moment of vacillation, my wolf pushed through the cloud of thoughts swirling around us. The anger radiating off her was enough to burn away the emotional fog, like the hot summer sun clearing away a damp, dewy morning. My upper lip peeled back to expose my teeth as I mirrored her; the skin prickled on my nape as the hair there stood stand on end. The skin on my arms tingled beneath my shirt. "Do not speak about my mother that way. You need to watch your damn mouth," I snapped. I was barely able to suppress my wolf's rage. This man had about three seconds before I—

"Luna! That's enough!"

I would recognize that voice anywhere. I spun around, forgetting all about the nasty butler as my defenses dropped; my wolf's seething rage melted into a warm affection. *Her alpha.* Surely he was here to set everything straight.

Marnet dismissed his butler with a wave of his hand, and to my relief, the man went without a word of argument. I didn't even wait to hear the stable door roll shut before I was closing

the space between us, striding over the hay to wrap my arms around Marnet. I was so relieved to finally see him — and hopefully I'd finally get some answers about what the hell was going on. I detested being angry with others, and the fact that the butler had almost managed to bring that out in me... The thought alone was enough to make me shudder.

Unfortunately, my mate didn't seem to feel the same way. I went in for a hug and he sidestepped me effortlessly, planting a broad palm on my shoulder blade as he directed me further into the barn. Though I glanced up at him, I didn't protest.

I was always sensitive towards him; that's simply how it was with mate bonds. If he was excited or worried or randy, I always knew. It wasn't just knowing, either. I tried to acknowledge his emotions without vocalizing them, anticipate how to celebrate or alleviate or enjoy together. Marnet had never been particularly good at reciprocating, but it wasn't his fault. I'd never seen his mother be particularly caring towards him. Besides, he usually made some effort when we were alone and no one was around to judge him for what an alpha should or shouldn't do, so it had never bothered me that much before.

But now?

Now Marnet was acting like everything was fine.

Even if my wolf was relieved to see him, he should have sensed my confusion and anger only moments ago. If he didn't, then why the hell had he even come out to the stable in the first place? There weren't even any horses in here! "Marnet—" I began, but that was the only word my mate let me get out before he rounded towards me, face red.

"Luna, what the hell is wrong with you? Why the hell would you come here? Couldn't you see I was busy? What a stupid thing to do!" He spoke rapidly, clearly pissed, but keeping his voice low. Then he turned away again, running his hand through his light brown hair, as if he were *worried*. My brows only pulled closer together.

"What do you mean? Marnet, you blew me off! *You left me* a note asking to meet up, I didn't ask you!" I replied, reaching

into my jeans to fish out the crumpled yellow note. “You’ve never been that late before! I was worried!”

He scoffed, then reached out to snatch the little piece of paper away from me. I blinked and took a step back — I didn’t care if he had it. All he had to do was ask.

“Worried? I’m obviously busy, Luna. I know you’re a bit of an airhead sometimes, but surely even *you* could notice that there are alphas from all the neighboring states,” he scoffed.

I could feel my face heat. “I’m not an idiot,” I said. “I know it’s the Moonmate ceremony tonight. I was just worried. I thought maybe something had happened to you...” I trailed off, my voice sounding weak even to my own ears. I gave up with a small shrug. *Should I have just called to check in? Text? Why the hell is he making such a big deal out of this, anyways?*

Marnet rolled his eyes. “I thought...” he said in a terrible imitation of my voice, managing to sound both nasally and whiny at the same time. My face flamed hotter. “No, I think the problem is that you *didn’t* think. If I couldn’t make it, something more important came up, obviously. There are four other alphas here. Four, Luna! Someone has to make sure this all makes a good impression on them, and it sure as hell isn’t going to be Kate or Sophia. Besides...”

The second half of what Marnet said was completely lost on me; it felt like my world was consumed by a dull static, an ugly white noise composed of smothered buzzing and a faltering heartbeat. *Something more important came up...?* Replaying it over in my head made my heart lurch and my wolf gave a miserable whine, sounding positively *ill* over the emotion we were both trying to stomach.

I was supposed to be the most important thing. I was his mate, damn it! It wasn’t as if I was even being particularly selfish with his time. If Marnet needed to juggle these men because he’d only been the alpha of Lupus Claw for the past year and needed to prove something, that was fine. Hell, if he’d just *let me in*, I’d be happy to step up and help him! He

didn't need to rely on his mother or sister. I was perfectly capable of logistics myself.

"Marnet," I said softly, my voice betraying the quiver in my chin. *Oh, no, not again. I'm not going to cry. Not now!* I tried to swallow down the well of emotion. If I teared up now, Marnet was never going to take me seriously. "All you had to do was tell me you were busy."

The man paused for a moment, looking like he was sizing me up. "You're right. I'm sorry," he said, as if this were some sort of business transaction that he could simply put in a bin and leave behind the moment it was over. "But you can't come back inside, Luna. I'm busy, and this needs to remain a secret." He pursed his lips, narrowing his eyes as he continued to look at me, making a motion with one finger between the two of us.

I startled, eyes wide with shock. *A secret? Seriously? That's what he's worried about?*

"Marnet, when are you going to keep your promise to me?" I demanded, retreating a step. My wolf whined again, clearly caught between her desire to keep us both safe and her need to be with her mate — to be made whole. There was nothing worse for her than when Marnet and I came into direct conflict like this.

He said nothing. I could practically hear the seconds crawl by. Still, nothing. I clamped my jaw shut, trying not to give away any more of my shock on my face. When I took a step forward, he took a step back, maintaining the distance I had put between us a moment before. "Marnet," I tried again, my heart giving a desperate lurch. All the doubts I'd felt earlier today at our love nest came welling up and I searched his face wildly, trying to parse even one inkling of what he was thinking right now. "Marnet, please." I reached for his hand again.

I had to ask to ask the question I'd been avoiding. My stomach lurched, but I did not let the man go. I didn't dare.

Marnet didn't stop me this time, but the alpha simply stared forward, his face an impenetrable wall of apathy.

“Marnet, I’m your mate. Don’t you want people to know about us?”

Time kept slithering forward. *Tick. Tick. Tick.* I scrutinized Marnet’s face for something. Anything. I didn’t see so much as a blink, a flare of his nostril, a tic on the lower side of his left jaw. There was nothing there. Each beat of my heart felt faster and more painful even as I tried to keep my breathing as calm and as unaffected as his.

“Oh, my—”

I took a step back, releasing his hand. The answer should have been easy. Obvious. *Immediate.* The answer should have been *yes.* Marnet could have been shy or worried or cautious or a hundred other different things, but no, he wasn’t any of those things, was he? *You should have listened to your gut. He’s been playing you along, just like everyone else in this shitty little town.*

My wolf made such a keening noise I was surprised no one else heard it as I stared at Marnet, still too shocked to say anything else.

Finally, he moved, offering me a half-hearted shrug. “Luna...” He trailed off. He’d run out of words. Maybe there was simply nothing else to say. After a minute that lasted an entire lifetime, he shook his head, turned around, and walked back towards the entrance of the stables. He had no other words for me.

My heart lurched and my wolf propelled me forward, scrabbling across the surface like this was her last chance at life. Like instead of following after the soul that was supposed to be her mate, she was scrambling across the surface of a frozen pond, only inches from cracking it and disappearing beneath the icy water. *I felt frozen, awkward and stumbling* as I hurried after him, reaching out to grab his arm before he could open the doors.

I grasped Marnet tightly enough that a startled noise squeezed out from between his chapped lips. He turned towards me, green eyes widened with shock as he looked between us. I had never laid a hand on him before (well, not

outside of the secret cabin, and certainly not in anything other than affection or desire), and it seemed he couldn't quite believe I had done it now.

I followed his gaze, slightly relaxing the death grip I had on him. *Breathe, Luna. Breathe. No need to freak out now. Do not freak out right now.* My self-coaching attempt didn't really work. My wolf was still half-frenzied, convinced this might turn into a life-or-death situation. Like there was something slipping through her paws, even if my weak human senses couldn't pick up on it. My heart still sounded like it was running a marathon in my ears; my hind brain was pretty sure we were still perched precariously on a precipice, and we couldn't see what might be waiting for us on the other side of the fall.

How many times do I have to fall today?

He opened his mouth, about to address me, when someone called out his name.

“Marnet? Marnet, where *are* you?”

The voice sent shivers down my spine.

A moment later, the barn door slid open, revealing none other than Sophia Claw herself. She wasn't alone. A few party guests milled a few steps behind her, clearly more interested in chatting among themselves than whatever Sophia and her brother were doing. I didn't recognize the woman she was standing with, shoulders almost touching as they chatted, but she smelled like a wolf, and Marnet didn't seem particularly surprised by her presence. He had removed himself from my grip, however, brushing at his tailored shirt sleeve like he'd gotten a few pesky stalks of hay stuck in the fabric. When he looked at his younger sister, he somehow managed to look *bored*.

My heart faltered again. *Was he just playing it cool for his sister, or have I really been **that** wrong about this guy?*

Sophia gave me one quick looked and arched a well-manicured brow, fixing her brother with an imperious look.

“Marnet? Your guests have been wondering after you. What are you doing out here with this woman?” Her glittering eyes gave away her sweet tone. I knew she knew who I was. Knew my name. She was doing this on purpose. I caught her gaze and quickly looked away, trying to pretend her presence didn’t bother me. Sophia shifted her hawk-eyed gaze from me to her older brother, tugging on the hand of the quiet male to step inside the barn.

My skin crawled at having this woman in my vicinity. She might have brought me and Marnet together in some strange, twisted way, but that didn’t change the fact that the younger Claw had tormented me through elementary school, and most of high school, too. *Don’t give her the satisfaction of seeing you uncomfortable*, I instructed myself, trying to school my expression back into something that might be mistaken as neutral.

“Luna works in the barn,” Marnet said without missing a beat. He looked down to fix his right sleeve. My heart twisted in my chest. *Surely this is a joke. This must be some kind of misguided, stupid joke*, I thought, trying to ignore the way my vision swam. *How could he talk about me like this?*

He looked up at his sister as if I had simply ceased to exist. The woman scoffed, clearly not buying the story Marnet was trying to sell. “As you may have noticed, it’s going to get dark soon. I wanted to know what was taking so long and why my horses weren’t in yet.” He glanced back in my direction with an unimpressed sigh. “She said she’ll make sure they’re all in before nightfall.”

Sophia shook her head and tsked. “Why Mother insists on charity cases, I’ll never understand.” She flashed me another beatific smile. Apparently, she had decided to play along with Marnet’s terrible story in front of their guests. One small corner of my brain wanted me to reach out and grab her by the shoulders, shake her until all those pretty manners fell away and that fake-ass smile cracked. Fortunately, the rest of me had better sense; I shoved my hands into my pockets, unsure of what to do. I shot Marnet a pleading look. He had to understand how much I disliked his sister.

We were mates. *Soul mates*. If we were going to be together for the rest of our lives, I was going to have to live with this woman, too. The very least Marnet could do was make it even the tiniest bit more bearable.

He did no such thing.

Finished with fiddling with his shirt, he turned back to me. “As I said, Luna. Make sure the horses are in as soon as possible. They’re valuable animals; each one is probably worth more than whatever you have in the bank.”

With that, he turned, using his hand to sweep his sister and her friends out of the stables. No one protested any further, seemingly relieved to leave the yard and return to the main celebration.

I stared after them in disbelief. It went without saying that there was a bit of difference between the wealth Marnet had been born into and what little my family still held on to, but he’d never used it as a weapon against me before. *Has he always felt this way?* I thought frantically, carding through dozens of memories. Maybe the odd little quirks I’d brushed off before had been warning signs. I thought he didn’t leave marks because he wanted to always appear professional. Or that he didn’t want me calling him when he traveled because he was with potential clients. Or that he didn’t have me over to his house because he was trying to protect me from Sophia.

Maybe he just didn’t want anyone else to know...

My wolf wailed at the idea. My head throbbed, overwhelmed by the battery of intense emotion and roller coaster of disappointment and relief. I felt like I had run five miles. My heart still stuttered awkwardly in my chest as I watched the group disappear, none of them so much as giving me a second look.

But I didn’t care what *they* thought of me — I cared what *Marnet* thought of me.

Maybe you’re being paranoid, I tried to tell myself, wishing my wolf would calm down and give me a moment to *think*. *Maybe you just shouldn’t have put Marnet on the spot.*

You know he's not good at expressing his feelings, maybe he didn't mean what he said...

I looked back towards the Claw mansion and sighed. He had promised me... and he hadn't actually backed out of that promise, even now. Maybe I just needed to reset my expectations.

Well, whatever was going on, I just needed some time to think. At least the stable was quiet enough to give me that.

Chapter 6

Remus

Stable, Claw Mansion
Woodward County, Oklahoma

Awoooooooooooooooooooo.

The sound was faint and far away. If I wasn't enjoying the late afternoon air outside as I appreciated the view from the balcony outside Marnet's sitting room, I might not have heard it at all. I tipped my head, fairly certain the low noise had come from the direction of the ground's stable — and that was no horse. There hadn't even been horses inside, if I had heard Marnet correctly. That was definitely a wolf, and there was a distinctively feminine quality to her voice. I had only seen one female go in that direction — the silver-eyed she-wolf. Marnet and the butler had gone that way too. Sophia had been in the barn briefly, before insisting her brother rejoin us as we headed back towards the mansion. A disagreement? Injury?

It was such a faint cry, I wasn't fully convinced it had even come from the barn. Deciding I needed another drink before I pursued this train of thought any further, I waltzed inside, taking quick stock of the room. Marnet had returned from his visit to the stables — I had heard a rumor there would be a "twilight carriage ride." I had never known the man to be one for festivities, but maybe taking over for old Noah Claw had changed him. I was curious, if nothing else.

Gith was chatting with someone I didn't recognize. Okay, chatting was a strong word, but York had abandoned the bar (finally, thank fuck) and seemed to be regaling Seff with some animated story, apparently forgetting about whatever slight he'd felt Seff had offered him earlier. Seff glanced over and raised his brows when our gazes met. I felt a pang of guilt as I wondered if I should rescue my childhood friend from a tall tale that could possibly last well into the next three hours.

Drink first.

Drink first, damsels in distress second.

I had barely gotten my refreshed whiskey on the rocks when I sensed another presence closing in.

“Remus, darling,” a cool voice drawled near my ear. “How good of you to show up! I can't help but notice you're looking rather bored.”

I rested one arm on the mahogany bar top, twisting slightly to look down at Sophia Claw. The corner of my mouth twitched sideways. Whereas Marnet had taken after their father and reached a solid six feet, poor Sophia had taken after her mother — and then some. She was at least a foot shorter than I was, though she always seemed to be wearing heels that would kill a lesser wolf. I appreciated a woman who took pride in the impression she made.

“You're going to help me out with that, are you?” I shot back, unable to help myself. She wasn't wrong, after all. I *was* a bit bored, and Sophia was by far more interesting than Gith or York... or even her brother, for that matter.

She fixed me with a pleasant smile as she twirled a brunette curl around one finger. “Maybe. I was here with someone, you know, but the man is such a wallflower. Not for me.”

I shook my head, tscking my tongue against my teeth. *Poor sod*, I thought, not really feeling poorly at all. He should have known better than to try to tangle with Sophia. “More's the pity,” I replied.

“You know, we have a few hours yet,” she whispered, leaning in conspiratorially. “Marnet is planning a tour and carriage rides, but I think he’s still waiting for everyone to arrive. We could sneak off to the guest quarters and none would be the wiser.”

I couldn’t help but chuckle; perhaps other men would be put off by Sophia’s straightforward nature, but I appreciated it. There was no wondering what she wanted, and she didn’t waste my time in getting to her point, either. Perhaps, if she were my type, I’d go for her.

Offering Sophia a pleasant smile, I shook my head. It wasn’t as if she wasn’t attractive — she certainly was. Though she was shorter than what some might consider ‘conventionally beautiful,’ she had a power about her. She knew how to dress herself, and I didn’t just mean in the latest trends and with the hottest designers (though one could always count on Miss Claw to know what was in this season, stuck in Oklahoma or not). Sophia understood the shape of her body and dressed as such. There were few things sexier than a confident woman, but I had seen the way she had spoken to a few guests earlier in the day. She had even snapped at a maid who had made the grievous error of trying to take an empty glass before Sophia was apparently ready to release it.

Speaking down to one’s staff really took the veneer off a polished presentation. The maid was just trying to do her job, after all — did she really need to be snapped at like a misbehaving pet? Sophia was gorgeous, and confident, but I had the feeling getting involved with her might be a bit more trouble than a liaison was worth.

It wouldn’t do to snub the host’s sister, though. I leaned down to whisper into her ear. “As tempting as that is, I wouldn’t want to step on Marnet’s paws.”

Sophia peered at me with her lower lip pushed out in a dramatic pout. “He doesn’t have to know.”

I hummed and shook my head. “I’m afraid I have to insist,” I replied softly. “Besides, shouldn’t you be looking for your mate? The lucky fellow might be here tonight.”

The younger Claw fixed me with a sugar-sweet simper. “I didn’t know you cared so much about my soul!” Her eyes gleamed. “What a thoughtful man. I do like that about you. Maybe *you’re* my mate, Remus Silverstreak. You never know.”

This woman really was insisting on trying my patience, wasn’t she? I bit my tongue, trying to maintain my composure even as she started to wear on me. Apparently, I wasn’t as successful as I thought, because Sophia withdrew, her upper lip twitching slightly. I needed to defuse this situation...ASAP.

“If we were mates, we would know,” I told her, lifting a brow. “We’ve met several times since you’ve turned eighteen.”

Sophia dismissed me with a sniff, clearly uninterested in my logic. That was fine, I thought. The Claw woman was an interesting distraction, and nothing more.

The rest of the afternoon progressed exactly as Sophia had indicated that it might. Eventually, the horses must have been tended to, either by the stable girl or someone else, and Marnet did his best to show off “the splendor of the Claw grounds” from the carriages. I’m not sure how many guests fell for that; I opted to walk with Kate Claw instead. Her belated mate might have been the previous alpha, but she was nothing like Marnet — or Sophia, for that matter. Maybe Kate had been different when she was younger, or perhaps she was simply behaving because my mother had come along for the walk of the grounds as well, but I far preferred her quiet pride to Marnet’s obnoxious grandstanding any day of the week.

I mean *horses*. *Honestly*.

Even if I preferred Kate’s company to almost anyone else here, Sophia wasn’t the last single she-wolf to sidle up to me with the ‘clever’ implication that maybe we were long-lost mates after all, as if I were stupid enough not to realize until said female had the courage to point it out to me. It felt like each hour stretched on longer than the last. Time was as sticky and eternal as stale taffy, refusing to *move on* no longer how long I chewed (or how long I waited).

I was *bored*. So fucking *bored*.

But I needed to be patient. My mother always chided me as a boy. *Patience is a virtue, Remus. Even if you don't believe me now, there will come a time that patience will serve you better than your hot temper.*

I shot Fiona a sideways look, trying not to grimace. She had no idea that this was anything more than a Moonmate ceremony hosted by the Lupus Claw pack, and I had no interest in trying to convince her otherwise. Regardless of if she agreed with me or not, there was no way my mother would let me escape that kind of revelation without some kind of lesson attached — even if it was simply admitting to the validity of a past lecture.

I just had to wait. This was too important for me to spoil because I felt a little antsy. I had endured far, far worse. All I had to do was be present for this event; it wasn't the first Moonmate ceremony I had witnessed, and I was sure it wouldn't be the last.

After our dull stroll of the grounds, I ducked away from the crowd as the guests busied themselves with hors d'oeuvres or more drinks. I slipped into the restroom for a much-needed break. Inside, I took a breath, and then fiddled with one of my cuff links, watching the light reflect off the Silverstreak emblem. The constant socializing and flirtation and scheming was finally starting to *really* grate on my nerves. This wasn't my idea of a good time, regardless of my motives. I'd rather be back in Texas, at Silverstreak Motors. Hell, I'd rather be in a quarterly meeting with Tala and Bane, reviewing the numbers and our next moves — and those meetings usually lasted an entire day.

Straightening, I walked over to the bathroom mirror, checking to make sure my dark hair was still pulled back. It was, but a few strands had escaped the bun. I pulled the tie out, shaking out my hair before bending at the waist to gather it back up, smoothing the top of my head as I carefully arranged the bun at the back of my scalp. When I glanced back

at my reflection, a small smile tugged at one corner of my mouth.

No wonder the girls keep wandering over to you, Remus, I thought, smoothing a hand over my thick beard. You clean up pretty damn nicely.

As I had told my mother, I had no intention of finding a mate — not today and not ever — but it never hurt to look good. After all, as pack alpha, I represented all the Silverstreak wolves. I represented my mother. Showing up looking like something the wolf dragged in would be an insult to my parents *and* my hosts. It didn't matter if I gave a rat's ass about Marnet Claw or not, my mother would never let me hear the end of it. Tongues would wag, and no matter my reason or intent, every wolf from here to Minnesota would have a theory why I turned up looking disheveled to a rival pack's Moonmate ceremony, and none of that would help me continue to strengthen the Silverstreak pack.

I turned away, and the cagey feeling crept back up almost immediately, a tide rushing in around my feet. *I refuse to get cold feet, literal or metaphorical*, I thought. I knew my mother was not going to appreciate what I planned to do next. I didn't even need to ask. She still held tradition near and dear, after all, and while it was true a few older wolves probably felt the same, I had to hope that majority of wolves in my generation were a bit more forward thinking. If not, I would have a whole lot of fires to put out.

Hopefully, they'll see that this is the way forward. I forced myself to stop fiddling with my hair and the cuffs of my sleeves. This was happening. I had worked too hard and put too much into this to back out now, and for what? Because I had a few strange feelings? Because Seff had decided to talk to me and... And...?

That's all I had. *Definitely not a worthy reason.*

I glanced at the door again, ensuring it was still locked. I fished a small device out of my jacket pocket. The bug detector was small and slim, looking no different than a large

smartphone to the unsuspecting eye — and why would anyone ever suspect I had anything like this, anyways?

Fiddling with the knobs, I hummed once I recognized the correct display and then began to sweep the device around the room. One of the perks of being a werewolf was the exceptional hearing — I might not have been able to hear the gentle crackle of a recording device when it was in some sort of silent or sleeping mode, but the detector I had purchased would force them to cut on, and would alert me to their presence. It allowed me to be doubly sure there was no one listening in (though if Marnet had planted bugs in the bathroom offered to his guests, he was considerably more perverse than I had thought).

Neither my ears nor my bug detector picked up anything, even after sweeping the room twice. Satisfied, I switched my new toy back off and returned it to the inside of my jacket. I pulled out a small phone instead; it wasn't my usual, day-to-day device, but rather a cheap plastic burner I used to communicate with Bane. He had a similar one, and both of us were able to discard the items at a moment's notice if required. It was perhaps a bit paranoid — this wasn't a damn James Bond movie, after all — but it certainly did the job.

I pressed the first speed dial and waited to hear the telltale click. "Bane," I said, waiting.

"*Here, boss,*" replied my beta, sounding faintly distant. That was the problem with low-tech solutions, I supposed. Reliable, but, well, *low tech*.

"Good. Status report." It was best to keep this as quick and concise as possible. Thankfully, Bane was not a man of many words unless prompted.

The beta cleared his throat. "*Alpha team notes no potential issues. Beta team also in place. Delta team waiting over the border, ready to move as soon as you give the word.*" He paused for a moment and I waited, rumbling a wordless *go on*. I could hear him sigh. "*Two guards had to be subdued. Both encountered by beta.*"

Bane didn't offer any further information, so I assumed it wasn't a major issue. If it was, he would have elaborated. The man might not be particularly chatty, but he was thorough; I could always trust my beta to get the job done, and get the job done *right*.

Bane cleared his throat.

"Yes?" I prompted him.

"The plan hasn't changed, right? Still going to fold the wolves in."

I nodded, even though he couldn't see me. "The plan hasn't changed," I affirmed.

"Understood," Bane said.

"Good. Wait for my signal." I closed the line and tucked the device back into my coat. Everything straightened, I finally left the bathroom, pleased to see there was no one lurking in the hall waiting for a turn who could have overheard my conversation. *Excellent*.

After a moment of thought, I headed back out to the balcony. The landscape surrounding the Claw ranch was just as beautiful by moonlight as it was in the sunshine, and it elicited a small smile no matter how hard I was trying to remain impassive. There was nothing that could compare to the cool, fresh air out here. I couldn't see a single manmade light on the horizon. Even with the light flowing out from the mansion, there were dozens if not hundreds of stars visible overhead. If the owner put the lights out, I imagined you could even see the Milky Way. I'd traveled a lot of places (mostly for business), but none of those places had allowed me such a view of the galaxy.

Maybe, if all went according to plan, I would transfer my base of operations out here. Maybe I'd even live here, and leave the place back in Texas for my mother. At the very least, I could probably make this some sort of weekend home. It wasn't far at all from the local airport, and it clearly had no issue with the company jet. I smiled despite myself, stroking my chin as I gave a small nod. I loved Austin and almost

everything about that city, but it didn't have views like this. It didn't have fresh air like this. It *definitely* didn't have a skyline like this.

The Silverstreak family home in Texas had a lot of memories (for better or worse, I hadn't exactly decided), and I certainly wouldn't get rid of it, but...

Yeah, I thought, almost wistful. Having something of my very own. Something that I earned, not something that Mom or Dad passed down to me. This could be it. This could be mine.

I drummed my fingers against the stone railing. I took a moment to compose myself before I went back inside. I very well couldn't waltz in with a dopey smile on my face, or my mother might get some ridiculous idea, like I had actually *found* a girl.

After a moment, the cool air did its good work and any flush in my face had disappeared. My expression had returned to a calm, neutral expression — and just in the nick of time. I heard the soft snick of the balcony door opening and turned around, ready to abandon it to its next visitor when said visitor stopped me dead in my tracks.

That woman had eyes made of pure quicksilver.

Chapter 7

Luna

Claw Mansion
Woodward County, Oklahoma

“Oh!”

I had come up to the balcony looking for Marnet. Admittedly, I had only taken a quick glance, seeing the general outline and shape of a man I had assumed was my mate. He was the same height, at least six feet. I hadn't investigated it any further. Marnet had made it rather clear he didn't want me bothering his guests or making a scene, so meeting him up away from the party seemed like a perfect spot to have a quick word. I didn't really want Lynn or my step-sisters seeing us together, either. Honestly, if my family didn't see me at all, that would be just fine. Unfortunately, the Moonmate ceremony didn't really work like that.

I sighed and shook my head, flashing the stranger a quick smile. “Sorry, I was looking for M— or our host. I'll leave you to your stargazing.” I turned to leave. The man looked like he might want to have a chat, and I really didn't have the time for that, not right now. Even if he was rather handsome. His hazel eyes studied me curiously, something almost gold glittering in them. His dark hair was arranged neatly in a bun, and I might have been mistaken, but I was pretty sure I saw the hint of tattoos peeking out from beneath the sleeves of his well-tailored suit. Outside of sharing the same height, this man

looked nothing like Marnet; he was even dressed better, and that was a rare thing to see.

I hesitated a moment longer. Meeting wolves from other packs was usually a nice change of pace. I didn't really get along with any of the other Lupus Claw members. It was nice to chat with other shifters, even if I wouldn't see them for another year — or ever, really. It didn't matter.

But I didn't feel like socializing, not today.

I had been looking forward to the Moonmate ceremony for weeks — well, maybe that wasn't true. If I was being entirely honest with myself, it was more like a few months. I wasn't the sort of girl who dreamed of her perfect wedding since she was old enough to realize she liked boys...but I *did* sometimes daydream about spending the rest of my life with Marnet. It was a dream that kept me warm when my stepmother was exceptionally unkind. I wouldn't exactly call her 'good mother material' even to her own daughters (it was clear to me, at least, that her sons were certainly her favorite — her 'future little alphas'). Sometimes, she was nicer to her social rivals than she was to me.

On days like that, it was good to disappear somewhere quiet and imagine what my life might be like once my mate finally claimed me in public. He would be my family from that day forward, officially. Sure, I loved my dad, but... I felt like I barely knew him. If there was ever an argument between me and Lynn, he always chose his mate. It certainly wasn't like the relationship I had with my mother before she...before she passed away.

The memory of my mother made my heart skip a beat and I paused my trek across the room, my eyes going a little misty. It should be *her* who was here at the Moonmate ceremony with me. It should be *her* standing with proud tears in her eyes as the pack alpha — the pack *alpha!* — claimed me in front of everyone!

I could imagine exactly how she'd look, in some sort of finery, a handsome man on her arm. (She deserved so much more than my father.) I still remembered how she looked, clear

as day, even if she had been gone for half of my life. I missed her so much. Even as an adult, I missed having my mother around. I could certainly use some motherly advice. Perhaps Marnet would have allowed his mother-in-law to move in with us if she had opted to remain mateless. It was a beautiful home. It had always been a beautiful home, but Marnet had made several improvements since inheriting it from his late father.

The walls had a nice clean coat of whitewash (or paint, depending on the room, and that was no small feat, given the size of the Claw estate). The floors were shiny and polished, regardless of if they were stone or beautiful hardwoods. The art had changed, too; though the paint was still faded around some frames where Marnet had changed or moved art and hadn't yet repainted. Whatever Noah Claw had preferred, Marnet Claw had replaced, opting for expensive works of art that displayed his power and pack standing.

I wondered idly if he'd allow me to add my touch to things, once he claimed me. We'd had that argument earlier, but my wolf must be right. I just couldn't believe that Marnet would toy for me for six whole years, and to what end? It wasn't as if he needed a quick fuck. He was handsome, charismatic, and he was the alpha's only son. If he had harbored some sort of concern about our mating, surely he would have let me go once he'd been promoted to the position of Lupus Claw alpha after his father's death. Any she-wolf would have been happy for her alpha's attention.

And while I didn't understand what it was that was preventing Marnet from claiming me before now, I had to believe in him. I *had* to. Because if he was being honest back there in the stable, I didn't know what I'd do. I couldn't keep living in my father's house, not with his wife and his other children. But a wolf couldn't very well leave her pack, and... And a mate just didn't reject his (or her) mate. It didn't happen. I'd never heard of such a thing. So, while I might not understand what Marnet was getting at, or why he was being (far) less than kind, I had to trust my wolf. Marnet was our mate, and he *would* claim us. That was just the way the world

worked, and mateship had to be infinitely better than what I had now.

I was so busy with my thoughts that I hadn't even noticed there was someone stopped in front of me. I took one too many steps; even though I glimpsed the other person at the last possible second, I couldn't stop quickly enough. Our shoulders bumped and she stumbled forward a step, her heels clicking against the marble tile. My wolf whined and I stepped back instinctively, apologies already tumbling out of my lips. As soon as I realized who it was, my stomach plummeted to the floor.

"Lynn, oh, gosh, I am so sorry." I extended a hand as the woman steadied herself. I felt like someone had just dumped a bucket of ice water over my head. My stepmother swatted my arm away with the same sort of irritation with which she might swat a house fly. I recoiled, swallowing down the rising sense of panic. My throat felt too thick and my tongue was stuck. "Are you okay? I didn't mean—"

"Oh, shut up," she snapped, and took a menacing step forward. The click of her heel echoed like a gunshot.

My heart fluttered like an anxious bird. A few other guests seemed to have noticed the commotion, and I saw a few gazes directed back at us. Oh, I wished I could sink into the floor just now. I didn't want to be anywhere near Lynn.

Athena, my step-sister, darted forward and covertly grabbed her mother by her elbow. She leaned closer to whisper, though I wasn't entirely sure why — werewolves had a particularly keen sense of hearing. "Mom, don't," she hissed urgently, her gray-green eyes flickering around the room. She must have seen the same thing I did. "You can't do that here."

Lynn's shoulders stiffened, but she followed Athena's gaze, noting the other wolves in attendance. After a moment, she exhaled deeply, as if dismissing all the irritation she felt for me. Then she strode forward as if none of that had happened. As if I didn't even exist. Artemis, her other daughter, trotted after her quickly, perfectly balanced on her heels.

Athena lingered to shoot me a glare. “Watch where you’re going, space cadet,” she growled, eyes flashing. I could feel my wolf begin to stir, unimpressed by my younger step-sister’s display. Trying to push my wolf’s anger down, I shrugged it off.

“It was an accident,” I muttered. In a perfect world, I could maintain at least ten feet of space between me and Lynn at all times. Unfortunately, this world was anything but.

Athena sneered. “Well, use your fucking eyes, Luna,” she snapped. “Some of us actually have a chance at finding a mate tonight, and Mother won’t stand for you ruining it for me *or* Artemis. I’ll make sure of it.”

It was hard for me not to roll my eyes, but I didn’t dare — not with Lynn only a few strides away, and not with several members of the Lupus Claw clan in audience. Besides, causing a scene wouldn’t look good right before their alpha claimed me now.

Thankfully, my step-sister took my silence as agreement — or at the very least, submission. She sniffed and smoothed out her short dress, then turned around to catch up with her mother and her younger sister. I watched them go, largely indifferent as the trio made their way to a servant holding a tray of hors d’oeuvres. It didn’t much matter to me — this behavior was hardly new. They were even worse when they were in a group like this, like the number gave them powers.

Just as well. Let them think they’d gotten the best of me. Let them think *they* would find their mates here, and not me. Just imagine how surprised they’d be, when I was introduced as one of the mated she-wolves. When they saw I hadn’t just ‘found a man,’ but it was fated, destined, that I was to be at the alpha’s side for the rest of our lives.

I remained quiet as a staff member asked us to all begin filing through the house, back out towards the stables for the ceremony. Apparently, Marnet had set up a special location.

When we reached the lawn outside the stable, I was shocked to see how much it had transformed over the past few hours. It had been early afternoon when Marnet and his sister

departed, and I hadn't realized that anything was going on in the area outside of the carriage rides. This looked like a professional party planner had been at work for days. There were beautiful fairy lights outlining the area, providing an almost magical air for the Moonmate ceremony, twinkling gently as the sun started to disappear behind the horizon. The guests who had already been directed out here were murmuring to one another, interrupted only by the gentle clink of glasses.

The mood was excited. Hopeful. It might even have been *happy*. Despite myself, I smiled, ducking my head as I wandered around to admire the decorations.

Yes, I thought to myself, trailing my fingers over one of the flower arrangements before I smoothed out my dress, grateful the detour to the barn hadn't done anything but mess up my hair a bit. A finger comb later, and I almost looked as good as new. But it didn't matter. I was here. I had made it to the Moonmate ceremony, and soon... I could get used to this life. I could live here. I could be happy here, with him, and not even Lynn will be able to take that away from me.

As the light slowly faded, more guests continued to filter in. The mood shifted from quiet joy to something more energetic. Electric. I had preferred it as a quiet lawn outing, but it wasn't my party — not yet, anyways. Besides, I knew it was the first time Marnet was hosting everything all on his own, so it didn't surprise me he wanted to make sure surrounding packs knew that he was thriving. That the entire Lupus Claw pack was thriving.

And indeed it was!

Everyone looked like they were having a good time — even Lynn and her daughters. I paid my stepmother and step-sisters no more than a passing glance, wandering over to the pop-up bar. Trailing my fingers over the hedge, I took a moment to marvel over it, wondering how on earth this had been created. Marnet didn't have hedges by the barn...or any type of shrubbery at all, come to think. This must have been

brought in for the party. There were even little white flowers woven through, festive, but understated. It was a beautiful statement.

“Can I get you anything, miss?”

I looked up, greeted by the smiling bartender. She looked genuinely pleased to be here — either that, or she was a damn good actor. It caught me off guard and I couldn’t help but smile back, feeling a bit warmer than I did before. “Cash bar?” I asked.

“All compliments of Mr. Claw,” she replied before I even had the chance to move my hand.

I blinked, momentarily surprised. Werewolves could really drink, especially depending on the alcohol provided. But given how Marnet had gone all out on everything else so far, I wasn’t really that surprised. I folded my hands in front of me. “Well, you’re the professional,” I said after a moment. I smiled right back at her. “What do you recommend?”

The brunette looked thoughtful for a moment. “Do you like sweeter drinks, or not so much?”

“Hm...” I pressed my lips together and shrugged sheepishly. “I don’t drink too much, if I’m honest. So...sweet is fine, I guess, but not too strong?”

I was fully prepared to be embarrassed, for the bartender to give a little laugh and a shake of her head...but she did no such thing. Instead, she tapped her chin. “Do you trust me?” she asked.

Why shouldn’t I? Honestly, this woman had been the nicest person to me at the whole party so far — and she was a professional. “Yes.” I nodded.

The woman beamed and began pulling bottles and glasses with a manic sort of enthusiasm. It made me wonder if she’d been stuck making the same thing all night — come to think, I had seen quite a few glasses of whiskey or martinis walking around. I shrugged and leaned forward, intrigued. A minute or so later, she presented me with a bright pink drink, garnished

with a cute little lime wedge. I grinned, enamored with how cheery it looked, even in the low evening light.

“Go ahead and try it,” the bartender urged, wiping her hands off with her towel. “Make sure you like it before you go, yeah?”

“I’m sure I’ll like it,” I murmured, carefully picking up the cocktail glass. After a moment of admiration, I took a cautious sip. It wasn’t too sweet, and it didn’t burn on the way down — but it wasn’t so smooth that I might wind up downing the whole thing before I realized. In a word, it was perfect. I smiled over the rim. “I love it,” I amended. “Thank you.”

The woman flashed me one last cheery smile before the next guest stepped up and she shifted her attention to something called the Singapore Sling. At least it was interesting. I spared the bartender one last thought before wandering back into the little garden scene that had been created for the ceremony. I’d been here at least an hour — likely closer to two — and Marnet still hadn’t made an appearance. I hadn’t seen his mother all day, nor had I seen Sophia since our little run-in at the barn.

Don’t get me wrong, I wasn’t eager to see the younger Claw— by all means, the night would be made much better if she decided to skip it — but I was a bit worried none of the hosts were around. Perhaps something had gone wrong?

I sipped my drink, glancing towards the main house. At this point, all the lights were on, making it difficult to see anything. With the murmuring of the guests, there was no way to hear anything at a distance, either. My wolf seemed content, though, if not slightly anxious for someone to just get on with this whole ceremony business, so I tried to quell my nerves. It was a big event. Marnet was probably just trying to make sure everything was perfect.

After exchanging greetings with an old high school acquaintance, I wandered over to an empty table near one of the installed rose bushes, sipping my drink in peace as I tried to watch the entrance to the little ceremony grounds. Every time a large man arrived, my heart skipped a beat...but so far,

no Marnet. One of the visiting alphas, some other fellows I didn't recognize... Not interesting. I sighed, fiddling with the stem of my glass.

"Care for another drink?" a deep voice rumbled.

It was the dark-haired man I had almost run into on the balcony when I'd been looking for my mate. I offered him half a smile, not wanting to be rude. "I'm fine, but thank you."

One corner of his mouth lifted. "But your glass is empty," he replied, nodded down at the table. I followed his gaze and frowned despite myself — he was right. Before I could say anything else, he took the seat across from me and set a fresh drink in front of me; it was the same cheerful shade of pomegranate pink as my first one. I glanced up, surprised he had appeared with the correct drink, but he was sipping from his own glass of whiskey.

I wouldn't have minded going to get another one, but I was hardly about to leave it. Despite Lynn's best efforts, I *was* raised with good manners. "Thank you," I said quietly, pulling the glass a little closer before taking a delicate sip. It was just as good as the first. I hoped Marnet was paying that bartender well.

My eyes drifted back to the entrance before the man spoke back up. "Lovely weather for a Moonmate ceremony," he commented, and I had to fight not to roll my eyes. *The weather, really?*

"Oklahoma is quite pleasant this time of year," I answered mildly. I wasn't interested, but it wouldn't do to be rude to a member of a visiting pack.

"Mm." The man agreed, nodding before he took another sip. "I have to admit, I never thought highly of the area before now. Perhaps I simply visited the wrong areas."

"Maybe." *Is this guy looking for a tour guide or something?* He was cute and all, especially with that well-groomed beard, but I had never been plagued with wandering eyes. My wolf had hardly even acknowledged the man's presence, and she *did* recognize the presence of an alpha — he

simply wasn't *our* alpha. It would probably be polite to ask where he was from, how his pack was...but I just wasn't that interested. Marnet still wasn't here, and I wanted to see him the moment he arrived.

The man chuckled. I finally glanced over, barely restraining my impatience. *What's so funny?*

"You must not be looking for a mate tonight," he said. I was about to snap back when I realized he was smiling, honey-warm eyes *amused*, but not *mocking*.

I was caught off guard, but only for a moment. "No." I shook my head. "I'm not, sorry." *I already have a mate, somewhere around here...*

"Me neither," the man replied, but he was still looking at me. Perhaps it should be flattering, but I wasn't remotely available. I was trying to figure out how to inform the man as much without giving away too much information when a hush fell over the crowd. My heart stuttered and I knew why even before I stood up, drink and stranger forgotten as my eyes scanned the crowd. Marnet had finally arrived. I beamed — and a second later, my heart fell into my feet. The Lupus Claw alpha hadn't arrived alone.

That wasn't his sister standing at his side.

That wasn't his mother standing with him, either.

"My friends," Marnet greeted everyone, raising his hand that didn't have a woman all but hanging off it. My gut clenched so tightly I felt nauseous. "I hope everyone is enjoying themselves. I am pleased to welcome you all to this year's Moonmate ceremony — and even more pleased to announce that I have finally found the woman I will be taking as my mate!"

Chapter 8

Remus

Terrace, Claw Mansion
Woodward County, Oklahoma

Huh.

I hadn't any inkling that Marnet was taking a mate tonight, but I wasn't sure why he felt the need to announce it in front of anyone. I didn't recognize the woman, so this couldn't have been some uniting among packs...unless, maybe, she'd come from one of the European packs. But since Marnet didn't lead with that, I suspected she was a member of his pack, and nothing more. I paused for a moment, trying to see if I could spy York among the wolves gathered.

Hadn't he mentioned his beta's daughter would be joining Lupus Claw? I glanced back at the nameless woman, but I couldn't place her. She was pretty, in a standard blonde Barbie doll sort of way. Straight hair teased into curls. Sparkling green eyes. Dressed to the nines, of course, with heels high enough to kill a man and a dress short enough to expose legs for days. Exactly the sort of girl I pictured Marnet with, really.

I was about to take a sip from my glass when I heard that strange sound again. A whine, low and whispering. A wolf in pain. My nape bristled as my own wolf stirred, unsure if there was someone he needed to protect — but it wasn't a member of our pack. It was the woman standing next to me. She had abandoned her drink and looked as if she had just seen a ghost. *Weird*, I thought, trying to edge a little closer to her. “Are you

all right?” I asked. Marnet’s display was a bit uncouth, but it was hardly something to inspire swooning.

The woman really did look like she might pass out. I realized, after a moment, she was murmuring softly under her breath.

“That is not his mate. Marnet is my mate — I am his mate. He is mine. He is my mate. It’s not her. It’s not her.”

The woman almost sounded possessed, as if she’d forgotten there were dozens of other werewolves attending the same ceremony as her, witnessing the same announcement she just did. I had no idea why Marnet would claim anyone but his actual mate — this poor girl must be delusional. That was the problem with these sorts of ritual things, wasn’t it? People bought into them so deeply they started to twist the world around them to make it true.

“Hey,” I said, trying to get her attention again. “You’re looking pretty pale. Why don’t you sit down?”

I reached out to try to take the woman by the wrist, but my movement seemed to break whatever spell had been cast over her. Without so much as blinking in my direction, she stormed forward, possessed with a kind of fury I’d rarely seen. *Maybe Marnet was playing the field. Now **that**, I could believe.* I snorted, watching the woman stalk towards the alpha like the hunter a wolf was. Maybe he had a couple of different women on the line while trying to sort out who and what he wanted.

No one was guaranteed to meet their ‘destined’ mate within their lifetime. There were no rules about where your mate might be born, or when. It could happen that you were eighty-seven years old when your mate was born...and then what? Or maybe you spent your whole life in southern Texas and your mate was born in...I don’t know, China. *Did they have werewolves in China?*

There were no guarantees, which is why I thought the whole thing was ridiculous. You set up young women (and young men, too) to believe the only true love they’d find was their destined mate. If you never met them, maybe you’d find

a partner, but it wasn't *destiny*. If you did meet them, well, that was your whole life, wasn't it?

Remus, get a grip. Exhaling carefully through my nose, I forced myself to derail that train of thought. This wasn't my problem. I might have felt bad for the silver-eyed she-wolf, but it wasn't much more than a passing thought. She looked like she was about to make Marnet sorry — or at the very least, she was going to make a scene. I lifted my glass back up, trying to hide my growing smile. This was perfect. Certainly nothing I had planned for, but I couldn't imagine anything better. If this woman decided to fight an alpha, of all things, there would be no one paying attention to me.

I better get in touch with Bane.

I swallowed the rest of my whiskey and set my tumbler down at the table, eyeing the cosmo I had brought over for a moment. *Should I...? Nah, don't need it. I can celebrate later,* I decided, straightening my jacket. It wasn't hard to start weaving my way through the crowd — those who hadn't cared about Marnet's announcement certainly had their attention captured by the woman approaching him. I had almost made it out of the decorated terrace when Fiona suddenly stepped into my flight path.

Ugh.

I suppressed the urge to growl. There was no easy way around her, not while pretending I hadn't seen her. I had to hand it to her — my mother was crafty. She snagged my arm and pulled me to one side, whispering something fiercely. "Is that her? Is she the one?"

I scowled and tipped my head, searching my mother's face. It looked like she was warring between aggravation and panic — but the second emotion didn't make much sense. Unless she was on to me? I inhaled carefully. "Is who what?" I whispered back, glancing over her shoulder. Thankfully, it didn't look like anyone was paying us any mind at all.

"That woman about to embarrass herself." She nodded towards where Marnet and his arm candy were standing.

Where the silver-eyed wolf was heading. “Is she your mate? I saw you sitting with her before the announcement.”

“Oh.” I couldn’t help myself, chuckling. My mother was still stuck on the mate thing. *That*, I could deal with. “No. I just thought she was cute.” I shrugged. “Didn’t even ask her name.”

“Oh, that’s good. That’s very good.” Relief won out over her face, and the death grip she had on my arm turned into a thoughtful pat. “I’ve heard some...unsavory things about her while I was mingling with some of the older pack members.”

What? The woman had seemed perfectly normal to me, if not a bit distant. Hardly anything alarming. *But why is Mom asking about random women?* I narrowed my eyes, nostrils flaring. “Were you gossiping about me?”

“Oh, no.” Fiona patted my arm again, clicking her tongue against her teeth. “Not at all. But if other wolves are talking about their own pack members, it doesn’t hurt me to listen, does it? Apparently, that girl is an illegitimate daughter of an otherwise well-respected wolf in the Lupus Claw pack. He has several other legitimate children. Some of them are looking for mates tonight.” She kept talking. I hardly knew this woman, but I felt a little rankled my mother was going on at length about her and her family. “Someone mentioned that woman was a bit of a loose cannon, though, and now I can see why!”

I exhaled, giving my mother a sharp look. “For someone who ‘wasn’t gossiping,’ Mom, you sound a *lot* like a gossip right now.” That wasn’t how I liked to run my pack, and I certainly didn’t want anyone else to get that impression. “How do you know they weren’t just speculating or being nasty?” Who knew what kind of history those wolves may (or may not) have had?

Fiona brushed a strand of graying-brown hair away from her face. “Are you even paying attention to what’s going on right now, Remus?” she huffed, as if the outburst made everything these people said totally valid.

“What if she *was* my mate?” I growled. “Weren’t you telling me earlier how that bond was supposed to come before

all else?” Just because I didn’t *agree* with the woman on that particular matter didn’t mean I didn’t *listen* to her. Perhaps she had thought otherwise.

The look of abject horror on Fiona’s face was worth whatever lecture I might get down the road for ‘not taking mateship seriously.’ It even managed to sweeten my otherwise sour mood, and I had to bite the inside of my cheek to keep from grinning at her. “Remus!” she hissed, swatting my forearm as she seemed to shake herself from whatever nightmare she was imagining herself in. “That is not funny. Besides, no future daughter-in-law of mine would have such poor manners. I know you.”

I snorted. *Maybe not as well as you think.* ‘Picture perfect manners’ were definitely not the first thing I looked for in a woman.

Not that I was looking for a woman at all. Not for more than a weekend, anyways. And even if I *was* interested...with what time? I had a corporation to run, and a pack to care for.

Speaking of which...

Something was distracting my mother, so I tried to reach into my pocket for my burner phone. All I needed was a minute — thirty seconds to make a quick call to Bane, and fifteen seconds on either side to disappear and reappear right after. I hadn’t made it so much as two steps away when my mother reached out and grabbed my arm, demanding my attention.

“What—”

My question died on my tongue as I realized the she-wolf was now toe to toe with Marnet. Misguided or not, I had to give her credit for her guts. Even though I couldn’t imagine this would end well for her. Imagine if one of my pack members tried to do that to me! (I mean, it would never happen. I had a far stronger grasp on my pack that Marnet ever did over Lupus Claw. It was a moot point.)

They were whispering fiercely, and I found myself leaning in a little, curious to what was being said. The woman

introduced as Marnet's mate had seemingly disappeared from his side; that probably for the best. She didn't want to be collateral damage. I could only see the back of the she-wolf's head, but Marnet's face had gone all red and blotchy. Even from here, I could see the tension rising in his shoulders. *How embarrassing...* First Moonmate ceremony all on his own, and it was turning into a total riot.

I grabbed another drink off a tray as a waiter wandered by, clearly attempting to distract the guests. *I really need to call Bane.* When I tried to extract myself from my mother's grip, she only latched on to me tighter. I scowled. She couldn't pull her eyes away from what was unfolding, but she damn well couldn't let me go, either.

“Mo—”

“No! You won't do this to me!” I was cut off by the silver-eyed she-wolf all but howling at Marnet. She leaned in closer, pointing a finger at the man. She was loud enough that no one needed to strain to hear her any longer. “You fucking liar,” she seethed, anger radiating off her in waves. “She's not your mate, and you and I both know it. We've both known it for the last six years.”

Six years? I raised a brow. She could have been the right age, six years ago. But if that were true, why wouldn't Marnet have claimed her right away? She was pretty enough, and surely Kate was just as irritating when it came to 'stabilizing the pack' as my own mother was. *Something doesn't add up.*

Marnet tried to take a step back, brushing the woman away like an errant fly. “Don't embarrass yourself,” he growled. “Now calm down, or I'll *make you* calm down.”

The threat did nothing to settle the she-wolf. Her hand was shaking as she pointed at him again. “How *could* you? After everything we shared? After everything we went through?” Her voice cracked and I felt the back of my neck prickle. I liked drama as much as the next person, but I really hoped this woman wasn't about to break down into hysterics. “Why are you doing this? I deserve to know.”

Marnet peeled his upper lip back, eyes flashing dangerously. “I don’t owe you anything,” he growled. My wolf tensed slightly, more keenly aware of the influence the other alpha was trying to exert. “An alpha would never have his fate entwined with a wolf like yours.” He had moved back into her space.

Before the she-wolf could say anything else, an older woman came striding out of the gathered crowd. “Luna!” she snapped, reaching out to snag the she-wolf’s elbow. “Stop it. Stop it right now! You are embarrassing your father and your family.” She seemed to be trying to whisper, but the effect was lost in the situation.

Luna only side-eyed the woman and tried to shake off her grasp. I had to assume the woman was her mother, though they looked nothing alike. She leaned in to try to wrangle Luna again, still seething venomous whispers. “This is a new low, Luna, even for you. The alpha’s mate? *Really?* Has he just been loitering the past six years? You’re far too old for this sort of nonsense, now stop embarrassing *me and—*”

Maybe there was more to that tirade. Maybe not. I tuned the woman out, largely uninterested in her vitriol. The silver-eyed wolf — Luna, right, Luna — was moving again. She’d pushed back her mother and was standing right in front of the alpha again, staring him directly in the eyes. Even as the man growled, she did not break her gaze. The shaking seemed to disappear. Despite myself, I was curious about what was going to happen next...and if I was completely honest, I didn’t mind seeing Marnet humiliated by a little she-wolf, either. I didn’t even have to participate.

“Do the right thing,” she snapped. If I didn’t know better, she almost sounded...tired? Well, it was quite the outburst. “Do the right thing, Marnet. Claim me as your real mate and I’ll forgive you for this.”

I almost couldn’t believe she was giving the man an ultimatum. If she was *actually* his mate, then she would have good reason to be upset, given what my mother said about mate bonds. But...if she was *actually* his mate, wouldn’t Marnet have claimed her by now? Even if I didn’t buy into all

the mating bullshit, most wolves did. Marnet probably had packmates that did. It probably could have strengthened his position among the wolves (not that it would have helped him now, but still — the point was that he wasn't much a fool, and denying your mate seemed a foolish thing).

This wasn't going to end well, not for Luna, and not for Marnet. I glanced over at my mother, noting her hand had fallen away. *Finally*, the scene seemed to have all her attention. Sensing my opportunity, I reached back into my pocket, trying to step away as quietly as possible lest I alert Fiona again. I hadn't gotten more than two steps towards the exit when a loud growl made the hairs on the back of my neck stand up.

My wolf bristled on instinct. I glanced over my shoulder just in time to see Marnet backhand the silver-eyed woman hard enough to produce a meaty *smack*. The respect I had for the man was already minimal, but whatever was left was flushed immediately down the toilet. I almost forgot the phone in my hand and my plan altogether; my nostrils flared as I fought to rein in my disgust.

By the time Luna hit the ground, she had already started to shift. It was only a few seconds before a svelte wolf stood where the woman had fallen. Her silver eyes blazed, almost ghostly against her deep brown pelt. She looked almost black, save for a few chocolate-brown highlights around her ruff and her shoulder. The wolf jerked her head up and growled, pulling her lips back to display her teeth.

There were a few gasps before the crowd fell deathly quiet. *Luna had disrespected her alpha*. My heart did something strange in my chest, twisting slightly as I shook my head. I had liked this woman's moxie, but what she'd just done...some alphas would consider that punishable by death, and I had a strong suspicion that Marnet was one of those alphas. He had just struck her, after all.

I tightened my grip around my phone before shoving it back in my pocket. *This had better not fuck up my plan*.

Chapter 9

Luna

Terrace, Claw Mansion
Woodward County, Oklahoma

I growled up at him even as I took a step back. I was still stunned the man I loved actually *struck* me. You did not hit people you loved — hell, you shouldn't hit people at all. I regretted putting my hands on Marnet in the barn, even if it was just to stop him from leaving. On some level, that was wrong, too. Maybe I had opened the door to this.

I knew, or thought, that wasn't really true. An escalation was not okay. I should have apologized, but I did not deserve to be hit. I didn't. I knew my father and Lynn probably weren't the pinnacle of relationship goals, but they rarely argued with each other. My father would never hit Lynn. (And that had nothing to do with the fact that she'd probably rip his arm off if he tried.) It just wasn't something that ever crossed his mind. Lynn had never been shy about spanking me when I was naughty or pinching my arm as I got older, but I had no illusions about my stepmother; she had no love for me. She didn't even like me.

But Marnet...

He *knew* that about me and my life — about what happened at home. He always told me how much better things would be with him. That he would take care of me. I never thought much more of it because I *knew* he would. That's what

mates did. Our wolves knew. There was no reason to suspect anything different, and yet...

Here we were.

I wasn't even sure who was in control right now, me or my wolf. I was angry and hurt and *terrified*. My tail was tucked beneath my hind legs, practically hugging the underside of my stomach. I knew I was snarling and that I *shouldn't*, but I couldn't help it. I could still feel the sting of Marnet's hand against my cheek, even if I now stood protected by a thick coat of fur. If he tried to hit me again, I would be far quicker on four legs. But the fact that he'd done it at all... Nothing could protect me from the deep ache in my chest.

I couldn't see a way out of this. Honestly, I had no idea what he would do to me for disrespecting him in front of all these wolves, but I really wasn't eager to find out. He had just claimed this other woman, and that meant he was playing me for six years, and...

I just couldn't believe that the fated bond between us was anything less than real. I felt it, and I knew he felt it, too. Marnet wasn't *that* good of an actor, even if he was being pretty damn convincing right now.

I took a deep breath, trying to will the snarl off my maw while I tried to kick my brain into working normally. The punishment could be severe for disrespecting an alpha. I had to convince Marnet to claim me now, or... No. No 'or.' That was the only choice.

Shifting probably wasn't my brightest move, but in that moment, I wasn't been in control. Marnet had startled me so completely, hurt me so wholly. When my wolf surged forward to protect us both, I hadn't had the wits to stop her. It was more difficult to communicate like this in a room full of shifters still in their human form, but... Now, I had no choice.

I took another step back, my claws clicking against the stone of the garden terrace. Pricking my ears forward, I tried to get Marnet to meet my gaze. I wasn't foolish enough to uncurl my tail or stand up straight (certainly not lift my head — I had no interest in challenging my alpha!), but I needed him to pay

attention to me. I chuffed softly, air puffing out from my cheeks. When that didn't get Marnet to look, I took another step back to howl, or attempt or my best approximation. I was not willing to throw my head back for a full-bellied cry. There were too many potential enemies, and I still didn't want to leave any room for speculation if I was trying to challenge him or not. There was only one thing I wanted.

I wanted Marnet's wolf to come forward, and I wanted him to claim me.

After what felt like an eternity, he finally looked at me, but his green eyes were cold. Cruel. It was like looking into a storm drain rather than the warmth depths of springtime or a summer's grassy hill. My heart seized and my wolf's song faltered. We finally locked gazes, and he still wasn't shifting. It was as if he couldn't feel any of my pain, my hurt, my confusion. Instead, he stared right through me, as if I wasn't even there. He couldn't even do me the courtesy of meeting me in wolf form. Maybe he knew our wolves would claim each other. Maybe he didn't know me at all. Maybe I didn't know him.

This time, I couldn't suppress the howl that ripped from me, my wolf crying out in her pain and humiliation. Marnet's wolf pulled away from mine, and suddenly, I couldn't feel anything that resembled our bond at all. Only anger.

Anger?

Desperation bubbled up from the furthest corner of my gut. I took another step backwards and howled another warbling cry, a last-ditch effort to try to draw Marnet's wolf forward and bring my mate to his senses. *Nothing*. The anger had disappeared, replaced with...with...*nothing*. There was only a void. My wolf scrambled, thrown off balance by the complete absence of her mate, even though he was standing right in front of us.

When I risked a look up, Marnet's eyes had shifted from their usual green to a bright, piercing red. *He was casting his alpha on me*. Terror gripped me like icy hands, freezing me in place. Marnet finally strode towards me with an ugly smirk. I

hated that expression on his face, but it had never been pointed at me before. My heart stumbled and I whined, wishing for nothing more than to run away, to escape this situation altogether. I was unable to do so much as blink, much less move my paws; the unforgiving stone refused to swallow me up, even if it felt like the world was crumbling around me.

Even in my worst nightmares, I couldn't have come up with a situation as horrifying as this.

I whined again, and my ears were as low as possible. I sank closer to the ground. Pain scorched up the length of my spine from the tip of my tail to the tops of my ears, all the way down to each of my claws. I had always known Marnet was a powerful alpha (I couldn't imagine him as anything but), but I had never been subjected to his wolf's strength before. Even my throat burned, making it difficult to whimper and show my deference to him. Before I knew it, I was almost flat against the ground, my legs trembling with the effort to keep my belly mere inches above the flagstone.

Marnet planted his shoe on my muzzle, forcing me the rest of the way down. My joints screamed in protest as shudders wracked my body, pain still searing each and every nerve. I couldn't even part my jaws. I wanted to cry, to yell, to howl, but I could do nothing.

After a moment, he ground his heel into my muzzle. I squeezed my eyes shut, unable to do anything else. His voice rang out, but Marnet was not addressing me. He seemed to be addressing the entire party.

"I apologize for this interruption!" he rumbled, his voice rolling over the otherwise silent crowd. "I hope the rest of the festivities will help you forgive this. While we had a great many surprises planned for our guests tonight, this was not one of them." Silence lasted a beat too long, and someone must have realized that was a poorly planted joke. A few people offered uncomfortable murmurs, but then rest of the group got the hint, and Marnet was rewarded with several chuckles. Once the other wolves quieted, he continued, "I assure you, this one will be punished for her actions tonight. The Lupus Claw pack takes the Moonmate ceremony very seriously, and

such an interruption won't be ignored. Her disturbance will be punished swiftly accordingly to our laws."

I blinked. How did he keep managing to hurt me like this? How had I been his mate just yesterday, and today he was referring to me as *a disturbance*? My eyes flickered open, and I looked up just in time to hear him dole out his decision on my sentence.

"—and she will be put to death."

My heart stopped. At once, my wolf let go, and I shifted rapidly back to my human form. I scrambled to push my dress so I was still covered and prop myself up to plead my case. Before I could utter a single word, Marnet delivered a swift kick, his toe catching the corner of my jaw. I shrieked as something snapped. Blood pooled in my mouth almost immediately as my tongue throbbed. My eyes stung as my hands flew up to cradle my jaw — I was afraid to open my mouth and test if it was still working.

I can't let this happen. I can't just...just roll over and die, I thought, rubbing my mouth carefully. I dropped my hand carefully to try to say something, to change his mind, but Marnet refused to give me so much as a second. He reached forward to push me back, clearly determined on keeping me down. I was still shaking all over, thunderstruck but what had taken place so far. I still wasn't convinced I'd soon wake up in a cold sweat, trembling but relieved to realize it was just a terrible dream.

Everything ached. My body...my bones, my joints, each tendon and muscle. Even my *soul* ached in a way so profound, I couldn't put words to it. I couldn't tell if Marnet was still exerting his alpha influence over me, but it didn't matter. There wasn't much that could make me feel much worse.

It felt like years had passed by the time Marnet finally took a step closer, crouching down next to me. He reached over, one thick hand grabbing me by the scruff of my neck even though I was no longer in my canine form. I was so drained I was powerless to stop him. My wolf seemed almost afraid. I had never felt her withdraw so quickly before, but she felt

small and weak, like a newborn pup rather than the adult she was.

Marnet leaned forward as he dragged me up, his lips almost right next to my ear. “We had a good thing going, Luna, but you didn’t think it could last forever, did you? All you had to do was keep your mouth shut. It really wasn’t that much to ask, was it?” He paused, as if expecting me to answer. Eyes looking anywhere but at Marnet, I shook my head. The man snorted. “Oh, *now* you keep your trap shut. That tracks.” He grunted. “You and I were never going to be a thing, Luna, destined mates or not. You just don’t have what I need. You don’t have what this pack needs. You and I will never work, destiny be damned.” He paused again, and I could almost *hear* his smirk. “The sex was pretty nice, though. You *were* always down for a quick fuck, huh?”

I could feel my cheeks flare bright red and my heart sped back up. This was like an entirely different person standing in front of me. Marnet could be prone to dirty talk sometimes, but he had *never* spoken down to me like this before — but then again, he never much spoke to me much outside of our secret cabin at all. I had assumed he was a private person...but was this how he talked about me when I wasn’t around? Was this what he’d really thought about me these past six years?

I finally looked up, as if I might find some answers in my alpha’s face. Cold eyes I barely recognized stared back at me, entirely unreadable. I used to love looking into those emerald pools; they used to bring me so much joy — how ironic they might be the very last thing I saw before I died.

“Chain her up and deal with her later,” an unfamiliar voice hissed. I moved as much as I was able in Marnet’s tight grasp, gaze flickering over to the woman hovering over his shoulder. I had no idea who this woman was supposed to be, outside of Marnet’s supposed mate, but for all that Marnet looked at me with disgust, she was watching me with some trepidation. She looked away as soon as she realized I was watching her, resting her slender fingers on her... on Marnet’s shoulders instead. She gave him a gentle squeeze. “There’s still the ceremony to go through with, and we *need* to go through with

this.” If I didn’t know better, I would have thought she sounded nervous.

Marnet held me several moments longer before he finally released my neck, standing back up to his full height. He wrapped an arm around the other woman’s waist and tugged her close, pressing what might be called an apologetic kiss to her cheek. He’d always been a showman, and no effort went unspared while making sure everyone saw the way he comforted this woman.

My arms trembled as I thought about propping myself up. Humiliation still burned at the back of my neck, but I said nothing else, not entirely sure if I wanted to draw Marnet’s attention back to me. He’d already decided my fate. My wolf had almost retreated entirely now, shocked and horrified by the way we’d been treated. It was as if the evening’s events simply didn’t compute for her, as if they were so bizarre, she couldn’t fit them into her way of being.

More than anything, I was *exhausted*. My jaw still throbbed. It felt like someone had siphoned all the energy straight out of me. When Marnet called two of his enforcers to come and grab me, I didn’t move. My legs felt like wet noodles, threatening to give out at any moment. I wanted nothing more than to be left alone and allowed even a few minutes to recover. My dignity was probably a lost cause by now, but I wasn’t ready to lie down and *die*.

I was only twenty-six years old, for fuck’s sake! I had a life left! My wolf shuddered at the notion, almost lost to her despair. To her, it wasn’t an entire life left to live, but endless years to survive without the one wolf who could complete her. The absence of the bond was clearly more profound for her in this moment, but I wouldn’t abandon her, either. I just...I had no idea how to soothe my own wounds, much less whatever my wolf was suffering.

I inhaled a long, shuddering breath and fought the urge to cry. Some part of me still couldn’t believe Marnet was capable of this kind of cruelty, much less towards me — but perhaps that was the part closest to my wolf. Or perhaps I just didn’t want to give this up just yet. Oh, I knew I had no choice. There

was no going back, not after this, but that didn't mean it didn't fucking *hurt*. My heart ached more fiercely than even the agony of Marnet casting his alpha over me before I had shifted back to my human form. It was worse than the feeling of each and every nerve being lit on fire all while feeling like I was trapped in a complete void. I'd never been more isolated in my entire life.

Even when my mother passed away, I...

Taking in another trembling breath, I forced the memory away with a shake of my head. If I thought about Mom now, I'd lose my battle against the tears. Instead, I tried to focus on my wolf, tried to feed her any calm or care or... Whatever I had left in me just now. It was mine and it was hers. However we had to go forward, we'd be together. At least I would have my wolf, until the last breath, the last beat of my heart. There was some comfort in that.

We... We...

Well, fuck.

I had no idea what I could do on my own, but I would figure something else. I would not just be thrown out and left for dead. As I was dragged away from Marnet and his new mate, he caught my eyes one last time. With the corner of his mouth tugging upwards, he lifted one hand, tangling it in her silky hair. He reeled the woman in, pulling her up into a possessive kiss. I saw her knees go a little weak and his other hand pressed more firmly against the small of her back.

The enforcers kept pulling me along, and I had no interest in lingering to watch the show. An ember of anger flickered in the pit of my gut. Confusion swirled around my skull like a maelstrom. My wolf stirred, feeling the same intensity as our emotions warred with one another. Nothing seemed to win out, leaving me paralyzed, caught between anger and hurt, outrage and disbelief.

He said he loved me. He said he loved me. How could he do this — how could he do this to me?

Chapter 10

Remus

Terrace, Claw Mansion
Woodward County, Oklahoma

What the fuck was that?

The woman was clearly angry, and I was sure Marnet had probably done something to deserve that. He wasn't the brightest bulb in the box, and if he had been stringing along two or three she-wolves, that wouldn't surprise me in the slightest. Nor would it surprise me if he hadn't had the foresight to make sure he didn't have multiple mistresses at the same party.

Still. *Still*. No matter what had happened before tonight, the woman — Luna — must have realized confronting her alpha like that couldn't end in any way that was good for her. Even if she was right, and they were mates, what was she going to gain by contradicting him in front of the rest of his pack and all the visiting alphas? Anyone who knew Marnet at all would realize the man would do anything to save face. In what world would he have dumped his little piece of arm candy for Luna once confronted? He was only going to dig in his heels — and he'd done just that.

I sighed and shook my head. Making a public threat like that...I wasn't surprised Marnet had issued a death warrant, even if I didn't agree with him. It was such a waste of a wolf. I glanced over my shoulder, surprised my mother hadn't piped up about 'telling me so' regarding the silver-eyed woman

being a ‘loose cannon.’ But Fiona had disappeared from my side. I blinked. In the commotion, I hadn’t even realized she’d walked off.

When I glanced around, I saw she had joined Kate Claw and some other women I didn’t recognize. The she-wolves were all huddled closely, shoulders practically touching as they whispered and growled rapidly. *Gossip, no doubt.*

Uninterested, I walked in the opposite direction — alas, I hadn’t gotten more than a few strides before Gith and York called and waved as they strode across the terrace. I suppressed my sigh. There was no way to escape, so I altered my course, exchanging my empty tumbler for some plain-looking drink a passing waiter was carrying. He looked like he might argue for exactly three seconds, but my low, bassy growl was enough to send the staffer scurrying back to the bartender to fetch another drink for whomever he was bringing it to.

Good, I thought, and offered a wan smile to the other men. I could smell the alcohol on York before he arrived; it was amazing he was still standing. Gith didn’t look like much better company, but at this point, I’d prefer a sentient rock if it kept me from being trapped with the Shadow Rock alpha on my own. I couldn’t be trusted if my patience were to run out and there were no witnesses.

“Remus!” York barked, looking entirely too amused. He clapped a rough hand over my shoulder and my skin crawled. I didn’t slip from beneath his touch, but I certainly wanted to. “Have you ever seen something like that before? Hah! I knew Marnet was a sorry excuse for an alpha, but that display was something else.”

I arched a brow. *That’s not what you were saying a few hours ago*, I thought snidely, hiding my smirk with a sip of my drink. *How quickly those peace treaties fall by the wayside.*

Admittedly, it was perfectly possible that York still considered Marnet his ally. York wasn’t someone I would trust as far as I could throw, and the older alpha was a broad man who weighed a lot more than my lifts in the gym.

I decided to test York's feelings of friendship. "Wasn't that your niece he introduced tonight?" I prodded expectantly.

The man tossed his head and snorted. "I would never send a member of my family to Lupus Claw — well, not any family member I liked!" He laughed at his own joke while Gith and I exchanged a long-suffering look. "Her name is Skye Greene. She's my beta's youngest daughter. She wanted to get out of New Mexico, though fuck knows *why*, and Marnet had some bullshit idea about *trading pack members*. Never said they had to be useful ones."

Gith gave a knowing hum. He distinctly had not offered anyone from the Black Thorn pack during the earlier negotiations, and his tactic of silence didn't seem to be changing now. Frankly, I had to wonder how much York liked his own beta, given how he was talking about the man's daughter.

"I'm surprised that woman confronted him in front of everyone," I remarked, swirling my drink. "She couldn't have expected Marnet to take that well. He's never been known for holding his temper."

"Foolish," Gith agreed.

York guffawed, a wheezy, breathy laugh. I tipped my head towards my shoulder, almost overtaken by the potency of his breath. It reeked so heavily of whiskey, I wouldn't be surprised if I got a little buzz just from being breathed on.

The alpha didn't seem to notice and kept on talking, sloshing his drink as he gestured towards me with the glass. "Exactly!" he said, as if I had just proven one of his points. I'd encountered the man often enough to know to keep my mouth shut, and just a few seconds later, York blundered forward, clearly powered by his alcohol-fueled fervor. "I mean, the girl was cute. I'd tap that ass, but like — you can't shit where you eat. You just can't. If a man wants a side piece, fine, but he has to be smart about it."

Gith snorted but said nothing else. It was getting harder and harder to suppress my disgust with the Shadow Rock

alpha. *How does anyone put up with this man for more than five minutes at a time?*

York had a mate back home, and while I couldn't count the woman among my friends, she'd been nothing but pleasant on the few occasions we'd crossed paths. If York didn't want a relationship...he shouldn't have started a relationship. The same went for Marnet. It was such a simple concept, it constantly amazed me how many people fell into that trap.

York was still prattling on. "Even if she *was* his true mate, which is fucking bullshit, by the way, who the fuck would want to be stuck to that sack of crazy? You can get tits almost as nice on a quiet girl who won't ruin your party!" He laughed again, still cracking up at his own sense of humor — and his mirth left him entirely oblivious to the fact that our host was quickly approaching.

I was three seconds away from giving York a piece of my mind when Gith took a step to the side, making room for the addition between us. "Congratulations," the oldest alpha murmured, his voice hoarse. He always sounded like a man who hadn't spoken in the last five years.

"Yes. Congratulations on your mateship," I added, voice flat as I tried to mellow out my expression. As much as I loathed Marnet, he made marginally better company than York — but that was a low bar to crawl over. I turned my head slightly, eyeing the woman that was clinging to Marnet by his elbow.

Marnet preened, basking in our attention. "Thank you, thank you," he huffed, as if the entire shitshow hadn't unfolded right before our eyes only moments ago. "Gentlemen, I'd like to introduce you to my mate, Skye." He lifted her tiny little hand to his mouth, pressing what I could only describe as a slobbering kiss. It even *sounded* wet. Skye simply giggled, girlish and flustered as she dropped her gaze, studying the six-inch heels she wore instead.

He didn't bother introducing the rest of us. My wolf bristled, largely unimpressed by the man's lack of decorum, but I wasn't surprised. It had been well proven that Marnet

simply wasn't of the same tier as the rest of us (even though I hesitated to put York in a bracket anywhere near my own).

When none of us said anything else, Marnet cleared his throat. Perhaps his wolf managed to kick some sense into him. "Disregard whatever you heard that woman say earlier. Luna has been a troublemaker in my pack for years. Her father is a reliable wolf, though, and he handled a lot of things for my dad. I was just trying to give his daughter the benefit of the doubt, you know? Serves me right for trying to be a nice guy!"

My brows shot up before I could school my reaction into something more neutral. *Nice? Nice? This brute considered that cruel display 'being a nice guy'?*

York wheezed out another laugh, elbowing Marnet with entirely too much enthusiasm. "Ha! No kidding," he said, bobbing his head. "Cute piece of ass, but no side bitch is worth that kind of hassle, am I right?"

Side bitch? Screw whatever I thought about York, he's just as bad as Marnet.

Marnet cast his new ally a dark look, then tightened his arm around Skye's slender waist to pull the Barbie doll a little closer. They were practically joined from hip to shoulder at this point and both looked eager to be joined even more. "Watch your mouth, Rock," he growled, green eyes flashing. "Skye is the only woman I need, and I won't hear you talk like that in her presence."

"Pffft." York flapped a hand, dismissing him. I knew we were all thinking the same thing, even if none of us said it.

If Marnet couldn't control one she-wolf from his pack, how the hell would he make another alpha obey his wishes? York might be fucking *sloshed* right now, but it would be a fool's errand to discount him. He hadn't lasted fifteen years over in New Mexico out of sheer luck. Wolves were rarely interested in following the status quo. An alpha had to be cunning, powerful, or both.

Marnet, it seemed, was none of the above.

“She’s just some common bitch,” he said. My temper was finally reaching its breaking point; my empty hand twitched and I fought the urge to curl my fingers into a fist. My vision started to turn red. It wasn’t a question of slugging a smirk off someone’s face — the question was who should I hit first.

A distant howl rolled through the terrace moments later, bringing with it an eerie calm. A near silence. Even my wolf was forced to pause for a moment, and the red crept away before I could do anything that might embarrass my mother. I had no questions about whether or not I could take on Marnet or York, or even both at once — but I also had no questions about how Fiona Silverstreak would feel if her only son interrupted a Moonmate ceremony with violence. It didn’t matter if said ceremony had already gone to hell and back.

A renewed round of murmuring followed the silence as the curious energy rippled through the crowd surrounding us. It was obvious the howl had come from a she-wolf. Even I, the exact opposite of a gossip connoisseur, could realize exactly what everyone was going to think. Though it hadn’t been a particularly great display of Marnet’s power, it certainly was entertainment of some sort for everyone else in attendance!

Marnet has fed the rumor mills for rest of the year; I thought to myself dryly, allowing my gaze to drift across the room. My mother was still where I left her, just as engaged in the furious exchange of theories as she was before. I suppressed a sigh and finished the rest of my drink. The ice clinked against the glass. I surreptitiously placed the tumbler on a table, subtle enough that the pair of women sitting there didn’t seem to notice. Gith and York had taken up what little of Marnet’s attention wasn’t being slathered all over his new mate.

Well. Mostly York.

Why Gith didn’t take the opportunity to duck and run, I didn’t know, but I wasn’t about to waste my opportunity. I extracted myself from the conversation with the precision of a surgeon, striding away as silently and as quickly as my feet

allowed. Finally heading towards the exit once more, I paused as I realized I wasn't the only one with escape on their mind. Sophia was several feet ahead of me, but she wasn't alone. She was surrounded by what could only be called a *gaggle* of girls, and the entire gathering was moving towards the stable in one conglomerate.

I fell back, unwilling to attract Sophia's attention for a second time tonight. I figured she'd be on her best behavior after all the embarrassment her brother already experienced, but... I didn't want to be dragged into the middle of the Claw family drama if Sophia couldn't contain her need for the limelight. My brows furrowed. *That's right, Sophia likes the attention. A party. So why is she heading to the barn?*

The barn. Where Marnet had Luna hauled away after her outburst. My frown deepened. Sophia had never struck me as a particularly nice person, but would she go so far as to taunt a woman who'd been sentenced to death — or worse?

Well, I wouldn't have imagined Marnet as the type of man to kick a man — or woman— while they were down before tonight, either. The Claw family had been revealing one ugly surprise after another. My gaze flickered back over to Marnet; the patriarch had wandered back towards the front of the terrace, his hands still all over whatever her name was. Skye. The blonde she-wolf kept giggling and tossing her head, eyes flickering nervously from Marnet to whomever he was talking to, as if she were afraid they might see.

Or afraid they might not see. She sure is trying hard.

The thought gave me pause. Was it possible that Luna *was* Marnet's mate? The man was hardly a catch, so I wasn't sure why else a someone would fight so hard to be with him, especially after his continued dismissal. No, not dismissal. He had outright rejected Luna. There was no reason for her to keep pushing him, especially in front of all the high-ranking officials in her own pack and the visiting alphas from the entirety of the American South. She had to have known she was digging her own grave, and for *what?*

I scowled, unable to come up with a satisfying answer. Besides, I couldn't worry about that now. Sophia had moved on, and I finally had a free moment to myself. Digging the burner phone out of my pocket, I called Bane up immediately. It rang twice and I hung up. Five seconds later, I repeated the activity, but hung up after one ring.

I shoved the phone back into my coat. My beta would know exactly what that pattern of rings meant. *Now. Attack now.*

Slipping back towards the crowd casually, I scanned the party for my mother. I spotted her, and I spotted Marnet as well. *Five minutes. I have five minutes before the teams subdue Marnet's guards and arrive.* I didn't want to waste a moment; when the rest of my wolves arrived, I wanted to be within an arm's length of the Lupus Claw alpha. This was a coordinated strike, and every person had to play their role for this to come off correctly — and that included me. I had to be the one to kill the Oklahoma alpha.

As I moved, I spotted Tala's brilliant red hair on the other side of the terrace. I met her dark blue eyes, and the woman gave the slightest tilt of her head, acknowledging that the message had been passed on. *Good.* I nodded subtly in return.

Tala moved as effortlessly as any cat, though I'd never tell her as much. She'd probably be more offended than anything else. She wove through the crowd without breaking her stride to my mother's side, then gently laid her fingers on her elbow. She guided Fiona away from her circle of gossip, then leaned closer to whisper into my mother's ear.

A moment later, my mother's head shot up, searching the party. She spotted me almost immediately, her delicately shaped eyebrows pulling together in obvious displeasure. Fortunately, she said nothing and turned away after making sure I received her silent message. She allowed Tala to escort her off the terrace. *Good. She'll be safe.*

If this led to me having to listen to another lecture about 'the way things ought to be,' it'd be worth it, as long as my

mother was the one around to give me that lecture. No one even noticed her depart. Kate was still busy chatting with the other wolves in her small group. Marnet had moved on to yet another partygoer, as if it was his personal goal to make sure that each and every guest had a chance to personally admire his new mate.

The smug bastard has no idea what's coming, I thought as I slowly closed in on my target. Marnet had actually pried Skye off of his body, taking animatedly with a couple I didn't recognize. I saw him point at the older woman who had tried to stop Luna before the situation had devolved into violence. Or maybe he was pointing at the man standing next to her? The two of them had drawn expressions and they stood a bit away from everyone else — I could only assume they were Luna's parents. *They don't seem that concerned for parents whose daughter has been sentenced to death*, I thought. I wasn't sure if that spoke to their relationship with the she-wolf, or if it simply spoke to Marnet's authority as an alpha... or the lack there of.

I hadn't found him to be particularly reliable, but I had also minimized Silverstreak's interactions with our neighbors as much as possible since Noah had passed and Marnet had assumed the throne. Perhaps Marnet treated his packmates with the same sort of disregard.

As I got closer, I could pick out Marnet's voice clearly over the murmur of the crowd. "You know, I did my best to honor my father's relationships. I really did! Arden Highborn is good with money, and he works hard for the pack...but he was my father's man, not mine. I need wolves who are loyal to *me*. Besides, do you see how his daughter acted tonight? How can I trust a man who can't even control his own kid?"

My pulse thudded, the rhythm starting to intensify. I glanced down surreptitiously at my wrist. *Just one minute now*. I glanced around the room again for any sign of my packmates. My mouth twisted as I looked back up. *This* was why I didn't like tradition — more importantly, this was why I didn't *trust* tradition.

One foolish mating ceremony would lead to this alpha losing his pack, his people, his land, and, ultimately, his life. No one had so much of an inkling that something was coming. It was almost laughable how ironic this was. *A ceremony celebrating unity, hah! Well, two packs will certainly be unified tonight, though not in the way they expect...*

A burst of motion in my periphery caught my attention and I turned my head, expected to see Bane or one of my other team leaders. Instead, it was Seff who was storming toward me, a hard glint in his dark eyes. I hadn't seen that look on his face in *years*. My pulse intensified.

How the hell did he find out!?

Chapter II

Luna

Stable, Claw Mansion
Woodward County, Oklahoma

Time seemed to crawl by before suddenly accelerating in a blink. I had no idea how long I had been chained up in Marnet's barn. If I had been in my right mind, I might have been disturbed by the fact that he had something to bind a person easily accessible. His brutes didn't even have to look around for it. Marnet ordered them to bring me here, and they did just that, one of them grabbing the chain off the wall as they dragged me inside without a second thought.

I had struggled enough that the links were starting to wear against my bare arms; I was certain there were bruises on my skin by now. My wolf remained despondent, even if some of my shock had given way to an anger I'd never felt before, not even towards my father or Lynn. I twitched involuntarily and whimpered as my ribs got jostled again. The adrenaline was started to wane. I knew as soon as that happened, it would be a struggle to even peel myself off the floor.

I was *exhausted*. Shifting twice in less than twenty minutes was absurd. I knew it wasn't a good idea, but I hadn't been able to control my wolf — or myself, for that matter. That wasn't accounting for the emotional roller coaster I'd been on all day, nor...

Fuck.

I didn't want to think about what had unfolded between myself and Marnet. Sure, after our initial confrontation in the barn earlier today, I'd been concerned. But at most, I'd just thought he was getting cold feet about solidifying our relationship. As far as I could tell, some men were just like that. I hadn't imagined he might be seeing another woman, much less *leave me for her*.

The flame of my anger sputtered, threatened by a well of sadness bubbling up from somewhere deep inside my core. *How dare he*, I thought miserably, as I slumped back down. My legs were so tired. *I* was so tired. I wanted nothing more than for this day to be over. Even thinking was starting to feel difficult. Closing my eyes, I rested my head against the beam, trying to steady my breath before the little catches turned into shudders, and those shudders turned into sobs.

I grappled for anything to distract myself. My mother's favorite song sprang to mind — it was a Christmas song, but she sang it all through the year to me, especially when I was a little girl. The time was so absurd, I couldn't help my shaky laugh, and I began to sing the tune in my head. If I focused enough, I could even hear it sung in my mother's soft, sweet tone.

*Down in the South at Christmas time,
Christmas time, Christmas time – there's
Silent night by candlelight.
The stars shine bright, such a perfect night—*

A rattling sound caught my attention. I dragged myself out of the almost dreamlike state. My wolf remained curled in on herself, barely even acknowledging that someone else was trying to get into the barn. My heart lurched into my throat; without her with me, I felt half-blind and far more than half-unbalanced. *Are the guards back already?* I pulled my legs back to my body.

The woman who marched in a moment later made my heart drop straight to the barn floor. *Sophia*. She wasn't alone. She brought a small posse of women I only vaguely

recognized, most of them having graduated high school before I did. I shrank back. I had no interest in interacting with that harpy even on a normal day, much less when I felt like I'd gone through an emotional meat grinder.

"There she is," Sophia sneered with one hand on her hip. I stared straight forward, lest I make a smart remark and induce any more spite than I could already feel radiating off her. "Marnet should have finished you off then and there. Honestly, who do you even think you are?"

I'm beginning to wonder that myself, I thought dryly. Perhaps if I had known myself a bit better, I wouldn't have found myself in this situation. Even now, chains tight around my middle and my shoulders screaming from my arms being twisted for so long, some part of my mind thought this was too surreal to be true. That this was just a stress-induced nightmare the evening before the Moonmate ceremony. I might wake up in a cold sweat, but I would wake up, and none of this would be real.

When I didn't answer, Sophia stalked over and grabbed me by my chin. On any other day, I would've expected my wolf to react, but she didn't so much as stir. I didn't either. Lynn had never really beaten me, but she'd never been shy about making her displeasure known. When I was younger, I often wouldn't look at her in the eye, especially when she was angry with me. The first few times she grabbed me by the arm or the chin, I remembered squirming or writhing wildly — that only led to me being put over her knee and paddled with the wooden spoon.

I learned quickly not to move. Being quiet and 'respectful' usually made Lynn's tempers pass much more quickly than anything else. Unfortunately, Sophia didn't appear to feel the same way. When I didn't so much as blink, she tightened her grip, manicured nails digging into my skin as she gave me a little shake. "What are you, deaf as well as dumb?" she spat, her lip curled back. "Answer me!"

"Not deaf." I tried not to wince. My mouth still smarted from Marnet's earlier treatment.

Sophia snorted. “Just stupid, then.” She stood back up so she could look down her nose properly at me. “You really thought Marnet was your mate, didn’t you? I almost feel bad for you. It must be hard, being that *dumb*.”

One of the girls behind her cackled. “Yeah! You, an alpha’s mate? In what world!”

I couldn’t help myself. My tongue flashed over my lips, wetting them. “You would know, Sophia. Remind me, who gave the salutatorian speech when we graduated?” I paused long enough to peer up through my lashes, watching the brief flash of horror twist her pretty features. “Oh, yeah, that’s right. It wasn’t you.”

It was me. I had worked *so hard* to maintain that average — Sophia had spent the second half of our senior year celebrating. Admittedly, maybe I would have done the same, if I had friends who were the partying type. I’d only spoken to a handful of the other students, and all of them would have preferred to spend a Saturday curled up at the library rather than drinking around a bonfire.

I knew where my dad kept the liquor in the house, though. Lynn wasn’t particularly careful about hiding it. If I’d really wanted to, I could have joined the party — probably made a few friends, even. But I didn’t. What I wanted was to give that speech and be *noticed*. I got half of my wish, anyways.

“Sophia, are you just going to take that?” a member of the peanut gallery whispered, breaking my reverie.

The woman’s face morphed back into the icy anger I was familiar with. She leaned forward and struck me with her open palm. The slap of skin echoed in the barn and I inhaled sharply as a fresh blossom of pain bloomed in my jaw. “Ungrateful bitch,” she snarled. “You know, my father didn’t even have to accept you in this pack. You weren’t born in Lupus Claw. You were just your dad’s shitty mistake. My dad could have just denied his request to take you in!”

I very carefully did not roll my eyes. Instead, I ran my tongue over my lower lip, tasting the fresh burst of copper. Sophia must have reopened my split lip.

When I didn't say anything, she stomped her heeled foot, then kicked my ankle. I couldn't hold in my yelp; I tried to squirm away, resentful I had finally given the woman the reaction she was seeking. "You ought to apologize!"

It couldn't recognize that Sophia was still trying to get a reaction out of me. She reached forward and boxed my ears. The whole world went muffled. I could see Sophia's mouth moving, but her words were so far away, it was like she was speaking in French.

*I wish Noah Claw hadn't agreed, I thought desperately, closing my burning eyes. I couldn't hold back the onslaught any longer. Fat tears spilled over my lashes and down my cheeks, streaking through the dust and grime. I wish I never joined this pack — no, I wish I never **had** to join this pack. My chin trembled as my mother's song came back to mind unbidden and it was all I could do not to sob openly. How different would it be if I had mated parents instead of a single mother? Where would I be now if my mother hadn't passed so young?*

Mom, I thought desperately, trying to picture her. It was hard to draw up her image, and my struggle only led to more despair. A soft whine shivered up my throat.

There wasn't anything I wouldn't give to have her back — I'd give up my left eye. No, I'd give up my sight, or my hearing, anything as long as I had my mother back. The hole where my heart was supposed to be throbbed and ached as if she had died only yesterday, not when I was twelve years old. If anyone would know what to do, I thought miserably, it would be you. Oh, Mom. I miss you so much. I just wanted to make you proud...

The ringing in my ears was starting to settle and I could hear something Sophia was yelling. *No...not just Sophia.* There were several voices, and they were just going up, and up, and up. It took me a few seconds longer to realize they weren't yelling at me. Confused, I slowly pried my eyes back open, vision still blurry from the uninvited tears. I couldn't even move my hands to wipe my face, but it didn't seem like the gaggle of girls was surrounding me anymore.

For a moment, I was tempted to simply close my eyes and pretend I hadn't noticed, to drift back into the quiet place Sophia's strikes to my ears had allowed. Maybe if I just thought of my mother and her song... The happier memories sang to me like a siren, but I knew that song would only lead me to jagged rocks and I would be dashed upon them. It was only a memory. Mom was gone, buried in the Riverside Cemetery.

When I blinked my eyes back open, my vision was starting to clear. Sophia and her friends were in the far corner of the barn, and there was — there was a man, yet another wolf I didn't recognize. They weren't yelling insults at him. A shiver raced down my spine. *They were scared.* Realization struck me like a cold splash of water, revitalizing some sense of urgency.

Was that a gun? My nostrils flared as I clamped down a gasp. The last thing I wanted was to attract the stranger's attention. Sophia might be weaker than this man, but I was a fish in a barrel. I tried to pull my legs even closer to my torso, sinking toward the hay littering the stable floor. *Why the hell does that man have a gun? Violence is forbidden at a Moonmate ceremony! Though Marnet had proven that didn't matter. But a gun!* Hunting was popular among the humans in Oklahoma, but werewolves hunted with tooth and claw. He had no need for a gun. I wasn't sure I'd ever seen one in person, and the realization sent another shudder through me.

I still couldn't make out what the girls were shouting, or what the man was yelling back. His face hardened. He lifted the gun; there was a crack and the thump of a body. It was the man who fell, deep red pooling up from his back. My gut lurched and I swallowed down bile.

Is he...

I couldn't finish the thought, looking away instead. To my shock, Marnet was there, his white suit jacket splattered with red. There was a pistol in his hand; *he had saved his sister.* I struggled to sit up a little more, shoes slipping on the hay. Even my wolf finally stirred, interest piqued as she recognized his scent through the stink of iron, adrenaline, and fear.

Marnet.

My heart shivered; I was too tired to even begin to try to figure out what the man was doing now. I didn't see the blonde woman who had been hanging off him earlier anywhere. My wolf trembled as she tried to push forward, but we were both too exhausted for another shift. So badly, she wanted Marnet's attention, but we couldn't manage so much as a whimper, much less a howl. She keened all the same, desperately hoping Marnet had realized the error of his ways.

I wasn't so eager to receive him, but if it meant getting out of this barn and away from whomever had come to the Claw home with guns, then I would put my reservations aside. I couldn't see what was going on outside, but the sinking feeling in my gut told me that might be for the best. Marnet was covered in blood, and he was the *alpha*. If he was looking like that...

I shivered again.

As if by magic, those green eyes turned back towards me. The world stopped moving for a moment. No one breathed. No one blinked. It was only me and Marnet. My wolf reached forward tentatively, as if she could physically probe the space between us for the bond Marnet had cut. That place was still empty and jagged, a harsh landscape of stony earth and loneliness...but Marnet still hadn't turned away. My heart lurched again; my head felt like it was full of cotton and static.

My wolf kept pushing forward, eagerness swelling in her chest instead of unease. The murder we just witnessed hadn't fazed her at all; Sophia and the other women had stopped existing the moment we had locked gazes with our mate.

Against all odds, Marnet lowered his gun and turned to face me fully. His mouth was moving, but I still couldn't understand what he was saying — or if he was even talking to me. It didn't matter to my wolf. The deep timbre of his voice made her rumble with pleasure, a shiver rolling down her spine. Despite everything, she was certain he had come here to apologize. Not just apologize, but also to sweep us away in a heroic rescue. We would escape this place and find somewhere

quiet, and finally, *finally*, he would claim us properly. The way he was always supposed to.

I stopped breathing, afraid to look at Marnet, but even more afraid to look away. The fairy tale my wolf had spun felt too good to be true, and the man still had a weapon. His threat still echoed around fresh in my mind.

It took Marnet a year to cross the barn. He circled behind me, grabbing the chains. Without a word, he hoisted me to my feet; the chains dug into my sides and I wheezed softly, unable to catch my breath. Marnet stayed where he was, digging for something in his pocket. *The key*, I realized dimly, having enough self-awareness to stand still and let him unlock the chains.

Some tension released and I stumbled forward. My wolf could have sung her joy just then, fully expecting Marnet to sweep us into an embrace any moment now. Despite my freedom, I struggled to catch my balance — but I couldn't. I couldn't move my arms. I struggled again and gasped, my bruises shrieking and ribs complaining as I jostled the chains. Unable to process what was going on, I glanced down at my chest. The chains were still present over my rumpled dress like a gaudy accessory.

“What...?” I whispered, finally stumbling to my feet. I searched Marnet's face. He said nothing, instead impatiently waving a hand at me. The direction didn't make sense. Even if my brain didn't feel layered in fog, I wouldn't have been able to interpret what he wanted.

Patience was not one of Marnet's virtues. He rolled his eyes and grabbed me by one shoulder, all but throwing me to one side. I wobbled two steps on my heels before I fell forward again, my knees scraping against the wood. My hands were behind my back; I had no way to catch myself. A prickly pile of hay caught me instead, but it didn't stop the haze of pain from creeping up. One of my ankles had started to throb. My neck felt like I'd just been in a car accident. Even turning my head to look at Marnet felt like a monumental task.

Why...

My wolf lay just as still as I did, just as battered by Marnet's harsh treatment. He had pushed aside the hay next to the column I'd been chained to, revealing the trap door underneath. My brows furrowed as I watched.

He waved a hand frantically, ushering Sophia down the hatch first. Her friends followed, some of them wobbling in their heels. Marnet barked harsh instructions, but the words meant nothing to me. Kate Claw followed afterwards, and I blinked. My thoughts felt slow and gummy. *Where'd she come from?* Had she been in the group? I didn't think so, but everything was starting to seem like a strange, nonsensical blur. I'd never felt so exhausted in my entire life.

Something outside caught Marnet's attention. His chin jerked. There was no one left in the barn but him. He grabbed the trapdoor and began to climb down inside, pausing only to try to sweep hay back towards him, as if he might be able to cover up the hidden entrance. His green eyes looked up one last time, meeting mine. I sighed, briefly arrested by that emerald color. I was too tired to so much as blink.

Those eyes held nothing in them. They were cool and empty, observing me like I was nothing more than a body left on the floor. Marnet said nothing and ducked his head down, the door thudding shut as he slipped away into darkness. I finally closed my eyes.

At least I know now, I thought, even my internal monologue sounding shaky to me. *At least I know.*

Chapter 12

Remus

Stable, Claw Mansion
Woodward County, Oklahoma

Marnet, you coward!

In the thirty seconds I wasted trying to outmaneuver Seff, the Lupus Claw alpha had slipped between my fingers, disappearing from the fanciful terrace. Thankfully, my old friend hadn't figured me out too quickly — he stormed towards me, but my wolves appeared moments later, before Seff could confront me or spoil my *surprise* for any of the others in attendance.

The yard exploded into chaos. Wolves appearing. Wolves disappearing. Marnet vanished but my packmates arrived, corralling party guests to prevent any further escapees. The shouting was almost deafening as high-ranking members demanded answers and younger members just tried to figure out what the hell was going on. One moment they had been looking for their future mates, and the next they were being herded like a flock of sheep.

I strode along the perimeter, trying to spot Bane among the chaos. Tala hadn't reemerged since she had escorted my mother somewhere safer. I spotted my beta. "Where did he go?" I barked. Bane tipped his head towards the barn, raising his brow in a silent question. I shook my head. *I need you here*. I had known Bane almost as long as I had known Seff, and there was no one I trusted more. Bane was the brother I

found. Bane and Tala were the only wolves I would trust with such an important task, and since Tala was busy protecting my mother, Bane was the one I could leave on the terrace with the rest of my pack.

He gave a short nod and pointed to a few other members of our pack. I motioned to the delta team leader with two fingers. They fell in line behind me as we moved silently from the terrace, leaving Bane and the other two teams to handle the rest of the partygoers.

Unfortunately, the barn was empty — or almost empty. There was a body near the door and I scowled. Jack Colby. He was a younger member of the pack, having been a lone wolf most his life. He had been on alpha team...but clearly wasn't still with the team. *He must have pursued Marnet*, I thought with a grimace. I could appreciate initiative, but a lone wolf would always struggle to survive. *We'll bring him home.*

But we had to finish our business here first.

As we prowled further into the stable, I realized that Jack wasn't the only body left in Marnet's wake. The area stunk of fear and blood, making it difficult to pick out any individual's scent, but I was fairly certain the mass of hair and clothing wasn't a Silverstreak wolf. A moment later, I realized where I recognized that hair from. *Luna?*

My heart thumped as I broke into a jog, brows knitting together as I realized her dress was matted with blood. The strange glint of light was a fucking *chain*. She had been bound and tossed aside like a piece of chaff. Despite her earlier display, that bothered me — or maybe it was because she had caught the wrong end of Marnet Claw's bullshit alpha-ing, and *that* was what aggravated me.

I shoved that thought aside to deal with later. I crouched down as I reached the hay pile the woman had been discarded upon. One of her hands was unfolded, as if she was trying to reach for something despite her bondage. I followed the line, tracking it to a beam not more than a few yards away. There was a dark pool of blood, already starting to coagulate. *What a brute.* I grimaced. Even if Marnet had decided upon death for

the woman's actions, what was the point of beating her to a pulp first? That was torture for torture's sake. *I didn't think it was possible, Marnet, but you've sunk even lower.*

"Check that beam," I instructed the nearest wolf. Outside of the blood, the hay had been pushed away in a strange pattern. It didn't make sense that the entire barn could stink of wolves of and fear but have only two corpses — or near corpses. I frowned as I looked back at Luna; she was still breathing softly. Her pulse hadn't faded. Maybe Marnet had wanted to kill her, but he hadn't taken the time to finish the job.

"Boss, there's something here." The blond wolf pawed at a plank. He was able to catch a gap in the wood, pulling at the board to reveal an entire trap door. It made me snort, watching the man expose an entire basement. *What sort of barn has a basement? Especially around here?* Further east, or maybe further north, old barns were built into the sides of hills. You might have something like a basement, or at least subterranean floor. But here? Nah. We had hills, but they were rolling, at best.

I strode over then stood on the precipice of the opening, staring down into the darkness. A cool damp hung in the air. *This isn't a damn root cellar,* I thought venomously. I was barely able to keep my expression neutral. "Colin," I barked, motioning to one of the men watching the barn door. "Luna is still alive. Take her back to the house, get those fucking chains off her, and do something about her injuries." The man gave me a startled look, eyes shifting rapidly between me and the young woman still in the hay.

"Sir?" he croaked, face already going a little ashen. "I'm no doctor."

I growled. "Then fucking *find one at the party.*"

Thankfully, Colin sensed he'd asked enough stupid questions. Regardless of what he thought, he knew better than keep stalling. He holstered his pistol and hurried over to Luna, taking only a moment to assess her before scooping her up.

The woman didn't even twitch as she was lifted and carried away.

I shook my head. *What a fucking waste.*

But there was no time to linger on that. The longer I waited, the further Marnet got. If he got away... *No. He isn't getting away.* I had planned too meticulously to let that happen.

"Let's go," I found my footing on the haphazard rope-and-wood ladder leading further into the dark. The rest of my packmates fell into line behind me, but I had no patience to wait for all of them to file down the shaking ladder. Lifting my chin, I inhaled deeply. The primary scent was the wet, deep aroma of earth. On a normal day, I loved that smell. There were few things more calming than the land itself. After a particularly challenging day at Silverstreak Motors, the only thing that would settle my nerves was a run across the open land with the dirt and the grass.

But I didn't need relaxation today. I needed answers.

I tipped my head a little further and sniffed again. Beneath the layer of soil was a mosaic of other nuances. My wolf stirred and growled softly, honing in on something seconds before I did. Beneath the mask of earth was that stink of fear. That stench of adrenaline. Several wolves had passed this way, and I could recognize at least two of those individual scents.

Two?

I shook my head. It didn't matter. Among the potent bouquet was Marnet — grassy and heady and so very full of testosterone. It wasn't unusual for an alpha to have stronger pheromones than other members of his pack, but Marnet had always *reeked* of it. It was too much. Ugly. Overpowering. It had only gotten worse once he'd taken over the Lupus Claw pack. It dripped with overcompensation.

The strangest part of the puzzle was that it smelled... layered. I couldn't tell if Marnet had just passed through, or if he had ducked into this underground passage weeks ago. There were simply too many scents, too many wolves, but I

couldn't waste the only lead I had. If Marnet had disappeared through some other path, he was sneakier than I gave him credit for, because this was the only thing I could trace.

My course set, I allowed my wolf to power forward, launching into an all-out gallop down the darkened path. I had no idea where this was going to lead, and I didn't care. It smelled like wolves, it smelled like Marnet, and that was all that mattered. My packmates were scrambling to follow, but I couldn't wait. I *could not* let my rival get away.

The deeper I plunged into the underground, the more certain I became I was on the right path. The scents mingled and became stronger. My heart thundered almost as loudly as my paws against the dirt floor, claws digging into earth as I propelled myself forward. Even with my ears flat against my head, I could hear voices ahead. As good as it felt to allow my legs to stretch, to run faster than I ever could as a man, I had to restrain myself.

But it wasn't Marnet's voice coming from around the bend, and I needed answers. I rounded a turn and came to a halt only inches away from Sophia and a man I didn't recognize. The woman shrieked, scrambling against the dirt like a three-legged fawn. Even with a quick look, I could see she had twisted, if not broken, an ankle. I didn't have the chance to even think about shifting back to my human form; Sophia's associate lunged forward. Six feet of man became a bulky chestnut wolf. The Lupus Claw wolf snarled as he planted his paws in the dirt, clearing intending to act as a wall between me and his alpha's sister.

Fool.

Adrenaline surged up from my gut, swirling in my chest as the thrill of a fight loomed. I arched my thick tail and the ridge of fur over my spine prickled upwards. The chestnut stranger might have been considered brave, or perhaps even large for a wolf, but he was no alpha.

To his credit, he did not flinch, even as his ears rolled back as he braced for a fight. He had to know this was a fight he

was going to lose. I peeled my lips back to reveal the flash of white teeth. My ears flattened as well as my hackles reached their full height. *Last chance.*

The chestnut wolf bolted towards me, throwing all his weight on his hindquarters like a racehorse exploding out of a starting gate. I waited half a breath, only until he was fully committed to the action. I jumped forward as well, but I dropped my shoulders low. I *could* take this other wolf, pound for pound, but I didn't have to. An alpha couldn't only be the largest wolf in his pack; his pack would be taken over by the neighboring leader as soon as he had a better idea.

An alpha had to be clever as well as powerful. I slipped beneath the other male as he lunged, unable to alter his trajectory once he'd leapt into the air. My paws barely skipped over the ground before I was spinning, lunging after the chestnut wolf. He braced his landing with his front paws, but that hadn't been his target; he stumbled as his paws hit the ground. I lashed forward and wrapped my jaws around the male's haunch.

He yelped as canines tore through pelt and flesh like knives; the taste of copper hit my tongue, only driving me to clamp down harder. A growl rolled through me as I shook my head, knocking my foe further off balance. He tried to scramble forward, jerking his leg wildly, like prey, no different than a coyote with its leg caught in a bear trap. With one particularly good lurch, he finally wrenched himself free, revealing the open wound.

I stumbled forward, shaking myself out. The chestnut wolf tried to wheel around to catch me, but he only made it one step. He yelped. The damaged limb flopped uselessly like a fish out of water. Despite his pain, he still flashed his snarl and tried to hobble between myself and Sophia. The red haze tinged the very edges of my vision; I could cast my alpha and force him to step aside, but to what end? He was clearly loyal to Sophia — and thus, to Marnet. He had to go.

I charged forward in a single burst, and this time I grabbed the wolf at the base of his jaws. A wolf's fur was thickest there, but I clamped my jaw teeth down like I was a vice.

Mechanical. Biology couldn't stop me. The wolf howled and yelped; a claw pushed across my face, scrabbling at my eyes. I refused to let go and gave one sharp shake of my head, snapping his neck. He went silent at once, suddenly becoming a dead weight in my mouth. I released him, dropping the body on the floor before I turned to Sophia, blood flecked over my pelt and red still coloring my view.

Sophia had managed to get to her feet and limped several strides away, but it took only seconds for me to bound after her. I grabbed the edge of her dress between my teeth and snarled. My ears flicked to a forty-five-degree angle as my tail started to curl over my spine again, just daring the alpha's sister to try to run any further. Her shoulders tensed, eyes searching mine for a moment. She looked further down the pathway; she exhaled a long breath. "Fine," she hissed.

I released her clothing and took one step backward, then another. With enough space, my wolf retreated and allowed me to assume my human form again. I reached up, running fingers over my face to swipe away any remaining blood before it dried. Strands of dark hair framed my face, my neat topknot now much more like a messy bun. I turned to eye my captive.

"Where is your brother?" My voice was steady despite the adrenaline rush that always came with shifting.

Sophia stared at me belligerently for a moment before dropping her gaze, looking past me and over my left ear. *Good trick*, I thought, mouth twitching. Look at the alpha without looking into his eyes. Maybe Sophia had a little more spine than I had given her credit for. *Too bad it's too late for tricks*.

I clicked my tongue against the back of my teeth. "Don't mistake my mercy for kindness," I rumbled. I grabbed her elbow. "There is no more Lupus Claw pack, Sophia. I am your alpha now."

Marnet's sister defaulted to a struggle for a moment, trying to snatch her arm back to her chest. Her brain seemed to catch up with her body a moment later and I could see the effort it took her to force out a long, even exhale. She looked back up,

this time catching my eye. “I thought maybe you were a bit full of yourself, Remus Silverstreak, but now I know you’re a damn fool.” She set her jaw.

The skin on my nape prickled and my wolf growled, already preparing to push forward and put this whelp in her place. *That won’t be necessary*, I thought, annoying as Sophia was being. *We are **not** anything like Marnet Claw.*

“A fool or not, I—”

Sophia interrupted me with a wild swing. She dug her painted nails into the side of my neck and jaw. I snarled and tightened my grip on her other arm, bringing around my free hand to scruff her. I held her tight then shook her roughly, as if I was reprimanding a nipping pup rather than a full-grown woman. The red haze began to creep back into my vision. “Behave,” I hissed. “I am not going to ask again.”

I did not need to explain to an alpha’s sister what happened to a wolf who refused to listen to a request and forced a command instead. She stiffened for a moment before some of the tension began to drain, giving way to exhaustion. To pain. “You made a mistake, Remus,” she growled, but made no effort to fight me as I began to drag her back the way we had come. “You made a mistake. Marnet’s going to make you pay for this. The Lupus Claw wolves will never be yours.”

I huffed, tired of her yammering. I collected several of my wolves on the march back to the stable and the tunnel entrance, some of them having peeled off to check other tunnels. Each wolf reported a dead end, a storeroom, or something to that extent. “Someone take her,” I snapped as soon as I pushed her up ladder.

Bane was at the door to the barn now, jaw working. My spine stiffened as I stormed over. “What is it?”

He tipped his head. “We got Slate,” he said. “And we got Kate.”

Beta, mother, and sister. But...

He hissed between clenched teeth, eyes flickering to my face for a moment. “No sign of Marnet anywhere. This entire

place *stinks* like him, all over the grounds. Can't tell what's old and what's fresh. We can't find him, Remus."

I inhaled slowly, fingers curling into fists. I nodded curtly. "Go find Tala and Fiona." When Bane tilted his head in a silent question, I simply flashed my teeth. Like the priceless beta he was, Bane took my answer at face value and turned, heading pack towards the terrace.

I hung back, not trusting the rage I felt boiling up from my core. I tipped my head back and howled, my war cry ringing through the clear night air, rolling over the fields. I hoped Marnet could hear it.

You can run, but you can't hide, you coward!

Chapter 13

Luna

C law Mansion
Woodward County, Oklahoma

My consciousness hovered near the surface for a moment, as if I was just beneath a lake's waterline. *I'm floating*. The thought didn't make any sense, but I couldn't explain the feeling otherwise. I couldn't even convince my eyelids to open, much less get my limbs to move — but I was moving. Just not under my own power. Floating was the only way I could explain it.

A tiny sigh escaped me, exhaustion creeping back in like tiny black tendrils. Unable to figure out what was going on, I gave in to the warm, rushing feeling, and let myself sink back down into the quiet of my unconscious.

I stood in front of the mirror, running my fingers up and down the straps of my brand-new overalls. It probably wasn't what most twelve-year-old girls requested for their birthday, but I loved them. In truth, I really wanted to look like Rosie the Riveter, but Mom had said that one-piece coveralls were harder to come by, and maybe not so hard-wearing. She'd promised if I showed I could take care of work clothing, maybe I could have an outfit like Rosie's when I turned thirteen.

It sounded a fair deal to me. I knew Mom didn't expect me to keep my clothing spotless; we were working in a garage,

after all. Most of her work clothes were marked with oil stains and stitches in several different colors...but that was the point. She didn't throw something out just because it looked less than new. Even if something couldn't serve its original function anymore, she found a way to give an item a second life. Maybe even a third.

She felt that way about everything. I glanced over at my nightstand, grinning at the old-school alarm clock and the custom light. It was a bizarre-looking thing, made of gears and rods rescued from vehicles that hadn't had any more life left in them. I loved it. She'd given it to me for Christmas when I was ten, and I was dying to learn how to make one to give her in return.

Glancing back in the mirror, I straightened my overalls again, beaming at my reflection. I didn't *look* like a kid today — I didn't *feel* like a kid. And that was important, because Mom had gotten an abandoned Beetle, and she had promised she was going to show me how to fix each and every inch of that thing. When it was done, it was going to be mine. Today, we started with the engine. I couldn't remember the last time I had been this excited.

“Luna!” my mother called from down the hall of our little ranch-style home. “Come out here and eat your breakfast!”

“Coming!” I yelled back, still lingering in front of my reflection. I grinned and the girl — no, the *young woman*, that's what my mom would say — grinned right back. Rolling back one of my tee-shirt sleeves, I reenacted the Rosie pose.

“Your Eggos are getting cold!”

I turned on my heel, immediately forgetting my flexing in the name of blueberry waffles. “I said I'm coming!” I squealed, socks sliding as I darted down the narrow hallway.

Mom left me to finish my waffles and wash my dish in the sink while she got herself together. I barely tasted my breakfast as I wolfed it down, barely making sure I had remembered to put soap on the sponge and rinse all the suds

off before I grabbed my gloves on the table and went tearing out the front door.

My mother was out front, lifting the door to the garage. Her light brown hair shone in the sun, tied up in a wavy ponytail. She was wearing denim overalls today, too, and the thought made me giggle, almost tripping over my own feet as I dashed across our gravel driveway. I wrapped my arms around her middle, squeezing her close. Mom laughed gently, bringing her arms down to embrace me once she'd finished putting up the door. "Good morning, Lunaloo," she cooed, leaning down to press a kiss to my hair. "Are you ready for our big day?"

I bobbed my head eagerly, still smooshing my face against my mother's shirt. "Yeah," I said, inhaling deeply. Every wolf smelled a little different, but I had always thought my mother smelled the best of all. She smelled like lilacs on a warm spring morning, the smell of the blossom and the sunshine itself. There was a little underline of motor oil there, too. I wasn't sure if that was *her* or if it was because she was always working, but it was part of her now. Maybe other wolves thought it was strange, but I loved it. It was so uniquely her.

Mom pulled back, cupping my cheeks in her slender hands. Her eyes sparkled as she stroked her thumbs over my cheekbones. "Oh, Luna. You look wonderful. Do you like your overalls?"

I nodded again and she let me go, still smiling brightly. "Good! I'm glad." She turned and motioned for me to follow her into the small garage. On Mondays during the summer, Mom closed the shop to hang out with me — and run errands or whatever during the school year. The rest of the week, she fixed up cars for local families. It wasn't a terribly big business, but there almost always seemed to be a car on the lift.

Today, though, it was that little blue Beetle, so rusty and faded I almost couldn't tell what color it was supposed to be. I grinned at the sad little machine, unable to keep my excitement off my face. "That's it?" I asked, bouncing on the balls of my feet.

“Yep! That’s it,” Mom said, nodding slightly. The Bug hadn’t been lifted up yet, so I scurried over, tracing my fingers over its sides. “Be careful, Luna. It’s rusty.” I huffed, but I withdrew my hand, circling around to the back.

“Can we pop the lid?” I asked.

“Sure thing, hon,” my mother replied, opening the front door and leaning inside. A moment later, the deck lid groaned and gave a little jump. She walked back around to slide her gloved fingers underneath, carefully lifting the deck lid and propping it up gently.

I leaned over, peering down at the car’s innards. Honestly, I had no idea what I was looking at, but that didn’t frighten me. As far as I could tell, my mother knew everything that was worth knowing about cars — and if she didn’t know, it wasn’t worth knowing. “Ready?” I asked eagerly, still bouncing up and down. “What do we need? I can go grab it!” I stepped away to look around her workshop.

“Slow down, eager beaver,” my mother laughed, shaking her head. “There’s one thing you can never forget, okay? Come here.”

I did exactly as I was told, stepping over with wide eyes. “What’s that, Mom?” I prompted.

She grinned, her gray eyes sparkling with mischief. Moments later, she grabbed my face again, smearing grease across my cheeks. “Don’t forget to have fun!” She laughed.

I shrieked in mock horror, wiping some grease off my cheek to try to smear back on my mother. She knew exactly what I was going to do and was already halfway across the garage. By the time she hit the gravel driveway, there was a beautiful brown wolf in her place.

When the neighbors asked why we had such high fences, Mom always said it was to protect her clients’ vehicles. It was a good neighborhood, but leaving cars out in the open made people anxious, and she wanted her customers to feel safe. It was a good enough reason for them, and they were happy

enough not having to look at whatever they imagined our yard to look like.

It wasn't littered with cars — it was only Mom's truck and now my Beetle. The real reason she had the fence was for this — so we could shift, and no one asked where these big brown dogs were hiding most of the day. I shrieked with joy and shifted to try to keep up. I was nowhere near as graceful as she was, stumbling over my awkward legs and too-big paws; if it was possible, my wolf was somehow even more gangly than I was as a preteen. My mother promised every wolf went through that phase and every wolf grew out of it, but I couldn't wait to be as lithe and beautiful as she was.

We had done several laps around the house when something made my hackles rise. I slowed to a stop, ears tilting forward to try to listen. My mother also halted, tail falling between her legs as she tipped her head. Something didn't feel right.

My suspicion was confirmed when my mom shifted a moment later, waving a hand. “Go back in the house, Lunaloo,” she said, eyes glued to the driveway.

I did as I was told — mostly. Shifting back, I ran back up to the house, darting into the open garage. I hung around the door, cringing as I realized I recognized the voices.

Dad and Lynn. I hated when I had to go visit him and his other family, but I wasn't due for a visit any time soon. *Why are they here?* It sounded like an argument.

“I'm tired of asking, Josephine. Luna should come live with me. She should have a proper, stable family in a proper, stable home.”

I could almost hear the scowl in my mother's voice. “There's nothing unstable here, except for the fact that you keep trying to jerk this poor girl around!” she snapped. “If you wanted partial custody, you should have thought of that when you fucked off for the first eight years of her life.”

I knew my mother was trying to protect me, but it still made me shiver. I leaned a little closer to the wall, the shadow blanketing me as I try to lean in. I didn't *want* to go live with my father...and that was the first time I had heard anything about him wanting to spend more than a few nights a year with me. Sometimes when I visited, it felt like his wife didn't even notice I existed.

My father growled. "I want my children under the same roof. How can I protect her when she's out here, in the middle of bumfuck nowhere, and in a rundown mechanic shop, no less? She's being raised like a wild animal. This is not how I want my children to be raised."

"Besides," Lynn said, always inserting her opinion. "She has two younger sisters she could play with. They would love to have an older sister!" I peered around the garage again. Lynn was rubbing her extended stomach. She was so round, I was amazed she could even walk around. The last time I had visited, they'd told me they were expecting another pup, but it seemed like Lynn had expanded like a balloon. "And soon, she'll have younger brothers, too."

Brothers? My brain stalled out for a moment as I tried to figure out what she meant.

"She'll never be lonely! It's only right that all the Highborn wolves be together."

What? I wasn't lonely now! Something cold started to pool in my belly. I curled my hands up, my fingernails digging into the meat of my palms.

This time, my mother really did growl. The sound made my hair stand up on end. "When I want your opinion on how to raise my daughter, Lynn, I'll ask for it."

"Don't speak to my mate like that!"

"Then don't bring your mate to *my* home trying to tell me how to raise *my* daughter," my mother snapped. I felt like cheering. She was amazing. I couldn't see her face from where I was standing, but I could imagine the fierce look. I would never mess with a woman like her. "Luna is as much Ulfric as

she is Highborn — more than, likely. I am her legal — and *only* — guardian, so stop asking me. Now, get the hell off my property before I call the police.”

I heard the crunch of gravel as the adults moved. Lynn spoke next, the false cheer dropped from her tone. “You should hold your tongue, Josephine. Who are you, really? If you don’t watch it, we could get you banished from this pack, and you won’t have a choice.”

My mother turned, facing my father. “Is this *really* what it’s come to, Arden? You come here with threats to take my daughter away? You’re the reason I’m even here! I moved from the pack that I loved for *you*. I left my friends and my family for us. For *you*. You and your promises. And then when I needed you? When *she* needed you? You abandoned us.”

The sound of flesh hitting flesh made me jump. I hadn’t realized I’d been creeping forward, out of the garage and only a few feet away. The sight of Lynn striking my mother across the face made me gasp; all three adults turned to look at me.

Caught, I raced forward to wrap my arms around my mother. I could feel the anger rolling off her in waves, even as her features were starting to soften. Tears were already welling up in my eyes, making them sting and prickle. I sniffed, afraid to look up at my father. “I don’t want to leave,” I said softly. “I want to stay here. I *like it* here.”

Tears started to roll down my cheeks and my mother’s expression morphed again. She scowled at my father. “Look what you’ve done. Get the hell off my property, Arden, and don’t come back unless you’re invited. Luna is not going to live with you, and there is nothing on this good green earth that will change my mind as long as I’m living.”

My father sneered and started to turn away, heading back to his shiny black car.

“Thank you,” I whispered to my mother.

“Luna,” she said.

“Yeah?”

Luna. Luna. *Luna*.

I blinked slowly, my eyelids feeling leaden. *Where am I?* I opened my mouth to try to ask, but my throat was so thick, I couldn't make a noise. My tongue felt useless. A redhead was staring down at me, lips moving.

“Luna?”

Who is she?

I had no idea who she was — or where I was. It didn't seem that pressing, though. My eyelids fluttered, and I exhaled; why fight the urge to close my eyes? It didn't seem worth it...so I didn't. I let them close, and let the darkness overtake me once more.

“Luna!”

Chapter 14

Remus

Claw Mansion
Woodward County, Oklahoma

I stood on the small balcony of the master bedroom, damp hair sticking to the back of my neck as I watched the morning haze drift up from the fields. The sun had risen only an hour ago, but the July heat was already threatening. The grass was still. Horses grazed in one of the far paddocks, blissfully unaware of the change in ownership.

Must be nice, I thought idly, watching the distant shapes as tails swished and ears flickered. *As long as they've got food and a place to sleep, they really aren't that concerned, are they?* Someone had put the horses back out between the carriage rides and the proper start of the ceremony. While I supposed prey animals were probably sensitive enough to hear some sort of chaos unfold up at the main house, it didn't have anything to do with them.

Never owned a herd of horses before. I wondered if Marnet's stable staff was human and scratched at my closely cut beard. We had never had pets growing up, nor had I any desire for such things. There had been a class guinea pig once in the fourth grade, but the damn thing started squealing its head off every time I came close. That was the end of that, for me. *If they were wolves, we'd need to address that.*

I pulled my phone out of my pants pocket and pulled up my list for the former Claw mansion.

Oklahoma Mansion To Do

- Remove Claw insignia
- Sell paintings
- Accountant for assets

So much shit to do. I hated this part. After a moment, I added a few more items to the document.

- Take care of horses (new hires?)
 - Farm care, y/n?
 - Hire someone to deep clean entire place.

I paused and frowned. *Cleaning needs to be number one*, I decided, and quickly dragged that item to the top of my list. I closed the app and scowled. The entire home *reeked* like the Lupus Claw pack. It wasn't a surprise, but if I was going to spend any amount of time here, I needed it to change as soon as possible. It would take weeks of several Silverstreak Wolves practically *rolling around on the furniture* to replace the scents naturally, and I just didn't have the patience for that.

Thank the ancestors for modernity.

I stopped myself just short of pulling my phone back out to start scanning the Internet for local cleaning services. *Technically*, this house wasn't mine yet. Marnet was still out there, somewhere, and I had to deal with him.

The thought elicited a low growl from deep in my chest and I scowled, stretching my arms up over my head as I stared out over the landscape surrounding the property. As long as Marnet was alive, he was a threat to my pack. Remaining Lupus Claw wolves might hold out, hoping to remain with their alpha instead of being folded into the Silverstreak clan. Even worse, Marnet had the right to challenge me. If I folded

in his territory before the challenge, he could, technically, challenge me for my *entire* territory — that would be everything Silverstreak already held in Texas, too.

Tracing one of the fence lines out to the woods, I scowled. My wolves had been searching the surrounding area in teams, but nothing had been found overnight. I doubted any of the local werewolves would assist us; if they hadn't bound themselves to me as their alpha by now, I seriously doubted they were going to step forward before Marnet was found.

Hedging their bets.

I couldn't blame them. An average wolf who had no specific standing in the pack could find himself in a lot of trouble if he pledged himself to me now. His former packmates would see him as a traitor and make him a target. If he had no specific information, I had no reason to immediately promote him, either. They could even be concerned that Marnet could rise from the ashes and overthrow me. (He wouldn't, but a good businessman tried to see situations from the eyes of rivals or potential clients. I had to try to imagine what a regular wolf might think.)

If they supported Marnet now and he still fell to me, they'd still be screwed — and if they had no rank now, why would they risk their neck for him? Marnet's display last night didn't suggest to me he cared much about his packmates.

As long as the majority of the locals stayed out of the way, I didn't care. What I *could* use, though, was one wolf who knew the area and had a bone to pick with the alpha. Maybe a low-ranking pack member. *I should ask Tala to run the area and attempt to locate any lone wolves nearby.* Most wolves wouldn't choose to be loners, so maybe we could find someone who'd been kicked out of the pack and felt wronged by Marnet...and if not the man himself, perhaps by the Claw family.

I nodded to myself, content with the plan as I turned inside to go find my shirt. My hair was almost dry enough now, and I had wasted enough time percolating over the possibilities. "Ready or not, Marnet, *here I come.*"

I had barely finished dressing when the door to the bedroom burst open, doorknob slamming into the wall. “Remus Abraham Silverstreak!”

I rolled my eyes as I turned around — only one person in the entire world dared use that middle name. She might be the only person still alive that knew it. Behind Fiona stood one of the guards I’d posted outside of her room, looking rightfully abashed. “I’m sorry, sir,” the young woman muttered, her gaze flickering between myself and Fiona. “She wouldn’t— We couldn’t make her—”

I waved the woman off with a sigh. *When Fiona Silverstreak gets good and mad, there’s no stopping her.*

“It’s fine,” I growled, aware that was probably a contradicting message. I didn’t really care — I was annoyed, even if this couldn’t be helped. “Shut the door on your way out.”

The woman was relieved to be dismissed, hurrying back out of the room. My mother didn’t waste a second the moment the latch clicked shut, stalking over within a foot of me.

“Remus Abraham Silverstreak,” she snarled again, her eyes hard and dark. “You put me in a guarded room? Your own *mother*?”

I folded my arms over my chest. “Of course,” I replied, trying to keep my cool. “This is — was — Marnet’s territory. The last thing I needed was some wolf to get the bright idea to try to kidnap my mother in the chaos as some sort of leverage or bargaining tool.”

“So this is all about you, then.”

“Well, you were irritated a moment ago when you thought it was about you,” I shot back, arching a brow to mirror of the imperious look she was giving me. I had learned from the best, after all. “So, which would you prefer, Fiona? That I had you guarded for your protection, or for my peace of mind?”

She pressed her mouth into a thin line, eyes narrowing. “I raised you better than this. You had me guarded so I couldn’t stop you from enacting this foolhardy plan. Here I was, thinking you’d just be a shameless flirt and embarrass me that way.” She threw her hands into the air, as if praying to something overhead. No advice came, holy or otherwise, and she shook her head as she folded her arms over her chest. “No violence at Moonmate ceremonies is one of the most important laws, Remus. What were you *thinking?*”

I shrugged. An alpha didn’t have to explain himself to anyone, not even his own mother. “I did what I needed to do,” I replied, trying to keep my temper in check.

“Explain to me why you *needed* to do this, Remus, please, because I fail to see what Marnet Claw did to necessitate this takeover.”

I scowled, my thin shell of nonchalance easily cracked by her probing. “Just yesterday, you were on me about the stability of the Silverstreak clan,” I growled. She opened her mouth to protest and I held up a finger, silencing the argument. “There’s more than one way to shore up a pack, Mother. Frankly, expanding the territory and folding more wolves into the clan is a far better way to strengthen us than taking on a mate. That’s just one wolf.” I clicked my tongue against my teeth, irritated. As far as I could see, the addition of thousands was far more profitable than the addition of one, both for productivity and overall safety.

My mother hissed. “Damnit, Remus, that isn’t what I meant, and you know it. This is going to make us enemies. What are the other packs going to think?”

I shrugged, thinking about the other alphas. I had had them restrained, and they’d gone quietly. Far from home and with only a handful of packmembers attending the ceremony with them, they weren’t in any position to challenge my decision, regardless of how they felt about it. I hadn’t heard anything from my guards, so I could only assume the three of them had decided to remain peaceful until this situation with Marnet was over. *Good.*

At least a few wolves here knew how to use their brains.

“I didn’t raise you like this, I really didn’t.” My mother drew my attention back with a shake of her head. “Your father would—” She paused, something flickering over her expression. She shook the emotion away before I could parse it. “No. I won’t invoke him in this mess. We are better than this, Remus. Wolves have more self-control than humans do, we don’t succumb to childish things like greed. We can’t let ourselves get sucked into open warfare! There just aren’t enough of us to survive that sort of thing!”

I inhaled carefully through my nose. *Overreacting much?* Sure, what I did was the opposite of traditional, and yes, we certainly did not make friends by doing as such, but implying I might start a global war? That was a bit much.

I leveled my mother with a sharp look. “I am not going to repeat myself.” I kept my tone slow and calm. I refused to call upon my alpha powers when it came to my mother, even if I could. “This is in the best interest of the entire pack, and the wolves of Oklahoma will be better for it, too.” Even she had to see that Marnet wasn’t the sort of leader that could handle a territory that was made up by a thousand or so wolves. In three years, or maybe five if he was lucky, Marnet would start losing his grip on his pack, and a pack in chaos was dangerous for all the surrounding territories.

What if his carelessness caused a werewolf to be exposed to the humans?

It was impossible to imagine how disastrous that could be. Humans weren’t aware of us, and no wolf in their right mind wanted to change that. We were stronger than humans, yes, but we were also seriously outnumbered.

“Remus! You have to take this seriously!”

I turned my attention back to my mother. “I *am* serious, Fiona. Deadly so.”

Finally, my mother paused. She closed her mouth and scowled. I could see her struggling with her distress, but I was over this conversation, and she was sensing that. “I hope you

know what you're doing, Remus," she sighed, shaking her head. "I really do." She paused a moment longer. "Answer one more thing for me."

"Fine," I doubted this really would be the last thing.

"Did you do this for that girl? Luna?"

Her question left me momentarily thunderstruck — it took me a moment to card through my thoughts. *Why would she even ask — oh.* We had shared a drink, however briefly. That wasn't exactly a lifelong bonding moment, though. I supposed I *had* teased her about Luna 'being my mate' while she was making a scene, it was only to ruffle my mother's feathers a bit. Surely she hadn't taken that seriously. "While I think Marnet handled that entire situation poorly, no. It had nothing to do with her."

My mother pursed her lips, giving me a strange look. "Are you sure, Remy?" she asked. Something about her tone gave me pause; so much of the anger had dissipated with that one little question.

Does she really think it's better if I overthrew Marnet for a woman instead of because I thought he was a risk to shifters in the south? I kept the thought to myself, afraid to voice the thought and set off another round of interrogation. I had much better things to do with my time. Much more pressing issues to deal with.

Thankfully, she took my silence as a 'go ahead,' buying me more time before I was expected to answer. "Mate bonds are the most powerful things in the world, Remy. I know I've told you at least a dozen times, but you really can't begin to understand until you meet that wolf. But that isn't going to happen if you act so recklessly. Even if Luna was your mate, and I sincerely doubt that, given her display, that wouldn't be the way to deal with such a thing. You need to think about your future, Remus, and the future of the Silverstreak pack. I know it probably seems farfetched, but you will be *happy* once you settle down. Things will fall into place. When you're happy, the whole pack will be—"

“That’s enough.” I could feel my skin prickling all over. I shouldn’t have even walked into this trap. My wolf was already at the edge of my conscious thoughts, bristling and rumbling his deep displeasure. Marnet was still running out there, free, and we had given my mother more than enough time to voice her concerns. This audience was over.

“Remus, please listen—”

“I said *enough!*” I snapped, feeling the tinge of red before I could really see it.

My mother inhaled sharply, her jaw closing so quickly her teeth clicked. She took several steps back, no longer looking me directly in the eye.

Shit.

Not a second after it happened, I realized what I had done. I’d cast my alpha on my mother. It had only been a flash, a quick thing, but I’d done it. I strode after her, reaching out for her arm, but she snatched her hand away like my touch would burn her.

“Mom, I’m sorry, I’m so sorry—”

Fiona shook her head, still walking backwards towards the door. She hugged her arms against herself, a war of disappointment and hurt apparent in her glistening eyes. “I thought I knew what sort of man you were, Remus,” she said quietly, as much to herself as to me. “But now I see I was mistaken.”

“Mom, please, I just—”

She shook her head, turning her back on me to reach for the handle. I didn’t make her stay; instead, I watched the door shut behind her, listening to the click of her heels as she hurried away down the hall.

Shit, I thought again, my stomach dropping to my feet like a leaden ball. *You really fucked that one up, Remus.*

I sat on the bed, staring at my bare feet as I raked my hands through my hair. *How can she not see this is important?* I

could understand it might come as a shock, but we couldn't keep doing the same things over and over and *over*. We'd be aimlessly chasing our tails forever and a day. The pack might survive, but it wouldn't *thrive*, and that wasn't what I wanted for the Silverstreak clan. I wanted there to be opportunity for those who wanted it — or safety, for those who desired that instead.

I dragged my fingers over my face and groaned. *What would she have said if it were Dad in this position, not me? It's not like he never broke the rules.*

My burner phone buzzed on the dresser, startling me. Thoughts of my parents were quickly put to the side and I stood, striding over to flip the phone open. "What is it?" Only Bane had the matching phone, and he wouldn't use it just to chat.

"There's fresh scent about a mile into the woods," my beta reported.

I waited for a beat. "But?"

Bane exhaled. "But there are too many caves and the scent's spread out. It's fresh, but...I dunno, boss. It didn't rain. Just real hard to pin down."

I scowled. *That's better than nothing, but...* We were running out of manpower...or wolf power, I guessed. "We need someone who knows the area. Let me know if you find someone who fits the bill."

The line went dead. It could have been either of us. We didn't need silly things like 'goodbye, see you later.' I pocketed the phone and delayed only long enough to pull up my hair before I left the master bedroom, heading down the hall to the room where Luna had been taken.

When I opened the door, Tala was still sitting by the she-wolf's bedside. She was mopping the woman's brow with a hand towel, and I paused in the doorway, gut twisting. *Marnet, you bastard.* Torture was pointless and wasteful. If you were going to put someone to death — something I wasn't particularly keen on, mind you — then you had to just fucking

do it. None of this playing with your prey. That was cruelty for cruelty's sake. Nothing to be gained.

“How is she?” I asked, trying to shake the sudden nausea off.

“She's been in and out,” Tala answered quietly. She looked up from the other she-wolf. “She's been talking to herself. Sometimes yelling.” She sighed and put her hands in her lap. “Dreaming, I expect.”

My exhale was heavier than I intended. *Well, Bane better find someone who knows the area*, I thought. Tala's jaw tensed and I frowned. She turned her focus back to her patient. “What?” Dread crawled back up from my gut and threatened to choke me. “What is it?”

“She's been...repeating a name,” Tala said after a moment. “At least, I think it's a name.”

If I was in wolf form, my ears would have pricked. I took a step forward. “Is it Marnet? Does she know where he is?”

Tala shook her head, a strand of red hair falling in front of her face. She tucked it back behind an ear. “No, it's definitely not Marnet.”

My shoulders slumped a few degrees. *No, that would have been too easy, wouldn't it?* I wrinkled my nose. *Why is it so hard to find one man?*

“It's Ulfric.”

“What?” Frowning, I glanced back at Tala. “What did you say?”

“The name Luna kept muttering — I'm pretty positive she was saying ‘Ulfric.’” She pursed her lips, looking thoughtful before shrugging. “Oh, she mentioned a Josie, too. Maybe they're her friends?”

“You're absolutely sure that's what she was saying?”

“I'm—”

As if sensing we were speaking about her, Luna stirred, her lips parting with a soft sound. Her head turned and she

mumbled something. Tala and I shared a look and I huffed, motioning with one hand. “Go ahead and take a break,” I told her. “Get something to eat and come back. Do not tell *anyone* what you’ve heard Luna say. Understood?”

“Perfectly.” Tala stood up primly. “I won’t be long.”

I acknowledged her with a nod, then took the seat next to Luna as my packmate let herself out of the bedroom. Luna kept mumbling and I leaned closer, trying to parse words from nonsensical sounds.

The she-wolf turned her head the other way, lids twitching as she dreamed. “Mm...I...no.” She gave a breathy sigh, shifting again. I half wondered if I ought to wake her, but then she murmured something else.

“...Ulfric...”

Chapter 15

Luna

Claw Mansion
Woodward County, Oklahoma

Time became a weird soup — or maybe it had always been a weird soup and I just hadn't realized it until now. Sometimes I'd wake from my memories, greeted by the redhead when I clawed back to the surface of consciousness. The first time, the woman leaned in close, getting one hand behind my shoulders to help me sit even though my head was throbbing and the world was wobbling around me.

“Who—”

My throat was so dry, my question sounded more like a croak.

The woman hushed me. “Have some water.” She offered me a small glass from the side table. It was only half full. I was grateful as I reached with both hands; if I wasn't so exhausted, I would have been embarrassed by my tremor.

I couldn't remember the last time plain old water tasted so good. For all I knew, it could have been harvested from the purest glacier in Alaska, specifically melted into this glass. It was so fresh and cool, like a rainstorm at the end of the hottest summer days. Clutching the glass closer, I cleared my throat and tried again. “Thank you,” I whispered.

The woman offered a small smile. “You can have more in a few minutes,” she replied. “You don't want to guzzle too

much at once.”

I nodded. Even if I felt like I could drink the entire pitcher sitting next to my bed, I wasn’t in the mood to argue. I barely had the energy to speak. “Who...?”

I was getting more exhausted with each passing second. I barely heard the woman answer. “My name is Tala.”

I blinked; black spots danced before my eyes. Tala was still speaking to me, but she could have been speaking in Latin, for all that I could understand her. The glass disappeared from my hands and the world started to spin. I was barely aware I was tipping backwards before I was slipping back under, unable to keep my eyes open for one more second.

“Good morning, Luna.”

There was a presence nearby. The same presence. Even turning my head to better hear the feminine voice felt like too much work.

“I’ve been reading *Little Women*. There’s half a library here, but at least 90 percent of the books are about finance — or war novels.” A sigh. I wanted to ask her so many questions. *Where are we? Are we safe?* “Maybe you’d like to listen. I’ve always found books to be a nice refuge when I’m feeling down.”

Why am I...? Marnet?

Pages flipped. The spine of the book creaked. “Chapter Seven: AMY’S VALLEY OF HUMILIATION...”

She kept reading. I wanted so badly to listen — Amy seemed like someone I could relate to — but the darkness reclaimed me anyways.

“Hey, Luna. Not joining me for dinner tonight, huh?”

Dinner sounds really nice...

I turned my head, wishing I could just *open my mouth*. I had drifted in to hear this voice over and over, but every single time, I seemed to drift back out. I'd lost all sense of how long it had been. One day? Two? A week? Longer?

Tala was still speaking, even if I hadn't done much more than twitched. "Remus wants to ask your advice, you know. I'm not sure how much you'd have to say — some of your packmates are being a real pain in the ass, you know. They won't pledge themselves."

Who...?

She kept talking, but I was at least three steps behind, caught in quicksand and bogged down by my own brain. I couldn't keep up — I wanted to, desperately, but the harder I struggled, the quicker the darkness returned.

In between one breath and the next, I was gone again.

"Hey there, sleeping beauty. Must be real cozy in there."

I tried to blink my eyes, but nothing happened. It actually *wasn't* cozy in here — not at all. Every joint ached, as if I had completed an extreme marathon in cold weather. My body hurt where it met the bed. My back felt terrible. Even my *hair* was radiating pain, and I didn't even know that was possible.

"I'm so tired of it here." Someone flopped into a chair nearby. "I mean, no offense, but we're in the middle of nowhere. I wasn't supposed to have to stay in Oklahoma more than a few days, but here we are — and I don't think he's going to change his mind about leaving any time soon."

Who?

There was a pause — it was long enough I thought the talking might be done, but it began again a moment later. "Do you know where Marnet is, Luna?"

Do I?

I wasn't sure how to answer that. I didn't have long to think about it; the harsh sound of crunching paper scrambled my already-woozy brain. Huffing gently, I managed to blink,

prying my eyes open to a mere squint. The bright light filtering in through the window greeted me enthusiastically. I whimpered, squeezing my eyelids shut and trying to duck my head away.

“Luna!” Apparently, the tiny noise I had made hadn’t gone unnoticed. “Luna, you’re awake!”

I wanted to answer — but my jaw, my tongue, nothing wouldn’t cooperate. I struggled instead, and before I could open my eyes, I was hauled up away from the mattress and into a sitting position. The sudden jolt of movement made me gasp, eyes prickling with hot tears as I fought the urge to cry. “Ow,” I croaked as I tried to fold in on myself.

“Oh, sorry. Sorry. Can you open your eyes? Even a little.”

I paused for a moment, trying to crack my eyes open. This time, I stared down at the bedding; the light didn’t seem as horribly bright. I gave a tiny nod.

“Good, good. Here, can you drink this? It should help you start to feel better.”

I lifted my chin a few degrees, vaguely aware of the other person as she moved around. She picked up a cup with something that looked like a shake, fiddling with a straw before bringing it to my lips. I paused for a moment but did as I was told, sipping gently. Thankfully, the drink didn’t taste strange; the coolness felt like a relief to my throat, and even if I didn’t feel entirely renewed, I *did* feel a bit better.

After a few sips, the woman smiled at me as she pulled the drink away. “That’s enough for now. How are you feeling, Luna?”

I blinked slowly, tipping my head slightly. “Who...?”

The redhead’s mouth twisted into a sad smile. “Do you not remember?” When I simply stared, she nodded and reached forward to squeeze one of my hands. “That’s okay. Honestly, I was starting to worry if you were even going to wake back up. My name is Tala.”

I recognized her voice one I’d heard the last several days. “Where are we?” I grimaced at the rough sound of my own

voice.

Tala didn't seem to be alarmed. "We're in the Claw mansion still."

I studied the woman for a moment, then my gaze fell to something on the bedside next to me. It was stretched halfway onto the mattress. "What's that?" My throat still hurt, and my jaw ached even worse, but it seemed I could at least manage short sentences if I was careful.

"Oh, that?" Tala started to gather it back off the bed, looking apologetic. "We're still looking for Marnet. There appear to be some sort of underground tunnels. He's disappeared."

"Oh," I said, frowning slightly.

"We have to find him before he's lost to the wind entirely," she told me, as if I had any idea what was going on. I was so out of it, I could have been asleep for the last year, for all I knew.

Before I could ask anything else, Tala stood abruptly, the half-full glass still in one hand. She was pacing across the bedroom and I could barely track her with my gaze, tipping my head just enough to follow her path. "Fuck. This is so much. It's just so fucking much, you know? Remus and his mother took me in, and I don't want to let them down, but *fuck*."

That's...that's a lot of information, I thought mildly, wondering what the heck I had done to inspire this sudden faith. Or maybe Tala just didn't care if I shared what she'd said. I wanted to ask, but couldn't even think of what to say.

"Noah Claw killed my parents, you know."

I had no idea. *Why is she telling me this?*

"Here." Tala's face flickered as she strode back over, thrusting the cup at me. I took it cautiously, trying to watch her face. "Drink this. You need to get better. We need to find Marnet, and we need your help."

I paused, clutching the glass a little closer. I had no idea how to respond to that.

My indecision must have shown on my face. Tala pulled her chair back over, plopping into it with a sigh. She reached over and patted my knee.

What is she trying to do? Is this a trick? I tried to mask my expression, finally lifting the straw to my lips. I took another sip in an attempt to buy time while my brain made its best attempt to catch up on what was actually happening.

Tala didn't say anything else, so I stared carefully into my slowly disappearing drink. *I have to watch out.* If what she said was true, and Marnet was gone...then I had to assume that Remus was now the Lupus Claw alpha. Or...no, he would probably dissolve Lupus Claw altogether, wouldn't he?

Oh, that thought didn't feel any better. I was part of the losing pack. I was at Remus' mercy and, I assumed, Tala's too. Wolves were expected to submit and pledge to their new alpha when their territory was taken over. That's how the stories went, anyways. My eyes flickered sideways, and I stole another glance at the redhead. *I need to make a choice,* I realized.

If Marnet really had been chased off, and Lupus Claw really had been abandoned, then I would be expected to submit to Remus, too — and if not, I needed to escape. They'd have no reason to keep me around if I wasn't going to work with him. My gut twisted as my wolf stirred.

How am I supposed to make this choice when my mate is still alive?

How could they really expect me to turn against him?

Because he threw you away like a piece of garbage and left you to die?

I surprised myself with my own venom, blinking harder as I tried to ward off the tears as the memories came rushing back. If the attack hadn't occurred when it did, then Marnet might have killed me himself. And for what? To take some prettier, blonder wolf? The memory made my stomach roil

again and the shake threatened to curdle in my gut. He was going to kill me for defying him — for trying to protect our bond.

He was going to put you down like a rabid dog. My brows knit together. If the humiliation and violence in front of the entire Moonmate ceremony hadn't made his point, then his absolute disregard for me when he'd slipped away from the barn had. *Marnet Claw doesn't care a lick about you.*

He might have, once, but if that was true, it was years ago. I was just...just a distraction for him. A toy. And he had done with me as he would have done with any other broken trinket. Tossed me aside so he could have something newer, shinier, and fancier.

He had betrayed me. Why the heck did I still feel guilty for considering working with Remus? I hadn't even agreed to anything yet!

Because you loved him, a small voice in the back of my skull said, and I knew it was true. The very idea still made me shudder and my stomach clench. My eyes started to prickle again, and I wasn't sure I could fight off the tears.

I felt the bed dip seconds before I felt a hand next to my face; I jerked away almost violently, sucking in a sharp breath. Tala hushed me gently, brushing the backs of her knuckles over my cheek before tucking a strand of hair behind my ear. "They really did a number on you, didn't they?" she sighed, voice soft. "Poor thing."

I wasn't sure if it was sympathy or only pity; I wasn't sure which made me feel worse. I kept staring at my hands instead, biting my lower lip. *You aren't going to cry. You are **not** going to cry. Do not cry.* I repeated the words to myself over and over.

"Look, I know you're all out of sorts, Luna, but I have to ask." She folded her hands back in her lap. "Do you know how to navigate the tunnels? Do you know where Marnet might be hiding?"

I exhaled, my shoulders sinking as I looked down at the glass in my hands. *How am I supposed to answer this?* I could barely muster more than one word at a time, and my gut still felt twisted in knots at the idea. *I know one of the tunnels, but...*

A few years ago, when I had been looking for Marnet, I had followed his scent from our secret meeting place. There had been a tunnel, and wanting to see him before the ceremony, I had decided to follow it. His scent was fairly fresh, and my wolf had insisted we were going in the right direction.

To my great surprise, the secret passage had led to the Claw territory — or, more specifically, to the barn. There had been so many paths and turns on the way, I nearly got lost at least a dozen different times. *Could I actually navigate the tunnels beyond that one path?* I honestly had no idea — and that didn't account for what I wanted, or what my wolf thought we should do.

Another thought bubbled up, seemingly from nowhere. *What if Marnet's hiding there right now?* I had no idea what I'd do if I actually helped Remus find Marnet, or what the man planned to do with the former Lupus Claw alpha. Or if I wanted to have any part of it at all.

“Luna?” Tala prompted. I glanced up at her, frowning. I was about to shake my head when I sensed a new presence. The redhead must have felt the change in the air, too. She turned away from me, eyes locked onto the door. My breath caught in my chest. *Alpha*, my wolf thought, and I couldn't find a reason to disagree.

What if Marnet came back for me? I bit the inside of my mouth and forced a breath. *He won't. Why would he? And if he did... Who's to say he wouldn't do this to me again?*

My heart lurched; I couldn't figure out what to do with that idea. Before any other ideas could spring up from the darkest depths of my mind, the door swung open. A man stood there shirtless — and he appeared to have torn pants. My pulse

quickened even further, and my throat squeezed, making it difficult to breathe.

When I looked up to meet his gaze, his eyes were glowing bright red.

Chapter 16

Remus

Claw Mansion
Woodward County, Oklahoma

She's hiding something.

I knew it as soon as I entered the room. Luna stared up at me with shock in those big silver eyes, but I knew she was hiding something. When I had been in the tunnels beneath the stables, I had picked up a mix of scents. There had been the heavy smell of the earth, of course, as well as the stink of fear, panic, and adrenaline, but under those currents had been individual signatures. Two of them had led to Sophia and the chestnut wolf, but there had been more. Several more. It had been confusing at the time but having visited Luna more than once before she'd woken up, I was certain that one of the scents had been hers. The longer I stood in this room, the surer I became.

She had been in those tunnels before. *She had to know where Marnet was.*

"Tala," I said sternly, but not as sharply as I wanted to. "I need a minute." This woman was toying with us.

"Of course," Tala said. She effortlessly extracted herself from Luna's side, and paused only to squeeze the other she-wolf's shoulder before she strode past me and out of the room. I scowled at the soft click. My cousin had always had a soft

touch, but that didn't work for every scenario — and this was one such scenario.

I turned my gaze to Luna. She balked, her confusion slowly giving way to a frown. “Do you mind?” she asked, her voice so raspy I barely understood what she was saying. It sounded nothing like the woman I had shared a cocktail with only a few days prior. *Do I mind what?* I grumbled to myself. I must have made a face, because the woman cleared her throat and nodded in my general direction as she rubbed her jaw.

I glanced down at my bare chest. “What? Have you never seen a man's chest before?” I scoffed, ignoring the tiny flare of embarrassment. I had every right to walk around this mansion however I saw fit. *Okay, maybe I could have spared the two minutes to put the rest of my clothing on, but what is she, a nun?* Who did she think she was, exactly?

I looked back up in time to see Luna roll her eyes, but then her face pinched, like the motion made her head hurt. It dissipated rapidly though, replaced by irritation. Heat curled in my gut. Her gaze met mine and she shook her head, a slight grimace still present.

“Your eyes,” she whispered hoarsely. “I've gone through enough of that in the past few days — please. It hurts when an alpha casts.”

She tacked the last bit on, but at least she had remembered her manners. *Please* or not, she was still meeting my eyes, silver gaze unwavering. My wolf growled softly. Luna was bordering on disobedience, and she hadn't submitted to me as the new alpha. *Get a hold of yourself, Remus. You aren't Marnet. You don't need to cast your alpha to get what you want.*

I took a breath then exhaled softly, slowly allowing the red to filter out of my vision. Luna's shoulders softened, dropping a few inches away from her ears. “Thank you,” she murmured, lowering her gaze to study the mostly empty cup in her hands.

Despite my annoyance with her behavior, a small prickle of anger welled back up from my core. Tala had taken incredible care of Luna over the past few days, but Luna still

looked like she'd been run over by a truck — twice. I prowled around her, walking around the bed as I watched the woman out of the corner of my eyes. She would not look back up, clearly pretending she didn't notice me as I noticed her.

I kept walking, drawn to the window at the far side of the bedroom. The view wasn't as nice as it was from the master, but it wasn't bad. Expansive fields. The horses' paddock. The woods beyond that. It was certainly nicer than what I had back in Texas.

"How are you feeling?" I asked, finally pulling my attention away from the view. I leaned against the wall and settled my gaze back on Luna.

The she-wolf shrugged one shoulder, lifting her eyes only to stare straight ahead. She wouldn't look at me now that she wasn't eyeing up my alpha's stare.

I frowned. "That's not much of an answer."

"Sorry," she replied quietly. "My throat." One of her hands drifted up to her jaw. The memory of Marnet slugging the woman flashed before my mind's eye and I repressed the urge to snarl; Luna was already so jumpy she'd probably think I was threatening her. Given everything that had happened in the twelve or so hours of the Moonmate ceremony, I couldn't blame her.

"That's okay." The words slipped out before I could think better of them. It wouldn't do to take them back. "Not that well, then?"

The corner of her mouth twitched, threatening a smile. I tipped my head, but the moment passed. *Why do I care?* I thought, taken aback by the sudden dip of disappointment when I hadn't won her smile. I'd only known this woman for seventy-two hours, give or take. *It's probably just the challenge.*

"Are you at least somewhat comfortable? Tala isn't *actually* a doctor, but I'm sure we could find one."

This time, Luna shook her head. "No," she murmured, clearing her throat. "This is fine."

I gave a short nod; small talk had never been one of my strengths. Frankly, I found it to be a waste of everyone's time, and something I chose not to engage in...but Luna wasn't offering anything more up. Trying to hold a conversation with her was like pulling teeth. "Do you understand what happened three days ago?" I asked. *Not like I'm here to make friends, anyways.*

Luna bobbed her head. "Yes." Those silver eyes darted in my direction.

Curiosity: piqued.

"Good." I drummed my fingertips over my elbow. "So, you know what happens next, then."

"In theory," she replied. She tipped her chin this time, watching me carefully. After a moment, she raised a brow and added, "But it will take time to get used to a new alpha."

My wolf gave an unimpressed rumble, but I simply ignored him, recognizing the bit Luna was pulling just now — she was testing the waters. Testing what boundaries she could push — and which she couldn't. It was the same thing she had done to Marnet, but Marnet had almost taken her head off for it.

She has a brain, I'll give her that much. The realization made me pause. So why the hell hadn't she seen through Marnet's games? His social tendencies weren't exactly a secret.

Marnet and I ran in the same social circles — especially given that Texas' cities had a far better night scene (in my totally unbiased opinion). I had no idea the Oklahoma alpha had a fated mate — or anyone he had been seeing regularly, for that matter. When you took pack politics out of it, Marnet had actually been a decent person to party with; it was only when he took over Lupus Claw that I really start to have any issues with him.

I glanced back out the window, raking my thoughts for something that would entice the woman to give Marnet up. The woods at the edge of my view taunted me; this territory

was mine, save for one thing — Marnet Claw was hiding somewhere out there. As long as he was alive and hadn't submitted to me, he was a threat. *Bastard. You can run, but you can't hide forever.*

Huh. *Run.*

Now *there* was an idea.

My mouth slanted sideways, and I turned my eyes back to Luna. “We should go for a run.”

“Excuse me?” My off-the-cuff suggestion had clearly startled the she-wolf.

I peeled myself off the wall to stride over to her bedside. “Shifting will help you heal.” Werewolves healed faster than humans, but only when they shifted. Even if it wouldn't fix her up entirely, she'd be in far better shape than she was right now if she spent some time in her lupine form. “Besides, fresh air never hurt anyone.” Feeling Luna's eyes on me, I flashed her a winning smile. “C'mon.”

Her eyes narrowed slightly, and she cleared her throat before speaking. “Do I actually have a choice?”

I hummed, narrowing my eyes back. “Of course. Now, whether I will listen...” I trailed off with a shrug.

“Fine,” she decided. She started to struggle to get out of the bed. I slipped away, making space for her, but when it seemed to take ages for her to get out of bed and walk to the door, my patience began to dissolve. I strode up behind her and scooped her into my arms. Other than a tiny squeak, she didn't say a thing — perhaps I'd startled her into silence. Luna didn't move either, as if she was afraid I might drop her.

That probably reflected more on her and Marnet than my strength. I quashed my wolf before he could complain. It was easy to carry her down wide halls and a flight of stairs, ignoring the questioning look Tala shot me as we swept by. I fiddled a door open and walked outside. Once we were comfortably away from the main house, I set Luna down.

She wobbled for a moment, hand reaching out to grip my arm. Once she was steadier on her feet, she raised a brow in

question.

I shrugged. “I figured the woods would be a good place to start. The horses are over in that field — and besides, it’s more private. You can even show me around.”

The second brow lifted to meet the first. “Why would I want to do that?” she countered.

“Because you need to move, Luna.” Before I could make any further arguments, she wobbled again, her fingers tightening against my upper arm.

“Can’t this wait?” She sounded a little breathless.

I shook my head and started extracting my arm. “Remember what I said about choices?” My wolf had been anxious to stretch his legs for hours — he jumped forward at the slightest invitation, more than ready to seize control. The shift was a well-practiced one, and my wolf’s magic was powerful and effortless. I landed on all fours, tail curled lazily over my spine as I lifted my head as if to say, *Well?*

When Luna shuddered and swayed again, I knew I would have to take matters into my own paws. Hopefully, she wouldn’t hold it against me — but I wouldn’t dwell on that. I rumbled, catching the woman’s attention. She looked down, meeting my reddened gaze; I cast my alpha forward, calling her wolf forward. I was cautious, at least, aware of Luna’s injuries. Her wolf responded, if slowly; I was reminded of a bear slowly emerging from its winter slumber. Tired, sluggish, but still moving. Slowly edging forward.

Luna’s transformation was nowhere as near as smooth as mine, but she still had her wolf, and that wolf still came forward in the same swell of innate power. A wolf so brown she almost looked black in the shadows lay where a woman had stood moments before, her slender legs tucked against her body. Her ears lay back against her head, silver eyes carefully averted. I tried to exercise my (admittedly limited) sense of patience, tail swaying lazily over my back. I chuffed.

Luna glanced over and unfolded her forelimbs. A moment later, she untucked her hind legs, slowly getting all four paws

beneath her. Her wolf was still shaky; I knew it would have been better to give her a few more days to recover in her human form before trying to shift. That she needed me to help pull her wolf forward spoke volumes to the damage done — physically and to her wolf's spirit. I waited quietly.

Slowly but surely, Luna stood. She bowed forward, each toe flexing as she tested her balance. Her tail swayed slowly. I wished there was more confidence in her posture, but at least she was upright, and she didn't have the wobble she did before she shifted.

After several patient minutes, Luna was standing, silver eyes clearer. The transformation had helped something, even if it didn't totally fix her wounds. Better than nothing.

Perhaps more importantly, however, was that a wolf was supposed to feel more connected to her (or his) bond than the human. We were one and the same, human and wolf, but we also weren't. Pack tugged at us both, but it was a primal instinct for a wolf; it tethered him more closely than the man. By the same stroke, reputation meant much more to the man. His business might depend on it, but for a wolf? A reputation was abstract at best. You were alpha or beta, or you were not, and that's all it was. Safety was only in the physical sense for the wolf; was his back exposed? Was there a route to run? Was the wolf snarling at him larger or smaller? Simple. Practical.

A man had his finances to think about, things far more complicated than physicality. Were his plans figured out? Which man could he trust? And which man would get the job done? All definitely levels of security, different sorts of safety.

A wolf and a man were one in the same, yes, but it was more like a coin; two faces. Two sides.

After about ten minutes, my patience paid off. Luna had shaken her ruff out and stretched out her limbs, and then she set off in a steady jog. If Luna had even so much of an idea where Marnet might hide, her wolf was going to go to him — or do her damn best. I waved my tail once over the top of my back and wheeled on my haunches, breaking into a lope to

catch up. The deep brown wolf ahead of me seemed to grow a little more confident with each stride, ears tipping further and further forward.

Without warning, she broke into a full gallop, flicking me with pebbles and dirt as she suddenly tore away. My ears strained forward, eyes widening a fraction as adrenaline coursed through me like a bolt of lightning.

The hunt is on!

A wolf had a natural inclination to chase what ran, even if it wasn't running away — or even if it were another wolf. I burst after her, savoring the feel of grass and dirt under my paws. It took almost no time at all for us to reach the edge of the woods; she disappeared into the shadows, forest floor crackling beneath her gait. I sprinted after her; even if the area was foreign to me, the scent of a southern forest was familiar enough. Excitement spooled in my chest as I dodged around trees and hurdled fallen logs.

Of all the wolves to lead me to Marnet...it was the wolf he'd left behind. Had he thought me so foolhardy that I'd kill her without blinking a lash? Perhaps it hadn't occurred to him there was any other way to operate. If I could have, I surely would have smiled at the notion.

If only you knew, Marnet. If only you knew.

Chapter 17

Luna

Several Miles the Claw Mansion
Woodward County, Oklahoma

I should have been much angrier at Remus for dragging my wolf forward, even if I *did* feel significantly better than I had before he'd carried me out of the bedroom — and for that matter, did he really have to *carry* me? I'd have been more irritated if I had the energy to muster any other emotions. Instead, I only wanted to run.

There was a peace that always settled over me when I simply let my paws decide which direction to take us. The cool forest air felt refreshing, allowing relief to well up inside me as if from a spring. I relished the crack of each stick beneath my paws; the way the dirt felt wedged beneath my claws. For at least a few moments, it was just me and the trees, and that was enough.

According to Remus, I had been out at least forty-eight hours, if not more. Lying in the bed that long left me sore in ways I wouldn't have imagined, never mind the bruises and aches Marnet had left. That Sophia had left. It didn't matter, though. The longer I ran, the better I felt. The better I felt, the more strongly my wolf tugged on my thoughts. Marnet was missing, and she knew where he would be — or at least the best possibilities. My wolf needed nothing more than to find him.

Frankly, I couldn't see a reason to stop her. She needed to see her mate. But the thought made me pause. What did you even call a mate who rejected you? I'd never heard of such a thing. I had no idea how to refer to him.

Whatever. The name wasn't important. What mattered was that my wolf needed to see Marnet, and so did I; I needed to look him in the eye and demand to know why he'd left me at the mercy of Remus Silverstreak. Whatever he left me with, it wasn't closure. After everything he had put me through, I deserved *that* at the very least.

Something cold settled in the pit of my stomach and I fought the urge to shudder. The peace had been shattered in one swift moment. *Marnet*. I was chasing after *Marnet* blindly, allowing memory to dictate where I went. If my ears and nose were correct, then I wasn't far at all from our love nest.

My ears flicked; I could still hear the sound of another wolf following after us. I didn't need to glance over my shoulder to know it was the large gray alpha bounding after us, keeping pace without ever overtaking me. *Was that on purpose?*

I slowed down a bit, my ears flicking further back. The alpha didn't close in on me, and he could have made that ground up easily if he wanted to. Alphas were the largest, and an alpha could easily outrun me if he wanted to. My smaller size allowed me to duck through the forest more easily, but in an outright sprint, he'd be faster — and if he just kept running, his endurance would eventually overtake mine. My ears pinned back a little further. *Yeah, it's definitely on purpose.*

Deciding I had no interest in doing Remus any favors, I shifted my headings slightly, veering away from the love nest I'd spent countless hours at with Marnet. He'd never shown any indication of anything but affection when we shared our time there; sometimes we never even undressed. We'd just lie and stare up at the stars, discussing the things we wanted. Or maybe just venting about the day we had.

It wasn't tainted with bad memories, and that still mattered, somehow.

And if Marnet was hiding out there...?

I shook my head, trying to swallow down the lump forming in my throat. That was not a thought I could deal with...not yet. I needed more time.

With the wind to my snout, I led Remus farther east, away from the little alcove and one of the doors to the underground passage. Instead, I wove through the forest, following the trees. I'd run through here dozens of times, but they'd only been runs, then — the occasional hunt, even. Those weren't times to focus on the scenery.

The scent of fresh water tickled my nostrils, and I recalled a small stream in the area. Lifting my muzzle, I inhaled; that seemed as good a destination as any. With a flick of my tail, I accelerated again, testing the wolf behind me. Just as expected, the silver alpha accelerated too, keeping the exact same distance between us.

Damnit. What am I going to do with him?

I hadn't visited this stream in...ages. The first time I had found it, I hadn't been living with my father for very long; despite the tragic situation that led to the man taking me in, my step-sisters hadn't been very understanding. I was shocked and scared and one night, I just — ran. In my thirteen-year-old mind, I would be able to find my way into the woods and disguise my scent, and then I would run all the way to my mother's home.

It didn't occur to me that another family had probably moved in. That the garage was someone else's business — or abandoned.

I never made it that far. I had made it to this stream — probably not this exact spot, but somewhere nearby — and sat down and cried. My father had caught up to me. The man hadn't said anything; he'd set a heavy hand on my shoulder and allowed me to sob until my eyes were dry. "I miss Mom," I had choked out. "I miss her. I don't understand!"

She had seemed so healthy. She had seemed so bright and vibrant; I had no idea that anything could be wrong. That was the problem with being a child, I guess — your parents seem infallible. Never wrong. Never sick. My mother seemed like anything but fragile; she was my hero.

An uncomfortable sensation rang through me like someone had struck a bell, the sound reverberating through my bones. I faltered. I grabbed forward blindly; my wolf retreated seamlessly and gave way to my human form. My bare foot caught on a root, and I fell forward. My hands caught my fall, but not before I splashed into the shallow stream.

*Not was. My mom never **stopped** being my hero.*

What would she do right now? What would she do if her pack had been taken over, and her mate rejected her, and—

Dad. What had he promised her? Had he— What if—

A heavy hand on my shoulder broke my train of thought and I almost shrieked, having almost entirely forgotten why I had changed my track to come to this stream in the first place. I tried to flinch from beneath the weight, but the steady fingers closed, pressure without pain. It was presence.

“Luna?”

“Sorry,” I gasped. I had no idea what I was apologizing for. My eyes felt like they were burning. My knees were cold — I must have fallen in some mud. I started trying to pick myself up. All the steadiness I had felt as my wolf had dissipated. My limbs felt like overcooked noodles, barely able to pick myself up. Remus’ hand shifted to my elbow, lifting me up; when I wobbled, he pulled me a little closer against his frame. The warmth was a stark contrast to the chilly water against my feet. My ankles.

I wish he had remembered to put my shoes on before dragging me outside, I thought dimly.

When I looked up, I realized the alpha wasn’t watching me, but rather looking around at the area. He looked — he looked disappointed. Something in me felt validated. My

instinct, maybe. At least I still had that. *I knew it. I knew he didn't want just a tour of the area.*

I tried to squirm away once the world had stopped swimming around me. “Looking for something?” I prompted.

Remus dragged his eyes way from the trees surrounding us and settled his dark brown gaze firmly on me instead. My heart stuttered as I braced myself for the red tint to reappear. He had cast his alpha over me to drag my wolf forward — what was stopping him from doing it again to demand answers? It wouldn't work quite as well, especially not if he was after Marnet. I was, technically, still bound to the Lupus Claw alpha; I hadn't paid my respects to Remus. Even if he had all but taken over the territory, I wasn't bound to him. Not yet.

I was bound to Marnet until further notice.

*Luna! What is **wrong** with you?* There was absolutely no reason in the world I should stay bound to that man, even if I had been with Lupus Claw since my mother passed away. *How long will it take to realize he doesn't want you? No — it's not just that. He **left** you behind.* If Remus was a crueler man, he might have just killed me then and there.

The thought made me shudder and I looked away — there was nothing saying he wouldn't do that still. Marnet had cut me off. Cast me to the wind.

I didn't wait for Remus to answer me; as soon as he released his grip on my elbow, I stepped away, following the flow of the stream. I had no idea where it ended. The cold water was refreshing. It helped, but I needed space. I needed to find my head. I rounded a bend and found the stream was emptying into a pool; without thinking any further about it, I started pushing fabric off my shoulders. Soon I'd shed all my clothing, and I waded in, gasping as the chilly water hit my thighs. Then it was up to my belly. I stood up on my toes and dove in.

I hadn't been to this lake before. Or pool. Or pond. I had no idea how you labeled those things; I didn't really care. The body of water wasn't very large from shore to shore, but the ground beneath me disappeared. Water poured over stones, falling the last four feet into the pool. The rush drowned out the pounding in my chest.

The spray splattered against my face as I swam closer to the waterfall. I turned and wiped the water from my eyes — and saw Remus was only a few feet away. For the second time in less than thirty minutes, I nearly shrieked, paddling wildly. *Where the hell did he come from? I didn't hear a thing!*

I had spent plenty of time around alphas — or one specific alpha, anyways — and *silent* definitely wasn't a usual alpha trait. Quite the opposite, really. "I'm not going anywhere," I grumbled, my brows pulling down into a bit of a frown. "I just needed some..." *Air? That makes literally no sense, Luna.* "I just needed some space." He was still watching me. Those rich brown eyes traced the lines of my shoulders with no sense of concern. "I'm not going to run off, Remus." Honestly, I doubted I could. I felt better, but I didn't feel like a track star right now.

When the alpha said nothing in return, I frowned, lifting my hand to flick water at him. He ducked his head, but he didn't move from where he was floating idly. Even though he had joined me in the forest pool, he hadn't taken his hair out of its neat bun. He looked entirely unfazed. My frown dipped further. I repeated the act with both hands this time; Remus ducked again, but that was it. I scowled and leaned back, starting to paddle towards the waterfall again. "You can go back. I just need a minute."

Swimming felt restorative. It wasn't nearly as invigorating as my shift, but there was no way I could call my wolf forward again, not so soon. Not without help. Remus was still here, though, so... I bit the inside of my lower lip and glanced over my shoulder — indeed, the alpha was still there, floating in the middle of the pool where I had left him.

What is he waiting for?

I pivoted and began paddling back towards him. My heart rate finally settled back down a bit. The request for space wasn't a lie. Everything that had gone on earlier this week was just *so much*; if nothing else, I was simply glad to get out of those four walls.

I stopped a short distance away from Remus, my hands out to my side as I paddled to keep myself floating comfortably. Remus' hand darted forward and his strong fingers latched onto my wrist. Before I could process what he was doing, he drew me in closer, until there were only centimeters left between us. My gaze dropped to the surface of the water, suddenly unsure. My pulse began to quicken again. I reached inward for my wolf, but she remained passive. I felt like I was flailing, even if I wasn't moving at all.

Cool fingers touched under my chin, and droplets fell from his hand back to the surface. My reflection was obscured by the ripples. I had to fight to keep my eyes cast down, almost afraid of what I might see if I looked up at Remus' face. Into the man's eyes. Unfortunately for me, he did not give me the choice. The pressure against my chin was gentle, but it was there. It remained that way. A nudge, but there was no real force behind it. I probably could have resisted, but...I didn't want to, and that thought confused me, too.

Finally, I lifted my chin — and allowed Remus to guide my gaze upwards. He shifted his hand, fingers resting against my cheek. He stroked his thumb over my cheekbone; his calf brushed against mine. *Oh. I was right about that tattoo.* The thought felt far away as I followed the line of his arm. it wasn't just *one* tattoo, but several. His arms were covered. Full sleeves. Dark ink peeked out over the surface of the water, suggesting the tattoos went well below his shoulders. His chest.

I hadn't even realized we'd floated closer, practically aligned from chest to toes. My brain shuddered at the proximity. "No one should have laid a hand on you."

“What?” My head jerked and I glanced back up, searching his face wildly. Surely I hadn’t heard him correctly over the rush of blood in my ears. The roar of my pulse. “What did you just say?”

The corner of Remus’ mouth twitched, and he tipped his head to one side, still running his thumb over my cheek. It was such a minute movement. “No one should have laid a hand on you. Not another wolf. Not a partner. Not an alpha. No one.”

I blinked, almost unable to comprehend he was saying. “I…” I closed my mouth again. *What do I even say to that?*

“I should have stepped in,” Remus murmured. He was only a breath away. I remained entranced, even though there was no hint of alpha red in his eyes. There was no reason for me to be bewitched like this. He wasn’t influencing me, but I still couldn’t look away. The cool fingertips against my cheek were soothing instead of chilling.

“You should have.” I was unable to stop the words from stumbling out. *Someone* should have. My stepmother. My father. A packmate. Another alpha. *Anyone*.

“It won’t happen again,” Remus said. His other hand surfaced, and wet fingertips pressed to my other cheek. I leaned into the touch despite myself, as if I were starved for basic human contact. When I opened my eyes again, Remus was only inches away. His lips brushed over mine.

I froze.

Time seemed to stop around us. Sunlight drifted down through the canopy, dappling the banks of the pool. Rays of sunshine fell over his shoulder, dancing over the water droplets on his skin like shimmering freckles. The waterfall sounded like it was dozens of yards away rather than a few feet, and I was barely aware of the leaves shifting overhead in the breeze.

Remus was so close that my toes brushed against his shin as I paddled just enough to keep myself afloat. Even my heart seemed to have stopped beating, the traitorous thing. I couldn’t form a single thought. Not one.

Remus was kissing me. *Remus was kissing me.*

I had thought he'd been after Marnet, but...

My mind wandered off without me as Remus leaned in again. He settled one of his broad hands above my hip. Some sort of calm settled over me, leaving my thoughts blissfully quiet. I'd forgotten how nice that could feel. I didn't move, but Remus didn't draw away.

Remus kissed me again and this time I gasped softly; it wasn't like any kiss I'd ever experienced. I'd kissed other boys before Marnet, but I had always thought my mate would be the best I'd ever have, simply by virtue of the bond, but...

He paused only for a moment, darkened eyes flickering open; if I didn't know better, I would have sworn he looked a bit — surprised? Had he expected me to pull back?

I sighed softly against his lips and any hesitation disappeared. His other hand materialized to tangle in my long hair. My toes curled as Remus' fingers dug into my side; his nails prickled against my scalp. His beard was surprisingly soft against my skin, the well-groomed hair barely more than a tickle against my face as he kissed me. He didn't move either hand after that. The kiss was tender and— And I felt *desired*, like he had nowhere to look but at me. Like even if he wanted to, he couldn't look away. I hadn't felt this warm in days. When Remus tugged me a little closer, I put up no resistance.

My leg brushed against his again and this time I didn't jerk away. Instead, I shifted to try to accommodate him, tentatively tangling our limbs. A gentle heat started to pool in my belly as I finally brought my arms up from the pool, draping them both over the alpha's shoulders as little rivulets of water ran down his skin. Remus rumbled deep in his chest as my nails scratched across his skin and it reverberated through my core, drawing another quiet sigh from me. The sound made the ember spark inside me and I squirmed, curling my fingers against his skin. The movement only served to encourage Remus further. He slid his hand from my hip to the small of my back, flattening it there — anchoring me against his torso.

Before I knew it, he had tipped his head to one side; he trailed his lips down the side of my neck. When he nipped sharply at my collarbone, I finally gasped out loud, high and sharp. I dug my fingertips into the meat of his shoulder, then raked them across his skin. When was the last time anyone had made me feel like this? So — wanted? Desirable? This didn't even feel real. This felt like — this felt like a damn Hallmark movie, and I was the princess. Even my time with Marnet had fallen into some sort of pattern. A ritual.

Marnet.

Remus' hand slipped from my hair and down to my thigh, then finding my belly and sliding lower. Again, I thought of Marnet — my lip trembled as my eyes flashed open. I untangled myself quickly and pushed away, trying to get as much space between us as I possible could.

All my thoughts came flooding back uninvited.

*What am I **doing**? This man took over my pack! He — he killed some of my packmates!*

And even if he hadn't done it himself, he had authorized it. Hadn't he brought me out here just to track Marnet down? I couldn't trust him! *Why are you **kissing** him, Luna?*

I turned around and swam towards the waterfall as my hands started to shake.

What have I done?

Chapter 18

Remus

Several Miles from the Claw Mansion
Woodward County, Oklahoma

Luna pushed away and it felt like a veil had been lifted. I blinked, stunned. *What was that?* I had taken the she-wolf down to the edge of the forest because I was hoping she would guide me to Marnet. That was all I wanted. That was what I *needed*. I had wrested control over the majority of this territory, but the former alpha hadn't submitted to me — and I hadn't killed him, either. Marnet had to give up his leadership (one way or another). Until then, my plan was not complete.

I watched the she-wolf swim away, raising my fingers to touch my lips. It felt like electricity was still dancing over my skin. I had kissed dozens of women and I hadn't experienced a single kiss like that. Not a single one.

What the hell was that? I thought again, still flummoxed I had been drawn in at all. Sure, I had followed her because I hoped she was working off a memory; once she stripped out of her bloodied dress, it was clear it wasn't Marnet she was running towards. I should have turned away and let her do... whatever it is she was doing. Swimming, maybe.

She had been beautiful though, wading into the water. Despite the falter in her step. Despite the dusky bruises that hadn't been entirely erased by her shift to her lupine form. Luna was beautiful regardless of all that, or maybe because of it. She hadn't shied away when she realized I had been

watching her. Maybe she hadn't noticed. Maybe she hadn't cared. She had no reason to be anything but proud; a lesser wolf would have folded long before now.

I shook my head and inhaled deeply, gathering my wits back about me. *You aren't here for some romantic getaway, Remus. You don't even **do** romantic getaways, period. Get a grip!*

The sound of splashing caught my attention, and I turned my head, gaze finding Luna once more. She was several lengths away from me now, somewhere between me and the shoreline. Our gazes locked. *Was she shaking? Why was Luna shaking?*

"Where's Marnet?" I asked, voice still gruff. I needed to get this situation back on track. I needed to get *myself* back on track before this spiraled any further.

"What?" the she-wolf replied, blinking those silver eyes. They seemed cloudy again. Her voice was breathy — almost distant. Far away.

She seemed distracted. I glanced over my shoulder, but there was no one else here; it was only us. *Maybe she liked the kiss, too*, my traitorous mind whispered. My upper lip curled at the thought. *No. Focus, Remus.* I had come out here for a *purpose*, and it wasn't a nice swim in the middle of bumfuck nowhere. "Where's Marnet?" I asked again, not moving towards her any further.

It didn't matter. Luna ground her jaw shut and shook her head. "I don't know." She turned her back to me, swimming briskly towards the shoreline as if she couldn't get away quickly enough. I frowned; I didn't usually have that effect on women — or anyone, for that matter. Alphas had a natural sort of charisma. Even other alphas weren't immune to it, though we often began to posture once we got within a certain proximity of one another.

Luna clambered onto the banks, and tugged clothing haphazardly back on. Her back was positioned towards me, even if she was watching me over her shoulder.

My wolf's hackles rose, his ears starting to flatten as his fur threatened to bristle upwards. Was that anger, or desire? *Or both?* He was tired of this game, whatever it was, and was not satisfied or pacified by simple kisses. That was a human thing; that meant nothing to him. He needed answers or desire or loyalty — or any combination of the three. Before I really put any thought into it at all, red was coloring the peripheral of my gaze.

Luna flinched as soon as I began casting my alpha. She wanted to look away, I could see that even if I wasn't casting on her yet. She shook her shoulders, not unlike a wet dog, but it did nothing to wrest my hold; it didn't matter than Luna hadn't bound herself to me and the Silverstreak clan yet. I was a particularly powerful sort, and she might not have been weak, but she—

Shit.

Something cold bubbled up in my gut, uncomfortable and foreign. It took several moments for me to realize I did know that sensation, even if I tried very hard to ignore it. It had no place in running a business or a pack.

Guilt. It was *guilt*.

Luna was still injured, even if the shift had helped her recover some strength. But more than that, she looked tired. No, *exhausted*. Exhausted and paralyzed. “You have to pick a side, Luna,” I said, forcing the alpha red back down. My wolf growled unhappily but made no attempt to surge back forward. “I started this fight, and I am going to finish it.”

The she-wolf stared back, her mouth pressed into a thin line.

“This is my territory now,” I said.

“I know,” she replied, silver eyes never leaving my gaze.

I scowled. *What is **with** this wolf?* Couldn't she see there was only one way this was going to end? “If I have to canvas this entire state, I *will* find Marnet Claw. It could take a month. It could take a year. But make no mistake, I will find him.”

Luna slowly folded her arms over her chest. She said nothing. anything, the line of her lips only grew thinner.

This is going nowhere.

Resisting the urge to roll my eyes, I swam towards the shoreline with powerful strokes. I wasn't going to waste any more time. If Luna refused to lead me to her former alpha, then I had other matters that needed my attention. My bare feet hit the muddy shoreline moments before I allowed my wolf to surge back to the surface.

I strode away from the waterline and shook out my light pelt, lifting my snout to stare up at Luna. She did not shift, not right away, but I wasn't going to give up so easily. She might be stubborn, but she hadn't grown up with Fiona Silverstreak — two could most certainly play that game.

About a minute later, Luna gave a deep sigh and held her arms out to the side. "*Fine,*" she growled, perhaps to me — perhaps to herself, and stepped away from me. Half a minute after that, a dark brown wolf stood where the woman had moments ago, her ears airplaned out to the side as she regarded me with flat gray eyes.

Great.

We made it back to the Claw mansion without any further incident. It was for the best that Luna seemed in a hurry to get back, because my mind wasn't exactly all here.

What the hell had possessed me to kiss Luna?

I mean, it wasn't as if I *wasn't* attracted to her. That was a stupid notion. Her silver eyes were arresting; I hadn't really been able to get them out of my mind since our gazes had met at the beginning of the week. Her hair was soft and dark, and fuck, her *spirit*. It took some serious willpower to confront an alpha, and damn if that wasn't a bit sexy.

Seriously, though. Just because I found her sexy didn't mean I needed to drag her into a kiss. She was supposed to be bringing me to Marnet, and if she had been considering that

notion, she certainly wasn't *now*. My mother always accused me of planning to the point of being anal — where the hell was that right now? That was definitely *not* part of any plan I'd considered.

I growled under my breath. By the time we had both shifted and I had made sure Luna made it back to her room safely, I was feeling downright ornery. I stormed down the hallway of the upper floor and paused right outside the master. "Don't let anyone bother me," I snapped to the shifter standing guard. Without waiting for a response, I ripped the door open and slammed it shut as I strode into the bedroom, ignoring the way the mirror rattled against the wall.

That cannot happen again.

It didn't matter if Luna was pretty or not (she was certainly very pretty). It didn't matter if she was available or not (I was going to kill Marnet anyways, so it was a moot point). It didn't even matter if I liked her (I didn't, I didn't go around *liking* women — I liked Tala, but that was different, she was my cousin, I could be friendly with her and never have to worry about the relationship going sour because of 'mixed signals' or anything equally as inane).

I inhaled slowly and tried to steady my pounding heart as I leaned against the door. My shoulders slumped. I stared up at the ceiling, scowling as I realized that that, too, was decorated with ornamental touches. Maybe I didn't like *everything* about this damn place.

You are a grown-ass man, Remus. It was one stupid kiss. There is no reason for it to be anything other than one stupid kiss, either.

I stared across the room towards the ensuite. A new plan started to formulate. I would take a shower; I could use a wash anyways, after paddling around a pond in the middle of the woods. I'd find something new to wear. If there was nothing in the closet that didn't stink of Marnet, I would send Bane into the city. If there weren't any worthwhile clothing stores in Woodward (I wouldn't even kid myself and hope for a tailor,

I'd seen how Marnet dressed — off the rack), then Oklahoma City wasn't that far away. Was it?

We weren't at Silverstreak Motors. If anyone from the company needed me that urgently, they had my number — I could have my mother on the private jet within the hour to take care of anything.

So, no. There was nothing that needed me urgently — if Marnet reared his ugly head, I wouldn't need clothing for that, either. My mouth rolled up in a smirk. No, he'd have to deal with my wolf.

My wolf rumbled, clearly pleased with the idea. Once we finally eliminated Marnet, there would be no reason for any of the Lupus Claw wolves to hold out — including Luna. Fuck, I could still feel the sting of her nails on my skin every time my shirt shifted; every time I took a step. I could still see those clever silver eyes staring up at me every time I closed my own. My cock stirred, interested by the mere memory of Luna's naked form and open gaze.

Remus! Get. In. The. Shower.

Before I could peel myself off the door, there was a knock right behind my back. It did nothing to quell what was threatening to become a raging hard-on. My desire quickly morphed to something red hot and violent. I snarled and whipped around. “What part of ‘leave me the fuck alone’ do you not understand?” I shouted at the door.

“I understand,” Bane's muffled voice replied. I heard his sigh even if I couldn't see him. “But there's been an emergency.”

Of fucking course there's been an emergency.

I all but wrenched the door out of its frame.

To his credit, Bane didn't so much as bat an eyelash. Red wasn't flooding my gaze, but it was a damn near thing. The look on my beta's face was one I had rarely seen him wear, but it told that he'd been quite serious when he used the word

‘emergency.’ Whatever embers of desire had been burning were doused as if I’d stepped into a frigid shower.

“What is it?” I asked gruffly.

He simply tipped his head and handed me a tablet. I snorted, eyes glancing over the screen.

“We have maintained our control over the territory,” Bane reported, pulling his phone out. He typed on his screen, sending additional files to my tablet. “But the borders are heating up.”

“Borders?” I prompted, not pleased by the plural.

The man nodded. “Yes. We’ve had skirmishes on the borders of New Mexico, Arkansas, and Louisiana. Nothing... dangerous.” I could tell Bane was picking his words carefully now. “But I would consider the actions to be shots across the bow. Several of them. From all directions.”

I exhaled sharply. “Louisiana too, huh?”

Arkansas shared a large stretch of border with Oklahoma. New Mexico shared some, however small — but Louisiana abutted Texas, not Oklahoma. Louisiana was Black Thorn territory; that was Gith. That meant this trouble wasn’t strictly about Marnet. My lip curled up. “You were right to interrupt me,” I said through gritted teeth, eyes flicking back to the screen.

“The situation hasn’t blown up.”

We both knew what Bane was leaving out. *Yet.*

The Oklahoma territory had become a powder keg, and we had to defuse it. *Immediately.* I thrust the tablet back in Bane’s direction. “We’re meeting with the alphas.”

“Now?”

“Yes. Now.” I stepped back into the bedroom long enough to change my shirt and smooth out my hair, retying the bun. It wouldn’t do to look like this turn of events had ruffled me in any way. Bane waited patiently in by the door, falling into step once I started down the hallway.

He fell into step behind me. “Should I call up Tala or Fiona?” he prompted, already doing something on the tablet.

I shook my head. “No.” They each had their own tasks assigned in making sure this went smoothly, including keeping Claw & Co. Construction stable during the transition, and working with the high-ranking pack members who’d already submitted to me to ensure continued cooperation. I didn’t want to start messing with a working plan because I was experiencing a hiccup. Frankly, I didn’t want to give the other alphas the impression I needed any sort of backup — because I didn’t. They were *irritating me*, and nothing more.

When we reached the other side of the mansion, I eyed the armed guards outside of the door. I gave Bane a sideways look. “Has York made any other fool choices since trying to break out yesterday?” I asked.

Bane snorted and shook his head. “He caught a baton to the knee when he got past the first guard he’d cast his alpha over,” he replied. “He isn’t as mobile. And...”

When my beta trailed off, I frowned. “And what?”

“We let him have alcohol,” he sighed, already bracing himself. I opened my mouth, and the man held up a hand. “No, it is not ideal, but obviously he has no self-preservation anyways, and clearly has no problem getting himself so skunked he can’t manage his own power anymore.”

I scowled, but York being belligerent was better than the man trying to cast his alpha over my wolves again. Better his drunken foolishness than him being outright dangerous. “And the other two?”

“Smart enough to realize they’d never make it back to their territories if they tried something that idiotic.”

“Good.” I nodded. I knew there was a reason I liked Seff and Gith more than most of the other alphas. I glanced back at Bane. “Stay here,” I told him. “Let me know if anything changes.” I expected my beta would likely be listening — that was fine. Saved me from having to relay the conversation back to him afterwards.

I turned the guards at the door. One opened the door while the other flanked me as I stepped inside. “Gentlemen.”

The three alphas were in the three far corners, each taking over a different piece of furniture. Seff looked to be asleep, but York and Gith noticed me immediately. The oldest alpha stood, wincing slightly as he unfolded himself from the overstuffed armchair. My guards moved forward; the sound was enough to cause the Red Paw alpha to stir from his nap. He inhaled sharply and rolled to his feet, mouth pressed into a tight line as his gaze flickered between me and my guards.

York was not nearly as compliant. He snarled and took a swig from the dark bottle in his hand, making no move to get off the cushion. The guards stepped around me and walked over, each grabbing one of York’s arms. York growled and hissed as they hauled him upright. He dragged his boots across the carpet and made a horrible gurgling sound. For one brief moment, I thought the man had finally overdone his drinking and was about to wretch all over the floor. I took a step back, and not a moment too soon; a large wad of phlegm landed where my shoes had been seconds prior.

“I won’t do jack *shit* for the likes of you,” York slurred. Even a few feet away, his breath reeked of rum. *Rum?* Bane must have picked the first bottle he could find in Marnet’s bar. Just as well. There was no need to waste the good stuff on York.

I wrinkled my nose. “As soon as business is taken care of here, you will all be free to go,” I said, ignoring the face York was making. Sometimes, it was hard to believe this man was several years my senior. He acted even younger than Marnet, and that was a true feat. “I would advise you against staging any sort of counterattack, however.” I sized each of them up coolly. I would not underestimate them, not after York had proven brash enough to try and escape, and they would be wise not to make the same mistake Marnet had.

York continued to struggle with the guards, clearly trying to take another step towards me. Seff finally moved, laying a

firm hand over the York's shoulder. To my surprise, the Shadow Rock alpha actually stilled for a moment, and Seff turned his cool gaze to me. "C'mon, Remus," he said softly, keeping his gaze a degree below mine, careful not to meet mine directly. Careful not to challenge my dominance. "You don't need to do this. This isn't how a disposal should be done."

Before I could answer, Gith spoke up, stringing together more words than I'd heard from him since we'd all arrived in Oklahoma. "This was a big mistake." His voice was hoarse. Must be the fact that the man never used it. "No. Huge mistake, Silverstreak. There are rules for a reason. There are *traditions* for a reason."

That was probably more than Gith had said all year. I would have been impressed, if I wasn't so fucking *annoyed* by the sheer gall. Silly me, thinking they were smarter than York.

"You're lucky I didn't just dispose of you," I snapped. They'd be a lot less troublesome if they were dead. The back of my neck was starting to prickle. If my resources hadn't been spread so thin trying to find Marnet, York would have been in more trouble than he currently was. Frankly, I wasn't sure we could withstand a full-power counterattack — but that was for me to know, and only for me to know.

I straightened my spine a little further. "You have a few hours to get your pack to stand down," I growled. This matter was not open to negotiation. I motioned another guard in with a walkie-talkie. Bane followed with his tablet; he would oversee the matter.

"And if we don't?" York snarled, even as the other two remained quiet.

"Then Shadow Rock will go the exact same way as Lupus Claw."

The alpha hissed between clenched teeth. "Is that a threat, Silverstreak?"

I bared my teeth in a wolf's smile. "No. That's a promise."

Chapter 19

Luna

Claw Mansion
Woodward County, Oklahoma

I sat on the bed, cradling the mirror Tala had given me. I hadn't moved much since my return. The run in the woods had been invigorating, and the swim in the pool had been... Erm... *Enlightening*.

Hell. Who am I kidding?

I had no idea what to make of the swim. The pool itself was nice — certainly a little hiding spot worth remembering (once Remus went back to Texas, it would be mine, and mine alone) — but what had happened there... My wolf still insisted that Marnet was our mate. He was the only choice. It mattered not to her that we had been summarily rejected in front of the entire pack (as well as several high-ranking members from other packs, of course). It didn't occur to her, either, that our mate had left us to die when he'd closed the trap door to his secret passage.

He had no way of knowing Remus would spare me. *I* still wasn't entirely sure why he had; I had thought he wanted me to seek Marnet out for him, but when we swam together in the pool... It was like he'd forgotten about the Lupus Claw alpha entirely. His eyes, his attention, they were only for me. I had no idea what to do with that reality.

On some level, it was strangely enticing. Marnet had often seemed distracted when we were together, especially over the last year — or maybe two. I had been willing to accept the explanation that taking over from his father was worrying him, and then that the role was quite difficult, once the transition had actually happened. But given how quickly he'd traded me in for that blonde? Maybe his mind had been on her the whole time.

I looked back down and caught a glance of my own reflection in the small hand mirror. I tipped my head as I raised my hands, lips curving down. The shift — or rather, shifts, I supposed — had done a lot to heal some of the deep bruises. The aches. But there had been far too many injuries to be healed by one short run through the forest; the purple on my jaw had faded to that awful jaundiced yellow instead. The searing pain had faded to a dull throb, but I could still feel the mark Marnet's knuckles had left against my skin. The thought made my stomach turn. It was a good thing I hadn't eaten in a few days, or I might have gagged.

I set the mirror back down and tried to shake off the deeply unsettled feeling. I had been sitting in this bed long enough. The last thing I needed was Remus getting into my head. *You're such a mess, Luna. C'mon, get it together.*

The door opened and Tala stepped inside. "Oh, good, you're still awake," she chirped, offering me a small smile. "I ran a hot bath for you. No ensuite, though I'm sort of surprised with the size of this place, you know?" For a moment, her smile flickered to something a little more — judgmental, perhaps. I didn't get a chance to put my finger on it, because it only lasted a moment. I blinked, and her smile was back. "C'mon, you don't want it to get cold. I grabbed some clothes from one of the closets for you. I just guessed your size."

I forced myself to smile back and slowly got to my feet. "Thank you," I replied quietly, dipping my head in a little nod. "You really— You really didn't need to do that." I hardly knew what to say. The cruelty Marnet had offered a few days prior made the kindness a sharp contrast; it was almost overwhelming. "I really appreciate it, though," I added in a

rush. The last thing I needed was for Tala to think I was ungrateful; at the moment, she seemed like the only friendly face (I certainly wouldn't fool myself into calling her a friend) around this place.

Tala followed me out of the room. Part of me wanted to insist I didn't need a chaperone to take a bath, but I also wasn't 100 percent confident that my knees wouldn't suddenly give out on me. Though I was feeling better, I certainly wasn't feeling like the picture of health, either. It took me a moment to realize she was still speaking to me.

“—oh! And I added lavender. Well, lavender Epsom salts, but I got a few sprigs of lavender from the garden, too. Who do you think gardened here? Certainly wasn't Marnet — and Kate doesn't look like the kind of woman who'd suffer dirty nails, either.”

There are gardens here? My brow furrowed slightly. I supposed that showed how often I'd been invited to Marnet's home. Withholding a sigh, I opened the door and stepped into the bathroom, greeting by a wall of warmth and the smell of lavender warmed by sunshine. Almost instinctively, I exhaled, shoulders dropping by a few degrees.

“This is really nice,” I said. There were a few flickering candles placed around the room, on the marble countertop, perched on little nooks above the tub. If I hadn't known better, I could have sworn I'd just stepped into a spa, not a shared bathroom at Marnet's mansion — or, former mansion, I supposed.

Tala hummed, fluffing a towel to leave near the bath. “Yes, well, you've had a lot to deal with the past few days, haven't you? I thought it might be nice.” She shrugged. “I would treat myself to a glass of wine — or several! — and a healing bath after a breakup, so, it seemed right.”

I didn't know what to say to that, either. A breakup sounded so minor, as compared to what had happened at the Moonmate ceremony a few days ago. I sighed, staring at the bath water.

Tala cleared her throat when the silence stretched on too long. “Well, I’ll step out. I’ll be right down the hall so just shout if you need anything, okay?”

I barely registered the other woman as she turned to reach for the door. The water rippled quietly, and I was brought back to the pool for a moment, the memory so vivid it almost stole my breath away — and the memory was followed immediately by the thought of pushing back. The thought of Marnet. The hollow, empty feeling the man had left me with.

I jerked my chin up. “Tala?”

“Hm?” She paused with her delicate fingers on the door, glancing over her shoulder.

I forced myself to keep talking, no matter how awkward I felt. “Would you — would you mind staying? I just...this is a big house. It’s sort of lonely, you know?”

The urge to cringe was growing by the second. Thankfully, Tala brightened almost immediately. “I’d love to! Why don’t I give you a minute to change and get settled in the bath, and I’ll come back with something to drink? I could go for some more coffee, honestly. Do you want any?”

I paused; her smile was almost contagious. “I think just some water, if that’s okay?”

“Of course!” she replied. “I won’t be more than a minute.”

What a strange thing, I thought, gingerly stripping out of my clothes. *Having a coffee date in the bathroom.*

Tala did most of the talking while I sat in the bath, but I didn’t really mind. My throat was still a bit sore — and my jaw a bit more than sore, truth be told — so I was perfectly content to listen. Maybe she had mentioned it before, but I hadn’t entirely realized that Tala was Remus’ cousin. It must have been on her mother’s side, because *Tanner* did not sound anything like *Silverstreak*. If I was honest, it sounded positively mundane...but I knew some wolves were like that,

especially older families that didn't contain any alphas in immediate history.

They thought it was safer to be mistaken for humans, and I couldn't entirely blame them for that. Living without the protection of a pack as a terrifying proposition. I had wondered how Tala's family had become part of the Silverstreak pack, but I didn't have to ask, because she was already launching into the story. She'd taken a left turn into Silverstreak Motors. If I was honest, I wasn't sure I'd ever seen one of their cars in the wild. One of those cars was as expensive as a Lamborghini, or maybe more so. Regardless of price, they weren't the type of car you drove down a dusty back country road, not unless you'd stolen it and were hoping to hide it in the last place anyone might look.

"I'd love to see one someday," I said, almost dreamy in my imagination. I couldn't even picture what that kind of motor might feel like beneath my fingers. It had been a while since I'd worked on any cars at all. I grimaced. *Guess it's a good thing I'm just an assistant at the garage.* Where was my phone? *Fuck.* Had the garage manager been texting me? I had taken the day of the Moonmate ceremony and the day after off, but it had been more than a few days since then. *Man, if I had lost my job...* There weren't that many garages in this town, and while I didn't have to pay rent, I still tried to remain as independent as possible.

"See what? One of the cars?"

Tala's question interrupted my impending anxiety spiral. I glanced over, aware of the heat rising to my cheeks. Hopefully, she would just assume it was the heat of the bath, not the embarrassment. "Yeah. Not a lot of sports cars out here."

"Oh, I know," Tala laughed. "Trucks and Jeeps as far as the eye can see! I'm just surprised — no offense, but you don't exactly look like a gearhead."

I snorted. "I get that sometimes. My mom owned a garage when I was younger."

"Oh, really? That's something, isn't it? My mother, well." She paused, pursing her lips. "She wasn't good with money at

all. Which is why I made it my goal to be better with finance than anyone else in whatever room I'm standing in."

"And did you manage that?" I asked, surprised that I was actually curious.

She winked. "I'm not Silverstreak Motors' chief financial officer because I'm Remus' cousin. The man likes me well enough, but he doesn't like me so well as to let nepotism ruin his business. I'm not sure if you've noticed, but he's a bit... *strict* in his planning."

"That's one way of putting it," I replied, tracing my fingers over the surface of the water.

Tala sipped her coffee. "The pack means everything to him, and the company is a close second. It funds just about everything, you know?"

I didn't know. Now that she mentioned it, I had no idea what Marnet did — or what the Claw family did — to provide financial support for the Lupus Claw pack. Despite the fact that I was supposed to be his mate — despite the fact that he had promised me, over and over and over again, that he would publicly claim me one day — he'd never mentioned any of the pack specifics to me. It was like it was some big grand secret. Like either he didn't trust me enough to share, or he thought I was too stupid to understand the machinations. Honestly, I wasn't sure which thought hurt worse.

"I don't think he's ever had a relationship that lasted more than a month. More than a weekend, even," Tala was saying as I tuned back in.

I blinked and glanced over. "Hm?"

She flushed and cleared her throat. "Sorry. Got a bit carried away there. It's not really for me to speculate on Remus' dating life, is it?"

Huh, I thought. I wasn't entirely uninterested in Tala's speculation. Unfortunately, she changed topics, shifting back to life in Texas — something about the city Silverstreak Motors was headquartered in. My mind started to drift, and I made no effort to reclaim it, closing my eyes as I started to

sink into the water. The soothing tone of Tala's voice gave way to memories of my earlier swim, a stark contrast of the bath. The pool had been cold and earthy where this was warm and floral.

I wonder if Remus takes baths, I thought, feeling weightless in the water. My lashes fluttered and I did not open them. Would he have kept me company, if I had asked? Would he lean in and—

No!

My eyes flashed open and I sat up too abruptly, startling Tala into silence as the water sloshed against the sides of the tub. "I think I'm ready to get out," I said, praying she wouldn't ask for an explanation.

Tala gave me a funny look, but she didn't say anything. Instead, she got back to her feet, gathering up the empty cups. "No problem," she said, her voice carrying a cheerfulness I couldn't pin as forced or real. "The towel's there. There are a few dresses hung for you — we're having dinner in about an hour. I'll meet you downstairs in the dining room, so feel free to take your time getting ready."

"Thanks," I managed to croak out, feeling impossibly small as Tala swished out, every inch the confident businesswoman. *Shit, what am I even doing here?* I wondered, not for the first time. I felt like a country bumpkin compared to the Silverstreak wolves.

Well, you aren't going to make any good impressions naked, I thought to myself, and leaned forward to drain the tub. *Or as a wrinkly prune. C'mon, girl. Let's get it together.*

Once I had toweled myself off and procured a blow dryer for my hair, I finally padded over to the rack where Tala had hung three dresses. I had no idea where she'd gotten them, but I knew if I thought about *that* for too long, I'd end up wearing nothing at all.

It would have been nice to get something more comfortable, I thought with a sigh, grimacing as I peeked at

the tags. They would all fit, but they weren't going to leave anything to the imagination. *Why do I need to wear a damn cocktail dress for dinner?*

My irritation gave way to something cooler, more uncomfortable. Tala hadn't mentioned how many others would be at dinner. I assumed she would be there, of course, and probably her cousin, the alpha...but if the alpha was there, his mother was likely going to be there. Maybe his beta. How many other Silverstreak pack members would be there? *Would any Lupus Claw — er — former Lupus Claw wolves be there? Would my family be there?*

Unexpectedly, my chest felt tight, as if someone had cinched the towel currently wrapped around my skin. My father had been an important member of Lupus Claw — had he submitted to Remus, or tried to fight the man's claim over the territory?

My eyes stung at the idea. *No, don't do that.* I would hope for the best, and that meant I'd see my father downstairs, and it wouldn't do to be wobbling around like a fawn or something. I took a shaky breath and stared at the dresses, not having a clue which of them to pick. The grimace worked its way back onto my lips like a stubborn stain. *Well, what do you think would have happened if Marnet had taken you as his mate, Luna? You would be asked to dinner every night; who knows how often he was entertaining?*

The last thought made my mouth twist further, the idea sourer than any lemon. For all I knew, Marnet Claw had a different guest over almost every night of the week. We rarely spent evenings together, instead meeting in mid-morning, early afternoon, or well, well after any sort of respectable hour. *It all seems kind of obvious now, doesn't it?*

If he'd really planned to claim me, he would've taken me out to a real dinner, at a real restaurant, instead of bringing upscale Chinese takeout from Oklahoma City when I was getting sick of his behavior. He would've invited me over to his house to eat with his family rather than invite me to his *love nest* for a quick fuck and a snack after. I could count the number of times I'd woken up next to Marnet on one hand.

Stop that, I scolded myself, reaching for a deep navy dress. I wouldn't have called it 'mid-length' by any stretch of the imagination, but it seemed the most middling between my three choices. The forest green might have looked nice, too, but I didn't want to spend most of the night tugging my dress down my thighs. I had no idea who I was going to be meeting downstairs, after all.

Shedding the fluffy towel, I got dressed. Tala had thought of everything, from what to wear underneath to the shoes that matched each individual dress. I was a little impressed. *This house is practically a shopping mall*. Again, I almost caught myself wondering who this dress belonged to. *Sophia? Kate? The bl— Get a grip, girl. It doesn't belong to any of them, not now. Besides, you're only borrowing it.*

The only thing Tala hadn't supplied was any sort of makeup. I didn't tend to wear a lot, but if I was going to make a good impression, I usually tried to put on a neutral shade of eye shadow — maybe some eyeliner, if I was feeling really spicy. Even some lip balm would have been acceptable.

Maybe there's something in the bedroom. I hadn't exactly been in the state of mind to go rummaging around the various pieces of furniture.

I had almost coaxed a smile to my face as I walked out of the bathroom, my dark hair falling in gentle waves and my shoes hanging from my fingers. The carpet runner felt as plush as a verdant forest floor — this really was more luxurious than anything I could have imagined. *And it was almost yours, Luna*.

I shook my head; *no, it wasn't*. I didn't even know what was here, not really. And it was never mine; it was never going to *be* mine. Marnet didn't even struggle with his decision at the Moonmate ceremony. It couldn't have meant much of anything to him, if anything at all. *He always did tell you he wasn't much for tradition. Should have listened.*

My wolf stirred and I braced myself for her discontent. I almost didn't notice Fiona Silverstreak in the hallway until it was too late. I managed to step to the side, dipping in what I

was sure was the most awkward bow the woman had ever seen. As I straightened, I paused. What was I supposed to say to the mother of the man who had destroyed my pack?

Fiona broke the awkward silence, clearly unaffected by what might have been uncomfortable for others (including me, thank you very much). “How are you feeling, Luna?” she asked, her voice crisp. She reminded me of a school librarian, if a librarian wore heels and sapphire earrings to a Thursday night dinner. *Wait, not just earrings. That pendent...her bracelet!*

I swallowed before I could say something stupid. “Much better,” I said instead, allowing my gaze to flicker down. The last thing I needed was for any Silverstreak wolf to think I was challenging them, much less the alpha’s mother. “Thank you for asking.”

The air seemed to warm up by a degree. “You do look much better,” she noted. I didn’t need to look at the older woman to know she was sizing me up — it had happened so often over my lifetime. “Now that you are regaining your health, it is time you pay your respects to Remus and help him locate Marnet.”

Pay my respects...? My gaze jerked up as my nostrils flared, and I fought the sharp inhale of breath. *Oh, she wants me to submit*— I couldn’t finish the thought. Blinking rapidly, I looked away.

Fiona growled softly and I cringed, realizing a moment too late she might interpret the aversion as disobedience. The Silverstreak matriarch took one step towards me, and I fought the tremble threatening my spine; even if I wanted to move, my feet were rooted to the hardwood floor. She didn’t have to so much as lay a finger of me; the simple power of her stare had me pinned to the floor. *And she’s not even an alpha — no wonder Remus is so arresting.* It was bred into him.

“You’ve had a very trying few days, young lady, so I will allow you some grace. However, it would be in your best interest to *thoroughly consider* your words and actions over the next few days. Silverstreak is nothing like Lupus Claw,

and neither disloyalty nor disrespect will be tolerated by myself or by Remus. Do you understand?”

She said the last bit as if I were a particularly slow child. Unfortunately, I felt like a particularly small child, caught playing in my mother’s heels because she wanted to be a grownup. I tilted my head, trying to formulate some response that wouldn’t get me into any deeper trouble when the sound of footsteps rounded the far corner of the hallway.

“Mother!”

Remus? I glanced up suddenly, but I didn’t miss the way Fiona’s hazel eyes narrowed and her finely manicured brows pinched closer together. It was an expression I saw frequently.

The man approached us with long strides, not hurried but efficient. He dipped his head towards his mother, and she pivoted on one foot, wrapping her slender arms around him in a short embrace. I blinked and glanced away, shocked by the affection she offered the man so freely — in front of someone who was two steps away from a stranger, no less. I had never seen Lynn embrace any of her children in public, not even her sons.

What do I do? I needed to get to the bedroom I’d been staying in — or even just the dining room — but the pair of shifters was between me and the end of the hallway. I’d have to squeeze myself past them to get by, and there was *no way* I was coming within three feet of them. *Especially Remus.*

When I allowed myself a quick glance, Remus was staring at me, even as he untangled himself from his mother’s embrace.

“Luna,” he murmured. I hated the way chills ran down my spine when he said my name. *Luna.* Like I was something expensive. Luxurious. “Join me for dinner.”

I glanced up, trying not to look surprised. “Oh, uh, yes. I was just on my way down to the dining room. Tala told me—”

Remus shook his head, a lazy smile tipping up one side of his mouth. I bit my lip, lest I start frowning right in front of his mother. (Her watchful gaze had never left my face once

Remus had addressed me, and I had no desire to give her any ammunition against me.) “No,” he said, “on the balcony.”

“What?” I blinked, quickly losing the battle against my bewilderment. “Oh, that’s okay, I—”

Fiona’s eyes narrowed by a fraction and the words died in my throat. Even my wolf seemed to take notice, whining softly. *Was this part of what she considered disrespect?* I inhaled and straightened my spine. *Fine. If this woman thinks I have no idea how to play along with an egomaniac, she has another thing coming.* I had lived under Lynn Highborn’s roof for more than the last decade, after all. Smiling and nodding was the language in which I was the most fluent.

“I insist,” Remus said.

I cleared my throat, reaching up to brush my fingers over my skin and the bruises I knew were still speckled there. “Sorry,” I murmured, dipping my head gracefully. “Some of the injuries still hurt a bit. I was just going to finish getting ready in my room; I would love to join you after?” I smiled pleasantly. Fiona’s expression faltered and for a moment, the smile almost felt real.

“Perfect.” Remus turned to head in the direction he’d come from. “See you soon.” His mother trailed after him, their arms looped lazily together as she leaned in to whisper something.

I stared at their backs for a moment, mother and son. *I wonder what Josephine Ulfric would have to say about this.* I allowed myself one wistful moment, and then shook myself. There was no time to mope. I’d bought myself a few minutes before having to have dinner with the alpha who had overthrown mine, and I wasn’t going to waste them dwelling on such morbid thoughts.

Chapter 20

Remus

Claw Mansion
Woodward County, Oklahoma

Marnet's cook was human. It wasn't an inherent problem, and I assumed the man couldn't be totally incompetent if he had survived Marnet's employment this long. It also meant that he (as well as the rest of the kitchen staff) was not present on the night of the attack, as he'd hired a catering company alongside what looked to be half a bar. He had been rather surprised to show up to work the next day and find a different family residing in the Claw Mansion, but once I'd casually explained that Silverstreak Motors was expanding its portfolio to include Claw & Co. Construction, he didn't seem too bothered.

That I offered the man a 25 percent raise — and a 10 percent raise for each member of staff — probably didn't hurt. Sure, it would have been cheaper to find a new cook, but I'd been told Woodward County was tight-knit. Rumors spread fast. The last thing I needed was for humans to start poking their noses into werewolf country because some cook was sour because he'd lost his job.

It was a price well paid, when you considered that. Plus, the man was actually quite skilled.

I frowned as Luna rolled a potato scale around her plate. (Dinner was the most exquisite dorade fillet covered in potato scales, thinly sliced and perfectly crisp. Each one was almost the exact same size and shape — and never mind the sauce.

The chef had seemed elated to cook something besides steak and mashed potatoes, and I was pleased to see what he could do. A werewolf couldn't live off red meat alone, no matter what the paperback novels tell you.)

“Not to your liking?” I asked. Luna hadn't done much more than nibble on the first course, either; I had been willing to believe she was saving her appetite for the main course, but here we were, and she still hadn't taken more than a few bites.

She glanced up suddenly, as if I had interrupted her from some deep reverie. The last rays of the summer sun's light caught her silver eyes in the most striking way, and my breath caught somewhere in my chest. She paused, watching me steadily. If I didn't know better, I'd have said her eyes were twinkling. “Sorry,” she said, looking back down at her plate. There was a beat of silence before she lifted her chin again, silver eyes meeting mine. “Why are you being so nice to me, Remus?”

I could feel my wolf bristle, fur already beginning to stand on end at the perceived challenge. He wasn't used to being questioned. I exhaled and I tried to find a sense of calm. Or something resembling calm. Or an inkling of patience. *Not that you have much to spare*, I thought wryly, but there had to be *something* in there. I was fairly certain that patience was the only way I was going to get anywhere with Luna, and it would be stupid to waste that with a momentary snap.

When I didn't answer, Luna cleared her throat softly. “You didn't have to let me stay here, much less have your cousin take care of me. You could have left me in the barn. You could have broken the chains and kicked me to the curb.” She paused for a moment, and I knew we were both thinking the same thing. *I could have killed her*. And I could have. It would have been within my right, as the alpha who'd taken over the Lupus Claw territory. Luna continued. “And now...all of this.” She gestured to the table. “I thought Tala was asking me to come down to some, I don't know — informal...meal... thing...”

She trailed off, but her gaze didn't waver. “So, what is it, Remus?”

What is it, indeed? I picked up my glass, taking a sip of the wine the cook had pulled from Marnet's cellar. Even I could see Luna was being treated differently; Lupus Claw wolves that held out some faith Marnet would rise from the ashes and return to power (however misguided they were) were rounded up whenever we found them. I had a few holding areas; they would stay there until they pledged themselves to me, or until Marnet Claw was killed. If the latter happened first, well... they would have one final moment to see the error in their ways, really.

Why are you keeping her close?

It was a damn good question, and I didn't like having an immediate answer for it. She hadn't led me to Marnet and had given me no indication she was planning on it. I could simply cast my alpha on her and command her to find him, if she knew where he was, but the idea left a bad taste in my mouth. It would be efficient, though, and inefficiency was something I strove to eliminate from my pack and my business both. I didn't waste my precious time or energy — not in my business, not in pack matters, and certainly not in my personal life.

At first, I had told myself it was Marnet. Once Luna woke up, she would be able to take me to whatever hole Marnet was hiding in. I had even entertained the notion he might have several different shelters (he had the potential to be paranoid, in my opinion, and even if he wasn't, Noah Claw certainly was) and that it might take a few days for Luna to lead me to all of them. But this?

I frowned to myself, aware I still hadn't answered Luna's question. I stood abruptly, the chair rocking as it caught on the stone floor. Turning, I strode towards the railing and the view I'd rapidly become fond of, drink still in hand. "Come here." I rested one arm against the edge as I stared out over the hills. The sun was just beginning to sink below the horizon, casting shades of pinks, reds, and violets into the sky above. If I hadn't been so preoccupied by the nagging query, I might have been able to appreciate it better.

After a moment's hesitation, Luna joined me quietly, but not without keeping a few fragile inches between us. I eyed the space between our arms as if I had been personally betrayed. *But why do you care? Why does it matter if she finds you suspicious?* I buried my frown with another sip of my drink.

The she-wolf said nothing, both of her arms folded over the railing as she leaned forward, surveying the landscape. A gentle fragrance drifted up from her pale skin, comforting and familiar. Lavender? Yes, that was it. Like the garden. Earthy and natural — like she was already a part of this place.

The thought made me smile. I allowed myself a sideways glance, appreciating the way her arms pillowed her breasts, framed so nicely by the subtle navy dress she wore. *Remus, get ahold of yourself. Now's not the time to get distracted by a nice set of tits.*

As pretty as Luna was, Oklahoma was not stable territory. Marnet was on the run, but he wasn't dead, and he hadn't submitted to me — until that situation was solved, I could not lose focus. I could not *afford* to lose focus, not when I'd already lost wolves to this cause. Losing focus could cost me so much more than that.

At my side, Luna sighed, the corner of her full lips tipping upwards. "It's beautiful, isn't it?" she murmured, tipping her head to gaze up at me with those magical silver eyes. They were like the sky promising the first snow; something that filled you with both anticipation and joy, hope and just a little dread. Powerful things, those eyes.

"Yes," I said, unable to tear my gaze away. *You are.* "It is."

Shit.

She simply smiled at me and glanced back out over the farm's reach. I downed the rest of my wine and set the glass on the ledge, ignoring how precarious that position might be. *Fuck it, I thought. If I'm going to do it, I might as well stop pussyfooting around and just do it.*

I inched half a step closer and when Luna didn't so much as shift her weight, I trailed my fingers lightly up her side. The motion was so controlled, I barely felt the fabric of her dress beneath my fingertips, even as I traced the curve of her ribs, her side, found the bare skin of her shoulder. Her breath caught, and I bent my head to hide my pleased smile, dropping a chaste kiss against her shoulder instead.

I want to taste her again, I realized suddenly, a tendril of heat unspooling in my stomach. My plan had disappeared to the back of my mind again as Luna's earthy scent filled my nostrils. Thoughts of the pool came flooding back, the way her calf brushed against mine, the way she arched her spine as my hand inched steadily lower. The smoothness of her skin; the taste of her lips. *Yes. I need to taste her again.*

Perhaps if I just tasted her one more time, I could stop this before it became an obsession.

When Luna didn't move away, I tugged slightly on the shoulder strap nearest me, encouraging it to slip down her arm. I traced my fingers across her shoulder blades and then placed another tender kiss against her skin, edging towards her neck. I kissed her throat, wishing I could take the bruises away. I followed the ugly trail up her jaw, kissing her there. Before I could lean any closer and taste those sweet lips again, she inhaled sharply and took a step away.

I made no effort to hold her in place, pulling my hands back as quickly as if I had been burned.

"I can't," Luna whispered breathlessly, pupils blown wide as she studied my face. Her chest rose and fell visibly with each cycle of breath. "Remus— Remus, I'm sorry. I can't. This can't happen again."

I tipped my head to one side, some silent acknowledgment (even if it wasn't agreement). She finally looked away, tugging at the wayward shoulder strap. "I... I need to go."

Luna said nothing else and neither did I. She hurried away. The sound of her heels faded, and I pulled away from the edge of the balcony, walking back over to the table to pick up her

abandoned glass of wine. She'd barely touched it. I sighed and took a sip. *That's it, Remus, I told myself. This has got to stop.*

I swallowed another mouthful of wine and snorted. Who was I kidding, really? *It's definitely going to happen again.* I usually didn't go in for repeats, but those sparks between us? I'd never felt anything like that before, and I didn't think I could combat them. It was unfortunate that we'd met this way, almost as enemies. *But you don't have to be my enemy, Luna. Not at all.*

Looking back down at her empty seat, I leaned against the stone railing and sighed. I knew the answer to the she-wolf's question now. *I've been so nice to you, Luna Highborn, because I think you are the prettiest thing about this whole damn state.*

I drifted back to my room once I had finished what was left of the wine. It certainly hadn't been enough to get me drunk, but there was a slight current of electricity that hadn't been there before — or maybe that was just the company I'd shared the meal with. The corner of my lips curled wryly as I thought of Luna in her deep navy cocktail dress, the way it clung to her hips and settled gracefully just above her knees. The way the neckline didn't reveal much, but absolutely accentuated the woman's chest.

Had Tala picked that for her?

I paused in front of my room for a moment, but then I snorted and shook my head. Even if Tala knew I found the Lupus Claw she-wolf attractive, she certainly wouldn't have done anything as reckless as encouraging it. She'd probably just gathered up some dresses from the closet in what looked like Luna's size. At the very least, I knew my cousin had a good eye.

Pulling my phone from one pocket, I checked the time. *Almost 10:00.* Still early, by my standards. All the same, I reached behind me to lock the door before slipping out of my jacket, then tossed it onto one of the armchairs in one corner of the master suite. I left my phone on the sturdy oak table; no

one would be stupid enough to interrupt me after dinner. If someone did, it would be Bane, and it would because something had gone terribly wrong one of the borders. Anyone else could wait until morning.

Well. Maybe not anyone, I thought with a wry smile. *Does Luna have my number?* A second thought soon followed. *Did anyone even give Luna her stuff back?* Tomorrow, I'd have to ask Tala if any of her personal belongings had been recovered from the barn. I doubted Luna would be fool enough to attempt to contact Marnet now, but if she did... If she did...

I struggled to follow along with the thought, even if it *would* get me closer to my goal. *Tala's right. You work too damn hard, Remus.* I moved from the desk towards the bed, slowly unbuttoning my cuffs, then the row of buttons down my chest. Briefly, I considered the bathroom, but I had showered after I had returned from meeting with the other alphas. *Nah.* Tossing my shirt onto the floor, I toed off my shoes before undoing my dark slacks, slowly removing articles of clothing until I was wearing nothing but my boxer briefs. Everything was left on a pile in the floor.

That was a problem for tomorrow — and for someone else.

I pulled back the comforter and slid into the dark linen sheets. Grabbing the slim remote, I flicked on the large television and surfed a few channels, but nothing caught my attention. I made it maybe ten minutes before flicking it back off, banishing the remote to live with my clothing on the hardwood floor. Trying to sleep seemed pointless, but I closed my eyes anyways.

Almost immediately, I was greeted with a vision from earlier in the day. Luna, slipping out of her clothing and stepping delicately into the pool. Her slender legs, her cute ass — she played coy so perfectly, but she still stepped in carefully. She had been graceful despite everything. There was more in that woman than whatever anyone had said. There was something else beneath the surface. Maybe they just hadn't been looking closely enough.

My cock stirred, inclined to agree with my assessment.

I snorted. *How long has it been since you've gotten laid, Remy?* More than a few weeks, certainly. The plan had taken up a lot of my attention recently, but it was hardly anything I'd term dire. *So, what's got you so tied up about a cute girl?* I asked myself, trying to ignore the way my cock continued to thicken. Clearly, it was more than 'a cute girl.' It was Luna. I was tied up about *Luna*.

Hell, she had been absolutely gorgeous this morning, the water droplets clinging to her like she'd been borne of the earth itself. A verifiable Venus rising from the sea. *You should purchase that painting*, I thought idly, palming myself through the clingy black fabric. I had never been much one for art, but now that my mind had made the association between Luna and the *Birth of Venus*, I'm not sure I had much choice. I'd never be able to look at it the same way again.

Luna hadn't even been shy when I kissed her, had she? Fuck, the way she'd arched against me when I'd grabbed her hip. That moment echoed deep in my gut, threatening to drive me wild.

I dragged my teeth over my lower lip, a groan rumbling low in my chest as I pushed the elastic of my boxer briefs further down, freeing my throbbing cock from its cotton prison. Spitting in my palm, I wrapped my sure fingers around my shaft, hips tensing as I resisted the urge to rut up. I had been hard as a rock then, despite the water's chill. Had she known she made me so fucking stiff? In that moment, I had wanted nothing more than to pull her against my body and slide my penis into her, to burrow in the warmth of her tight pussy and make her forget there'd ever been anyone before me.

My wolf rumbled a throaty agreement. Yeah, if she were ours, she'd forget about anyone else. She wouldn't even have a frame of reference for the way I could make her feel. I groaned as I remembered the feel of her skin beneath my lips and wondered if she'd have let me worry a dark bruise into the meat of her shoulder. *Possession*. Another feral growl rumbled up from my chest, then I hissed through my clenched teeth, my hips jerking again.

I squeezed the head of my cock, twisting my wrist slightly as precum began to leak from the slit. I smeared the moisture back against my skin, leaning further into the pillows. I imagined Luna's delicate hands instead of my own, her slender fingers tracing the length of my dick as she learned each inch. I could imagine her sinking down between my thighs as she palmed my sac before wrapping those pretty pink lips around my penis, slowly swirling her tongue around the sensitive head. Even when I opened my eyes, I could still see that striking silver gaze.

My movements became quicker and I shifted my hips again, becoming more restless. Maybe she'd have ridden me, if I had pulled her back to shore instead of letting her swim away, that silky dark hair falling over her shoulders as she ground her clit against me. A quiet groan fell from my lips and I shuddered. *I wonder what she sounds like when she moans. When she moans my name.* The delicious thought made the heat in my gut roar higher. Damn, what I wouldn't give to hear that. What I wouldn't do. Anything this woman wanted from me, I would give her. I could make her feel like a fucking queen.

Fuck.

I throbbed for her. I was so fucking hard, and all for *her*. Orgasm hit me like a left hook, leaving me breathless and bent over as I stripped my cock. My spend splashed against my palm as my stomach clenched and my thighs tensed; white-hot pleasure zipped up my spine and left my mind blissfully blank.

Panting slightly, I flopped back against the pillows. I wiped my hand off with the sheet, wrinkling my nose before rolling to the other side. Washing the bedsheets would just have to be another thing added to the list of things to do. I stared at the wall, brow furrowing a bit. *When was the last time an orgasm felt this good?* Sure, it had been a while since I'd hooked up with someone, but getting myself off had never been...that *intense*. Not really.

Why her? Why now?

The vision of Luna returned to me, the way she glanced over her shoulder at me in the pool. The way those silver eyes studied me, like she could see right through my facades and my questions. I thought of Luna stepping into the pool of water and sucked in a sharp breath. I was ensnared.

Chapter 21

Luna

C law Mansion
Woodward County, Oklahoma

Tala had been wound up all morning. I could practically feel the unfiltered energy as we sat downstairs in the formal dining room for breakfast. The two of us in such a large room was such a ridiculous prospect, but she was so high-strung it was difficult for me to do anything but nod my head and fake a smile. I'm not even sure she noticed how ingenuine the expression was. She'd been tense all through breakfast, and it'd only worsened when she'd followed me back to my bedroom, saying she had something she needed to ask me.

Maybe she just doesn't care, the paranoid portion of my brain whispered. I didn't want to believe that was the kind of woman she was, not when she'd clearly made more effort than anyone else to make sure I was at least moderately comfortable, but...

It would make sense, the intrusive thoughts insisted. *It's not like you're that good at masking your expressions.*

I sat on the edge of my neatly made bed and picked at one of my nail beds. While it was true that almost any strong emotion could bring up a well of tears, I had liked to think I was getting better at controlling that sort of thing. At the very least, I didn't wail at the drop of a hat anymore. My placid smile was second nature; it had been for years. *You're overthinking it*, I told myself, giving a little shake.

I glanced up from my hands; Tala was pacing back and forth across the bedroom. We'd returned after our meal, and I don't think she'd stopped talking since the door shut. If she had, she at least hadn't noticed my silence. Her perfectly manicured nails tugged restlessly at her auburn hair. Frowning, I glanced back down at my fingertips. I hadn't bothered to paint them before the Moonmate ceremony; Lynn would have given me at least three different lectures about trying to steal the spotlight from my step-sisters, and I had thought it wouldn't matter anyways, because Marnet—

My heart skipped a beat and caught on the nest of brambles that had made their home in my chest cavity. Any thought of Marnet caused a snag, another piece of flesh caught and torn by yet another little thorn. They were countless, each one an individual prickle, but together an impassable wall. Not if I didn't want my heart to be shredded.

I took a shuddering sigh. *Not like there's much left at this point*, I thought grimly. My wolf stirred, whining softly; I couldn't determine what had distressed her — dredging up the memories, or the fact that I was trying to dispel them. If it was the latter...how the hell was I supposed to combat my wolf's feelings and my own at the same time? I didn't want to be stuck in this purgatory where I wasn't over Marnet forever.

I straightened my shoulders and settled my gaze back on Tala, who was still pacing, as if I'd been a very attentive audience this entire time. I cleared my throat softly, not wanting to startle the other she-wolf. "What's wrong?" I asked, tipping my head to one side.

Finally, Tala stopped pacing. She stood in the middle of the room for a moment, arms folded protectively over her chest before she strode over to where I sat on the bed. She folded herself delicately on the edge and reached forward, taking one of my battered hands in her own. I couldn't help but notice how soft her hands were — buttery soft, almost. *Would it be weird to ask her what kind of moisturizer she uses? Yeah, probably.*

"I'm supposed to collect information on Marnet by any means short of violence," Tala blurted out, interrupting my

awkward train of thought. I'd have been grateful, if not for the implications of the other she-wolf's directive.

I blinked once. "...what?" I hoped I hadn't heard her correctly.

Tala sighed, then glanced into a corner of the room like it held the answers to her internal strife. Though I was tempted to follow her dark blue gaze, I steadied my nerves and looked down at our hands instead. Tala had been the most reasonable Silverstreak wolf I'd come across so far, but I didn't want to trigger some sort of mood shift — or worse. I sat in silence, patient. At least I knew I was good at that.

"My alpha ordered me to get the information earlier this week," Tala finally said. I didn't look back up, but I could sense her studying me. "Which is stupid, because I'm not...I don't know, some sort of James Bond. Even if I do have the eyes."

I couldn't help a tiny chuckle at the weak attempt at humor. "You do," I agreed. "Accent's all wrong, though."

"Right?" I chanced a glance upwards and was rewarded with the sight of a tiny smile. Tala said, "I just... I'm a numbers kind of girl. Spreadsheets, bank rolls, mathematical proofs? Any of it — all of it — I'm your woman. But finding information?" She sighed and shook her head. "It's just...it's just not me. Besides, I think we could actually be friends, and some sort of half-hearted espionage would be a shit way to start that out, don't you think?"

I fought back the urge to frown, lifting my gaze to study the other woman's face. She certainly sounded earnest in her confession, and she *had* seemed pretty wound up since she'd knocked on my door this morning, but... *What if this is her play? What if she's trying to use some sort of reverse psychology on me? Reveal the plot, win my trust, and then get exactly what she was after in the first place.*

I swallowed, my throat suddenly feeling tight. It was clear to me that Tala was in distress, but the rest of it? She was really hard to read, now that I had settled into to an earnest

attempt. Even my wolf wasn't entirely sure what to make of the energy Tala was exuding. *Friend or foe?*

I extracted my hand from hers carefully. "Can you, uh, give me a moment? Please?" I asked. I unfolded my legs to slide off the bed. "I just need to freshen up. I'll be right back."

Tala's expression faltered as she pulled her hands back into her lap. "I... I really shouldn't let you," she admitted. She glanced away for a moment before looking back at me. Something unreadable flickered across those sapphire eyes, and then she stood, shaking her head. "You know what, maybe I'll do the same. I could use some air, too." She set a hand on one of my shoulders. "Whatever is going on, you should know: Marnet didn't — doesn't — deserve you, Luna. I mean that."

It felt like she had punched me in the gut. All the air rushed out of my lungs. I said nothing. She offered me a sad smile before walking past me for the door. It took several seconds after I heard the click of the door before I could suck in a breath, eyes stinging. *How could she possibly know that?*

I stood in the bedroom for several minutes, trying to remember how to breathe. *I should have paid more attention to that meditation app*, I thought dimly. There were tears welling up just behind my lashes and I did not want to cry. I would not cry. *I'm so damn tired of crying!*

Balancing on a fence between despair and exhaustion, I took another deep breath and pinched the bridge of my nose. The sensation was something else to focus on, and after a few more cycles of slow inhales and slower exhales, the feeling of paralysis starting to fade into the background. I finally uprooted myself from the floor, letting myself out of the bedroom to find the expansive guest bathroom again. The room they'd put me in was towards the far end of the hallway, and shared the bath with another guest room. The master suite was at my end. At the other was what I assumed was Kate Claw's room — or used to be her room, anyways, as it also had an ensuite just barely smaller than the master's — as well

as two other bedrooms and a second guest bathroom just as expansive as the one I stepped into.

I wonder if any of these rooms are Sophia's, I mused as I turned on the faucet. *I wonder which one would have been mi* — Scowling, I cut myself off before I could finish the thought. I cupped my palms beneath the flow to splash a bit of water in my face. The coolness was refreshing and I exhaled, splashing myself several more times before turning the faucet back off. I patted my skin dry with one of the fancy hand towels, then slowly looked at my reflection.

He doesn't deserve you, Tala had said. I ran my fingers through my dark brown hair. It was brushed out and silky again, but nothing that interesting. Defined cheekbones...but maybe almost too defined. Lynn always hissed that I should try to round out my features and warm up my face; my mother had had a slender face, too, more defined than it was circular. She had the same dark hair and pale complexion. She even had the same color eyes. I didn't...I didn't *want* to look like Lynn or my step-sisters. I didn't want to look like anyone but myself, not really.

Until a few days ago, I had thought Marnet had liked me just as I was, too.

I sighed and tucked a strand of hair behind my ear. My mother had been spectacular, and I was pretty enough — I wasn't so deluded as to insult what I'd inherited from her — but I certainly wasn't a supermodel like the blonde Barbie doll Marnet had revealed at the Moonmate ceremony.

That hadn't seemed to stop Remus, though. The cold water hadn't stopped him, either. Maybe it would be nice to—

Enough, I told myself firmly. I dried my hands roughly. I had no idea why we had given in to each other so quickly, but honestly, I didn't need to know. Entertaining those thoughts was only going to make my complicated situation even more tangled, and I couldn't deal with that right now. *What would Marnet think?*

Scowling, I shook myself internally. *Luna, why are you still thinking about him? Who cares what he thinks? He*

doesn't get a say anymore.

Determined not to dwell, I straightened the polo shirt Tala had pulled for me. I was grateful I didn't seem to be expected to wear a fancy dress every day; the cotton top and linen slacks were much more comfortable. I slipped out of the bathroom, about to pad back down the hall to my room when my eyes strayed to the end of the corridor. The master. *Marnet's room.* No, Marnet's former room. My heart shuddered again and it found another bramble.

How does he have so much power over me? This isn't fucking fair. I didn't want to feel a fresh wash of hurt every time I thought of the man. He had thrown me away like he hadn't felt a damn thing. It wasn't *fair* that he was still taking up space in my brain rent-free, especially not when my attempted evictions had no effect.

I didn't have to see him to know he wasn't suffering in the same way. If Marnet had felt that way, he wouldn't have humiliated me. He wouldn't have — he wouldn't have *hit* me.

A wave of determination I didn't recognize washed over me, and before I could talk myself out of it, my feet began to carry me towards the room. I rapped my knuckles against the wood softly; there was no sound of motion inside. *Remus must be out.*

Relieved, I pushed the door open and crept inside. I could smell Remus all over the room, but Marnet's scent still lingered, a fading undertone. My pulse began to quicken, so I glanced around the well-outfitted master to distract myself instead of chasing that fading scent. I had toured apartments smaller than this before deciding I couldn't afford to live in Oklahoma City, and they hadn't even been studios. *A man could live in here,* I marveled, almost forgetting why I had let myself into the room in the first place.

My wandering gaze fell on an austere desk, a small silver laptop shoved to one side. Remus must have found some of Marnet's things when he'd taken the mansion over. I hurried to the desk and pushed the computer open. My breath caught when I saw the username. *Marnet Claw.* Before I could think

better of what I was doing, the whirling blue circle faded away, revealing Marnet's desktop.

No password? I wondered for a moment, my brow furrowing. *Well...who would look at their alpha's computer? No one in their right mind.*

Yeah, that made sense. Or enough sense, anyways. *I don't feel like I'm in my right mind right now, anyways.* I couldn't stop myself. I didn't *want* to stop myself. Marnet still had several tabs open, and I began to click through them rapidly.

Excel spreadsheet. Pack finances. Holy shit, the wet bar cost how much—

I shook my head. I wasn't here to snoop on the inner workings of the Lupus Claw clan — or what was left of it. I grimaced and opened the next tab. Blank Word document. *Boring.* The third tab was just as uninformative, but when the fourth window opened, my heart launched itself into my throat. I almost choked on the sudden upwelling of emotion.

Photos. Dozens of photos. It looked like— Like some sort of vacation? Judging by the palm trees and colorful sunsets, they'd gone somewhere far nicer than Woodward County, Oklahoma. My eyes stung as I flicked through the album so rapidly I almost missed the date at the top of the window.

June 23, 2021

8:37 PM

Wasn't that the night we were supposed to see Lindsey Stirling in Oklahoma City? Yeah, it definitely was. I had been looking forward to that date for weeks; I'd even purchased a new dress for the outing. Marnet had said he had a last-minute business trip — something about getting a government contract for Claw & Co. Construction on the east side of the state, or something. He had told me it was too important to miss. That the company would be in the black for the entire year if he

could just seal this deal. I ate up that lie like he'd fed me chocolate cake on a silver platter.

I sucked in a sharp breath and willed the tears back down, closing the photo album. His notes tab sprung up from behind. Reading the first few lines, my heart dropped from my throat to the pit of my gut. My stomach churned angrily as I read over the list of names.

Briana Lee (Kitten)

Pam Whitewater (Princess)

Harmony Burns (Doll)

Yelana Rock (Not sure yet, keep working)

There were at least a dozen names and pet names on the list. Each had a few details next to them, phone numbers, and... links? My gut twisted and clenched as I hovered the cursor over the first name; I felt like an invisible python was winding itself around me, squeezing everything out of me. Out of breath. Out of tears. Out of good sense.

Click.

January 9, 2019

10:44 PM

Mercifully, the sound had been muted on Marnet's laptop, because the link opened to video. The scene was a little out of focus, like the camera had been set up ahead of time and hidden. It only took me a moment to realize why; the movement in the center of the screen was a pair of pale bodies writhing against one another. I didn't need to see their faces; the claw tattoo on the back of the man's shoulder gave him away. I'd traced those lines over Marnet's skin dozens of

times. The halo of brown hair beneath the woman's head didn't match whoever he'd brought to the ceremony.

How many women...?

I couldn't look at anymore. I didn't need to. I slammed the laptop shut, whirled around, and pressed my fingers into my eyes. Years. *Years*. Marnet had been up to this shit for fucking years, and I had been willing to believe he was worried, or busy, or— Or—

A feral noise ripped itself from my chest as I whipped back around and snatched the laptop off the desk. I flung it like a frisbee across the room, it hit the wall with a satisfying snap. The desk was too big to knock over, but the chair behind it wasn't; I flung it too, this time towards the built-in bookshelf. One shelf cracked and several books came tumbling down, and a cloud of dust drifted up from the heap.

I snorted. *Of course Marnet never read*. I didn't care. My horror had morphed, finally rekindling the little ember of rage Marnet had failed to stamp out when he'd abandoned me inside his barn. Anything I could grab with my two hands was seized, thrown, or knocked down. It was highly unlikely Marnet would make it back to his mansion, but I didn't care. The sound of things crashing to the floor was the only thing I could hear over the roar of my own pulse.

Unfortunately, the burst of energy didn't last forever. Everything but the furniture had been uprooted, and I didn't have the strength to tip the desk or move the solid wood bedframe. I sank down next to the headboard instead, finally noticing my fingers were trembling — no, not just my fingers. My hands. My arms.

Squeezing my eyes shut, I pressed my head against the wood. My heart sank to the floor. In the wake of my anger, the bramble of thorns still seemed to sit on top of my heart, prickling the tender muscle with every beat. Marnet didn't love me. Maybe he never loved me, not even at the start.

So why does this still hurt?

Chapter 22

Remus

C law Mansion
Woodward County, Oklahoma

9:55 a.m. Good. We'll arrive with plenty of time.

I pushed my sleeve back over my watch and was about to exit through the front door when a howl filtered through the mansion. A frown worked its way onto my face. I paused, turning where I stood to look back through the grand entryway. The sound of crashing replaced the lone cry and I sighed, immediately realizing where all the noise was coming from. *Luna's room?*

I'd seen Tala with her earlier — clearly, their conversation hadn't gone as my cousin had hoped. *Maybe I should check on her.* While I doubted the outburst was directed at Tala, it still concerned me to hear that much banging around. I knew Tala could take care of herself, and if she ever got herself in enough trouble that she no longer could, she wasn't too prideful to call for help. It was one of the traits I had liked the most about Tala; she was practical, and she never let ego get in the way of that.

I took two steps towards the stairs before looking back up, coming to a halt as I realized someone was standing there. My mother perched at the top of the flight, one delicate hand poised over the railing as she pinned me with her narrowed gaze. She was an excellent strategist; I knew she'd often had a seat at my father's table when he would call his most trusted

wolves together for meetings, be it about the pack or the company.

Hell, I often sought her council myself, especially in my first year as alpha. Fiona had never agreed with all my choices, but this? This was the first time she'd regarded me as if I were some sort of stranger, as if I were an imposter wearing Remus Silverstreak's skin. I wasn't too proud to admit I could use her council now. Luring Marnet back out was proving to be quite the puzzle, and my mother's insight into business matters rarely led me astray.

Surely, Fiona must know I still respected her, even if she didn't approve of the methods I chose to employ. Surely, she could not think so low of me, her own son. Her only child. I sighed, preparing to speak, but no words came to mind. As my jaw clicked back shut, I realized the thumping and crashing had stopped. Whatever was going on upstairs had ended, and either Tala had gotten Luna under control, or Luna had just calmed down from whatever had spun her up on the first place.

I checked my watch again.

10:01. Now I'm late.

Clearly that was my cue from the universe. I offered my mother a silent nod and turned, not waiting to see if she returned the gesture or continued her silent treatment. I shot off a quick text to Tala.

Quite the commotion up there. Can you check what's up with Luna?

I paused for a few moments after I hit send. The sudden silence upstairs was starting to concern me. Pocketing my phone, I turned around. Fiona was gone. I jogged up the stairs, striding quickly down the hallway once I reached the second floor. I paused outside of Luna's room and knocked briskly. "Luna?" I called when no one answered. I knocked again. Nothing. Not even the sound of someone moving.

I frowned and opened the door slowly before poking my head inside. The room was empty. My brows furrowed deeper as I retreated. I was about to head back to the front door when I heard a muffled noise further down the hall. The master suite. *My room?*

The back of my neck prickled as I prowled closer. Had someone snuck in to try to extract some misguided revenge? I braced myself, ready to pull my wolf to the surface at a moment's notice as I opened the door. The room was *trashed*. My muscles tensed as I swung around, looking for the intruder. But there was only Luna, curled up by the large desk at the far side of the room, arms wrapped around her legs as she pressed her forehead into her knees.

My wariness quickly morphed into concern. I rushed over, crouched down next to Luna, and I scanned her for any new injuries. "What happened?" I asked, lifting my nose to sniff the air. It didn't smell like a fight in here; there was no blood or adrenaline clouding the air. If a scuffle didn't hit this room, then a tornado must have.

Luna made a quiet noise and lifted her head just enough to peer over her arms at me. She mumbled something so softly I had to strain forward to hear. "Sorry, what?"

She sniffed and sat up a little straighter, wiping residual tears from her cheeks. "I said, I'm sorry about the room," she mumbled. Color began to return to her pale cheeks. She looked away, expression turning sheepish as she eyed the destruction. "I wanted to look at Marnet's things, and..." She trailed off.

"And?" I prompted, too curious to just let this go. After all, it wasn't *my* stuff Luna had destroyed. Technically, yes, it was mine *now*, but I'd only inherited it a few days ago. I had no attachment to any of it.

"Marnet had twelve different girlfriends while we were together," she confided, silver eyes searching my face. She seemed to be holding her breath, but when I didn't react, she kept speaking. "Twelve. Twelve! I feel like such an idiot. I

have no idea how I let him pull the wool over my eyes for so long.”

I frowned, my stomach feeling sour. Once, I’d considered Marnet to be a fun person to party with; I was starting to regret I had ever felt that way, even if I’d been younger then. More immature. “You aren’t an idiot,” I replied, not sure what else to say.

Luna scowled. The softness disappeared from her eyes. “Aren’t I? I should have realized he wasn’t planning a grand gesture for mateship. Or that he wasn’t shy, or that it wasn’t his father holding him back, or that Claw & Co. didn’t actually need *that* much of his time, or...or something!”

“He was really your mate?” I asked. At the party, I had thought she’d been delusional, but I couldn’t think of another reason for Luna to bring up something that could be that humiliating otherwise.

“Yes,” she snapped, her jaw working before she spoke again. “Yes. He really was. I really believed in the power of a mate bond. I didn’t even realize he had started drifting away. I was...I don’t know. Blinded by the idea of love.”

Huh. I had told my mother those tales of fated bonds were dangerous, and here was proof. *If only she knew.*

When my silence stretched on for too long, Luna glanced back over at me. “I have no idea why I’m telling you this.” She rested her chin back against her arms. “You probably think I’m crazy.”

I shrugged my shoulders. “I thought you didn’t care what I thought.”

Her cheeks turned a little pink. “I don’t,” she replied, barely able to keep her gaze on me. “Everyone already thinks that, anyways.”

“I don’t think you’re crazy. When my father d...” I stopped and shook my head. My mother’s grief when my father died was her private business, and I’d known Luna for less than a week. It wasn’t my place to share that. “I don’t

have first-hand experience with a fated bond,” I said instead. “But I know wolves who’ve lost their mates.”

Her expression softened a little. Thankfully, she didn’t pry about my near slip-up. “I wish I could just...move on,” she said instead.

“Why don’t you?”

Luna scoffed. “If I knew how, don’t you think I would have?” Her shoulders relaxed after another moment. “Sorry, I just... I was in love with him. Or the person I thought he was, anyways. And I know what happened, but it still hurts when I think about him, even if I don’t want it to.”

“I think that’s grief,” I blurted out, surprising myself. “I think that’s grief, Luna.”

She eyed me suspiciously. “But he isn’t dead.”

I shrugged. “You just said it yourself. You were in love with the man you thought he was, but that man wasn’t real. That’s sort of like a death, isn’t it? The death of an idea.”

Again, my mother came to mind, but I said nothing. Luna just watched me, an unreadable expression on her face. I opened my mouth to say something else, but my phone started to buzz in my pocket.

“Shit,” I cursed, fishing it out of my pocket. “I was supposed to be meeting Bane,” I said, already getting to my feet. “Are you going to be okay?”

To my surprise, Luna nodded. “Yeah. Yeah, I think I am.”

Bane met me down by the car. I didn’t like traveling in anything but a Silverstreak vehicle, but we hadn’t had the time or the means to get a few cars over to Marnet’s mansion. Low priority, really. Marnet also didn’t happen to own any of the luxury vehicles, but that didn’t surprise me. My beta had chosen a handsome gray Range Rover from the four-car garage, and I took a moment to give the SUV a once-over before opening the door and stepping inside.

The gravel driveway crunched beneath the wheels as I settled in my seat, clicking the belt. “Not bad,” I sniffed, barely masking my smile.

Bane snorted, opening the engine up the moment we hit the paved road. “Totally decked out. It’s barely been driven. Had the least miles on it. Also, the interior stank the least like Marnet.”

I couldn’t decide if I wanted to smirk or grimace; it didn’t take a genius to figure out what a womanizer like Claw did in the back seat of fancy car. Everyone knew a handsome vehicle was a great way to impress a date. “Good call.” I settled back into the seat. The fields raced by as we sped towards Oklahoma City. My eyes flicked over to the dash and I scowled at the time.

How had only eleven minutes passed?

I closed my eyes; I was not going to watch the minutes tick by on this entire drive. I hadn’t done something that juvenile since I was ten years old, at most. The memory made the corner of my mouth tick up. It had felt like it had taken days to drive from Austin to Ouachita National Forest up in Arkansas, even if the reality had been something closer to nine hours — but that had been the first time my father had taken me on any sort of trip on our own. Not a family outing, but something strictly about us.

That’s where I had met Seff, too. We had spent days in the national forest; it became something of a tradition after that. We spent a little longer each year, as I was a little older every time, and a little closer to inheriting the Silverstreak Pack as its next alpha. By the time I was eighteen, we’d spend just shy of a month in those woods, camping and living in our wolf forms for days. I had looked forward to those trips when I was younger. Now, I fucking longed for them. *What would Dad say about this entire situation?*

I stretched my legs out in front of me, enjoying the warmth of the flickering fire. After four days roaming the woods covered in fur, it was nice to enjoy the comforts of humanity again. It

was impossible to take your thumbs for granted after going for so long without them. I chuckled at my own joke and glanced over at my father; he was fiddling with something on the other side of the flames. His brows were furrowed together as he worked.

Odd, I thought. He usually enjoyed our runs — or at the very least, he'd told me he did. Said he always felt refreshed and ready for the incoming autumn after our yearly summer trip. "What's up, Dad?" I prompted, pulling my knees up a bit to lean forward.

My father glanced up, messy brown hair falling in his face. There was some serious beardage happening after three weeks in the woods; we were definitely going to have to make a pit stop at some place with running water before we got home. There was no way Mom would tolerate Dad's face like that.

"You're going to turn eighteen later this year," my father said.

I grinned toothily. "Yup." There was a party being planned; my mother was terrible at surprises. "If you need ideas for gifts—" The flat look my father gave me cut me off, my mouth hanging open for a moment. I shook my head, clearing my throat.

My father sighed and finally put his whittling project down next to him. "I was going to say you're about to become a young man, but..." He trailed off, narrowing his eyes.

Sensing it was wiser not to argue the point, I just tipped my head to one side and waited. My father wasn't a man known for his patience — that was definitely my mother's virtue. It only took a few moments for him to speak back up. "Well, I guess the key word there is young, isn't it? Can't expect you to change overnight." My shoulders relaxed a little and I leaned back against the log behind me. My father was clearly in the mood to talk. I wasn't sure what had inspired him. Maybe he thought I wouldn't want to listen anymore once I turned eighteen? While it was the age of majority, it was hardly a magic number.

Still, if he wanted to talk, I didn't mind listening.

“Do you know how long the Silverstreak family has been in Texas?” he asked.

“You’re the fourth generation,” I answered, not missing the brief flash of approval on the man’s face. “I’m the fifth. Before then, the Silverstreaks were in Minnesota. Often high-ranking members of the Whispering Timber Pack, if not the betas.”

“Good boy,” my father huffed, almost amused by my recitation. “Sometimes I wonder if you actually listen to me.”

“I can retain things, you know,” I replied, arching a brow.

“I know,” he replied, mirroring my expression. “Which is why your grades last year were so disappointing.”

“I got two Bs. Two! Is that really that bad?”

My father shook his head and held out his palms. “Remus, I am not trying to start a fight with you,” he said. “Simply making an observation. It’s not like you’ll have any trouble in getting into the university of your choice.” The platitude was enough to keep my hackles from bristling any further and I settled, inclining my head as I waited for him to speak.

“When we get home, I’d like to show you the family records. Our family has been in North America for a long time, but we certainly weren’t among the first werewolves to travel here. The fear of wolves came with the colonists from Europe; they thought, of course, they could leave the witches and the shifters behind in the land they’d already...well. You know how humans feel about their ‘space.’”

He fixed me with a knowing look and I snorted. I was pretty confident he was never going to let me forget the time we were on vacation in the country and I had shifted in the moonlight to go galloping through the neighboring fields. The neighboring fields, I hadn’t realized in all my eleven-year-old wisdom, were cow pastures. The neighbor was a rancher of the strictly human variety. One mighty crack! from his double-barrel shotgun and I had gone racing home with my tail between my legs.

“You’d think,” I said, “they’d eventually figure out that if they stopped shooting at everything that gave them a spook, all those things would stop fighting back.”

My father shrugged. “You would think.”

According to my father, it had been up to the shifters to prevent an all-out war with the humans. As long as the wolves retaliated, the humans would keep hunting for them. They’d even flipped a few witches to hunt werewolves a few centuries ago. Becoming a hunter was better than being the hunted, and a witch would rather eliminate werewolves than be burned at the stake.

Wolf populations had been decimated in Europe, and most of those had just been wolves — innocent, normal wolves. Those in North America had almost met the same fate. The thought made me bristle and I had to inhale, force myself to calm back down. “So, are we having a history lesson or what, old man?”

My father gave me a dry look. “Well, I thought I was trying to remind you to keep your hubris in check, stay vigilant and always have a plan, lest you find yourself at the wrong end of a witch’s rifle, but I can see I have no such need to remind you of such.” He lapsed into a silence that only lasted three seconds before he snorted, shaking his head. “Remus, you are so much like your uncle, it hurts sometimes.”

I flashed him a winning grin. “Which means I’m like Granddad, which means I’m also like you.”

My father wouldn’t admit as much, but that didn’t mean Mom hadn’t shared a few stories with me. If he was considered impatient now, he was downright impulsive in his youth.

Though he arched a brow, he couldn’t stifle his grin. “So it would seem.”

“No worries, old man. I’ll be the best alpha Silverstreak Clan has had yet.”

My father studied me for a long moment, and for a heartbeat, I was afraid I’d read the situation wrong. That I’d gone too far. But then he grinned, that real grin, just a hint of

teeth and a glimmer in his dark eyes, and he gave a single nod of his chin. "That's the idea, Remy. That's the idea."

The car slowed to a stop and the lurch made my head bob, stirring me from my reverie. *Wonder what the old man would say now*, I thought to myself, stretching out my limbs before unbuckling and stepping out of the car. Bane joined me on the passenger's side, wisely keeping any thoughts to himself.

We were just outside of the warehouse; though I couldn't see my guards, one sniff told me they were still present. My beta fell into step behind me as we opened the door. Any murmurs fell to a hush. *Good.*

I addressed the small crowd. "Your alpha still has not made himself known. The Oklahoma territory is officially under the Silverstreak pack's rule."

Soft gasps and whispers rippled around the former Lupus Claw pack members. "Wilson Slate, come forward," I rumbled, bracing myself to summon my alpha forward if needed. No such thing was required, however; the tall man in question stepped forward. His dirty blond hair was greasy, and he looked like he was still wearing the same outfit he'd donned at the Moonmate ceremony. There was a bruise on one side of his neck and he was limping, but Marnet's beta was otherwise unharmed. "Have you given any thought to my offer?" I asked him, lifting one brow.

The man folded both arms over his chest, mouth set in a straight line. "The answer's still no," he muttered, shaking his head.

I could respect that. There wouldn't be much to say about a beta who would sell his alpha out while he was still alive. Of course, I wanted Marnet's location, and I'd pay handsomely for it if I needed to, but I still wouldn't respect the man afterwards. I simply tipped my head to the side. "Very well," I murmured to him, then raised my voice to continue. "Then you are banished from all lands under the Silverstreak rule," I announced. "You have twenty-four hours to get whatever you need and get out."

Wilson's shoulders slumped slightly, but he began to limp towards the exit. One guard moved to open the door, but the ex-beta paused, turning. A low growl rumbled deep in his chest. I stood up straighter, baring my teeth with an echoing snarl. Wilson seemed to consider his odds for three seconds and then he turned, lurching out the door and out of sight.

I snorted.

"Coward!" someone behind me shouted.

"Come back and fight!" a different voice yelled.

There were several other murmurs in that vein, varying in their vigor and vehemence. I turned back to the remaining high-ranking members of the former Lupus Claw pack. This was my opportunity—this was how the clan would be dissolved. I took another step into the room. "You deserve better leadership than a cowardly beta and a weak-willed alpha," I told them, addressing them like I might address a future investor. I wasn't here to antagonize; I didn't need them to even like me. I only needed them to trust me more than they trusted any alternative option.

"In his single year as alpha, Marnet Claw was running this pack towards financial ruin. He was courting several females, telling each one they were his mate; he didn't even have the good sense to manage his own issues before hosting a Moonmate ceremony — a very extravagant Moonmate ceremony, I might add. Who do you think was paying for that?"

I paused for effect, allowing a few murmurs and dark looks. Shifters glanced back and forth at one another before I continued. "Several of your packmates have already pledged their loyalty to me and the Silverstreak clan. Anyone who does not join in a timely fashion will become a lone wolf."

It was not a fate anyone would enjoy. I didn't have to wait long. Two women stepped forward from the group, introducing themselves as former guardians of pack history.

"Marnet is nothing like his father," the first one sighed sadly, shaking her head. "I was hoping he might mature a bit,

but...” She trailed off. There was nothing else to say. After a moment, she leaned over and nudged her friend’s elbow.

The older woman sighed and nodded her head. “Yes, I think we’ve held out long enough.”

They exchanged a look; I could sense Bane’s growing impatience behind me, but I allowed the women their moment. It could not be easy, especially given they’d been pledged to Noah before pledging to his son. I had nothing against the Lupus Claw wolves themselves — I was impressed, too, that the women had enough loyalty to try to wait Marnet out. But the time had come. They were wise enough to see that.

Once their moment was over, they both nodded to me, and then knelt down. I sighed and closed my eyes; only an alpha would understand this moment. Every pack wolf knew what it was to bond, but only their alpha felt the crackle of energy as a subtle power shift occurred. One wolf didn’t cause much of a change, but they added up quickly. Two became twelve. Twelve became a few dozen. Once you were into the hundreds, well... If Marnet hadn’t been such a coward, he might have found out what that sort of power felt like.

I had almost been looking forward to fighting him.

Ah, well.

After the first two, several more stepped forward, until only a quarter remained as holdouts. Among them, I noticed, were the couple who had tried to pull Luna away before Marnet had hurt her. There was a man I recognized as Noah’s former financial officer, and, ah, yes. *Sophia*. I barely contained my grimace, wondering if it had been the right choice to contain her with the others. “I will never bow to you,” she snapped.

This time I didn’t contain myself, rolling my eyes. “Then you can remain imprisoned.” *Sophia* was one wolf I wouldn’t miss.

I turned to the guards. “Take them to a secure location. There are few enough of them that such a large building is no longer necessary.”

Then I turned to Bane. “You know what to do.”

Sophia was still cursing something behind me, but it didn't matter. It was only a matter of time. She would see that I was merciful and patient, or she wouldn't.

Chapter 23

Luna

Oklahoma City
Oklahoma County, Oklahoma

Tala had been the one to find me in the master bedroom after Remus left. That was probably for the best, considering that Remus was the one who'd been staying there. At least the computer hadn't been his. Tala said she would have someone come up and straighten everything else out while we got ready to head out. On some level, I felt like I should have cleaned it up myself, given that I was the one who had made such a gigantic mess, but Tala was hard to argue with. Tala was *really* hard to argue with.

At least it was quite clear why she worked so well with Remus.

Once we arrived in Oklahoma City, Tala insisted we walk. "I want to get to know this city, especially since Remus will need to spend time here now — and if he doesn't feel like it, he'll be sending me or Bane. Which means he'll be sending me," she said, huffing a soft laugh.

I didn't know what to make of that information, so I shrugged. "I don't come to Oklahoma City that often," I told her as she dragged me down the first street.

"Seriously?" Tala asked. "It's only like...an hour and a half away. Two hours if you hit traffic."

I shrugged. “Never had my own car.” There had been a plan, once The car my mother and I were going to fix together — No. I was not going to reminisce about my mom now. Especially in front of a...well. What was Tala, anyways? I wasn’t sure I could call her a friend, not yet. She wasn’t a stranger. Acquaintance? That didn’t sound very nice, though.

Tala opened her mouth, and I would have bet five dollars she was about to ask me ‘seriously?’ again. I raised a brow and she just shrugged, then wrapped her fingers around my wrist to lead me further down the road. Though I felt a bit reluctant, we had driven all the way here. It seemed a waste to turn around and just go right back to Woodward.

“C’mon,” Tala said. “It’s been ages since I’ve had a day off, even back in Austin. And walking around in your human form will be good for you. We don’t even have heels on today.”

She winked and it made me wonder if she actually wore heels every day.

Plenty of regular humans milled the streets. I realized it must be the weekend by now — that, or a holiday. But I hadn’t been out so long that Labor Day would have crept up on us, so. No. Weekend.

Folks ambled past us, chatting. Couples held hands. Children raced ahead of parents, smashing their faces against glass windows while pointing at toys inside. I chewed the inside of my lower lip. The day was lovely, not too humid, and a few stray clouds kept the sun from heating everything up too much. Ladies swished by in airy sundresses and men sported polos and tees. Despite the nice weather, something still felt... off. I couldn’t quite put my finger on it.

“Luna?”

I blinked and glanced up, not realizing I had stopped. Tala hurried back over, grabbing one of my arms. “Are you o— Oh! This store is so *cute!*” She slipped away almost as quickly as she had paced over, then stepped closer to the store’s display. “Do you want to go inside? I’ve been looking for a white cotton dress for months, and I’ve never actually been

able to find one that isn't either a sheet, or so fancy it could double as a wedding dress.”

I could feel myself starting to freeze up. *What are we doing? I know Tala said she wanted to be friends, but...*

“Sure, let's go inside,” I said tentatively. I *had* to stop doubting myself, or I was never going to get out of this mess. “I think I saw online that this store was new. They posted a pair of sandals I thought were cute,” I added, offering a tentative smile.

It must have been the right thing to say, because Tala beamed. “Great! I promise, retail therapy helps a lot of ills. I would know.”

Before I could ask what *that* meant, Tala pushed the door and stepped inside, the bell chiming merrily overhead.

I didn't end up getting the sandals. They were cute, and the boutique even had my size, but I really didn't have the money for it right now. More importantly, I still hadn't decided if I was going to help Remus and rat Marnet out — if I decided against the alpha's offer, I was going to need every last dollar to my name. You didn't need to be a genius to figure Remus was not the sort of man who took rejection lightly, especially if it meant it was going to be that much more difficult for him to obtain his goal.

I wasn't going to go running to Marnet, either. It had nothing to do with the fact that it would have been easy for Remus to track me. Even if I didn't want to betray my mate — no, my *former* mate— I didn't want to go running to him, either. There was no guarantee he wouldn't finish the job he started. While I had no idea what I wanted right now, I knew at least one thing. I didn't want to fucking *die*, and I wasn't going to get killed over one man's pride.

If he didn't want to lose his pack, he should have thought about that before he decided to sleep with half the women in Oklahoma behind my back.

My wolf stirred and I tensed, half-expecting her to protest my newfound conviction. To my surprise, she did not; she laid her ears back and whined. The pain whistled through me like wind through a wintertime forest, whipping through bare trees and rustling fallen leaves. My heart throbbed. My breath caught as one of those thorns pricked me again, a swell of sadness threatening to blossom into something so much more.

When is this going to stop hurting? I thought, feeling almost crazy for it. No matter how *I* felt, the photos and videos and lists I'd found on Marnet's laptop made it quite obvious he did not feel the same. I was grieving something that hadn't even existed outside of my own mind.

Still, it felt a little better to have a name for it. I hadn't expected Remus to be insightful at all, but I was starting to realize he might have been right.

The thought hit me like a freight train. *I was grieving.* In the moment, it didn't matter if the man in question was worth my bereavement or not. No wonder memories of my mother kept cropping up. I forced myself to suck in a breath, that hot flicker of anger burning in the midst of my sorrow. Marnet Claw and Josephine Ulfric did *not* belong in the same category. I'd thought Marnet might change my life, but my mother actually *did*.

Before I could settle into a proper bout of indignation, Tala grabbed my arm, nearly jerking me sideways. "Look! A bakery. This will help your mood. Low blood sugar always makes me moody," she chirped, not bothering to wait for me to agree.

"We had breakfast a few hours ago," I protested, but the words were lost in the general bustle of the small store. It was homey with several small tables near the window, and two large glass cases full of baked goods. The air smelled amazing, yeasty and toasty. There was something familiar about it. I didn't notice the woman standing at the counter until she called us up next.

Ava Redwood.

My heart ricocheted into my throat before dropping into my gut with a heavy plunk as I recognized my stepmother's friend. *That's why this place smelled so familiar*, I realized grimly. One of Ava's younger daughters was clearing tables, and there were a few wolves huddled together in the far corner of the store, whispering fiercely to one another. *Shit. They definitely recognize me.* Strands of anxiety crawled across my skin like spiderwebs as I reached forward to grab Tala's arm. "I think we should leave," I hissed, trying very hard not to look like I was staring at the Hispanic woman directing customers. "Tala—"

"This will only take a moment, promise." She stepped forward as Ava called us forward. My sense of dread coiled tighter in my stomach as recognition flashed across Ava's dark eyes, her smile becoming much more 'how can I help you get the hell out of my store' instead of the warmth she showed her last customer. I swallowed uncomfortably, making some lame excuse about needing air as Tala ordered. If she recognized the tension or smelled the undercurrent of adrenaline suddenly coursing through the bakery, she showed no sign of it.

Her obliviousness, faked or not, made my skin crawl. As I weaved through a few other customers back toward the door, I accidentally clipped someone's shoulder. "Sorry," I stammered as I stumbled back. "I didn't see you th—"

The man scowled, pressed two outstretched fingers into my shoulder, and gave me another little shove. He looked familiar, though I couldn't place his face. He smelled like Lupus Claw — or, well, sort of. His scent was heavy, laid over with adrenaline overdrive and the earthy scent of...of Remus. *Had he pledged?* "You should be sorry, traitor," he hissed as he leaned in, his upper lip trembling in anger.

Oh, no. There were several humans in here, and some of them were starting to pick on up the weird vibes. My gaze flickered back to the door before settling back on the man. "Sorry," I said again, not sure what else I could say. I hadn't even pledged to Remus and the Silverstreak pack yet. Unless this guy was at the Moonmate ceremony and saw my outburst?

But how could that be construed as betraying Marnet? If anything...

I shook my head, not willing to take a deep dive into how that might have looked. I cleared my throat and straightened up. “I’m sorry I bumped into you, sir, but I’m not...” *Not what? Not a traitor? Not a member of the Silverstreak Clan? Not working with Remus? Not Marnet’s mate?*

“There you are!” Tala chirped and grabbed my shoulders in a one-armed hug. A small paper bag slapped against my upper arm; Ava must have served her as quickly as possible to get her out. Tala smiled at the man blocking my way before steering us both around him and out the door.

I glanced over my shoulder, but no one followed us. *What was that all about?* I squirmed out of Tala’s hold. I shot the woman a sideways look, trying to keep my face neutral. Even if no one had tailed us out to the sidewalk, I could still sense wolves watching. *What if this is Tala’s goal? She can’t do spy stuff, or whatever, so she’s— What, alienating me from my packmates? Making herself the best option? Does it look like we’re friends? Do they think we’re friends — wait, does Tala think we’re friends?*

The thought made me bristle with confusion, mouth turning downwards as we walked. Tala opened the paper bag and pulled out a plump blueberry muffin, thrusting it into my hands. *It was still warm — it smelled so good. Ava’s coffeecakes were always so good on Sund— No! Luna, do not let her win you over with treats like some kind of house pet.*

“What’s this for?” I asked stiffly, eyeing the muffin. My mouth watered slightly, and I hated myself for it.

Tala snorted and rolled her eyes. “To eat? You said you weren’t that hungry, so I got something snack-sized.” She raised a brow. “Seriously, I think your blood sugar might be dropping or something, Luna. You’re not usually like this, you’re being kind of cranky.”

The statement rankled me. *How do you know what I’m usually like?* I thought sourly, picking at the muffin’s wrapper.

My stomach growled. *She might have a point about the blood sugar, though.*

We rounded a corner. I was about to ask Tala if she had known that bakery when a large warehouse caught my eye. I frowned. *Why are we in the industrial district? I thought Tala wanted to—*

“Dad!?”

The muffin fell from my hand as I raced forward, eyes wide as I recognized one of the people being led out of the warehouse. As I got closer, I saw Lynn was with him, as well as a few other Lupus Claw officials. “Dad! Dad, what’s going on?”

One of the guards gave me a dubious look. He held out a hand to stop me before I reached my father. Dad gave me an unreadable look, his face drawn. *Did he already have that many wrinkles?* Even if the Silverstreak shifter hadn’t stopped me, the way my father looked would have stopped me dead in my tracks. He looked... He looked like he had aged ten years in the past week, shoulders hunched and mouth drawn.

I glanced around frantically, trying to figure out what on earth was going on. “Where are you taking him?” I asked the guard. He stared straight through me. The shifter was clearly well trained. I hissed through my teeth and looked back to my father, trying to reach for him again. “Dad? Dad, talk to me, please.”

Before the guard could react, a smaller hand darted forward like a viper, slapping me away. I recoiled as if I had been bitten, the back of my neck prickling. I’d know the scent of blood orange and fabric softener anywhere; my father’s wife had always smelled a bit bitter to me. Artificial.

“You have some nerve, showing up here,” Lynn seethed, stepping between me and my father. The guard standing next to them eyed her over his shoulder, but didn’t move. I was only vaguely aware that few of the other guards had paused in what they were doing, on alert for the possibility of a

commotion. “Any remaining Lupus Claw wolves should have run you right out of the state — no, out of the United States — for what you’ve done, you traitorous whelp!”

My stepmother and I hardly had a warm and fuzzy relationship, but the accusations still caught me off guard. I took a step back. “What are you talking about?” I asked, trying to look to my father for some sort of explanation.

Lynn made sure to insert herself, blocking my view with her obnoxious blonde updo. (Honestly, I was amazed her hair was still pinned up, but that was Lynn. She probably kept her hair up with the power of sheer spite.) “Don’t play coy now,” she snapped, pointing a narrow finger at me. “Not after that display. What did the Silverstreak boy give you to put on that performance, hm? What did he promise you? You were so pathetic, you almost had me convinced — he must have offered you something good.”

Her allegations were so wild, they left me speechless, my jaw hanging open. *My performance!?* I thought, head spinning. *Did she— Did she really think I was faking that?* Everything about that night was terrible — it easily the second worst day of my life. If someone had paid me to make a distraction, I definitely wouldn’t have come up with something that *awful*.

My wolf stirred from her listlessness, the fur along her spine starting to prickle. “What the hell are you talking about?” I repeated, temporarily forgetting who I was talking to. “No one paid me anything! How the hell would anyone in Silverstreak even know anything about me?” I demanded. The insinuation was so absurd, it was bordering on insane.

Lynn sniffed, lips twisting into an ugly sneer. “Of course they didn’t pay you. You were probably just some easy slut, like your mother.”

“Don’t you talk about my mother like that,” I snapped. My cheeks felt hot. “My mother has *nothing* to do with this. I would never betray my pack like that, Lynn.” It was only my sense of self-preservation that kept me from pointing a finger right back at my stepmother.

“Which pack?” Lynn snarled, edging forward.

Which pack? I gave the woman an incredulous look. It would be easy to write her off as nonsensical (or just outright cruel), but it didn’t make sense for her to keep spouting off random insults pulled from thin air. “Lupus Claw, obviously,” I said through gritted teeth. “Who else?”

“*Who else?*” Lynn parroted back in a high-pitched, mocking tone. She pointed that finger again, this time jabbing me with a manicured nail. “Those little Silverstreak shits. The apple really doesn’t fall far from the tree, does it? You are just like your whore of a mother — can’t see when you aren’t wanted. When you aren’t even useful!” Lynn’s tone pitched higher as she spoke; there was a wildness in her eyes I hadn’t seen before. For a moment, I was afraid she might shift. “I should have killed you when I had the chance!” she snarled, then lunged forward with an open palm.

Killed me? Despite the threat, her words left me frozen.

Before Lynn could make contact, someone else grabbed her by the wrist, jerking her back to stand next to my father. I swallowed hard, glancing at the guard, but the burly man was busy keeping my father in place. I looked back to my left and my gaze was met by warm, hazel eyes. My heart lurched from my gut back into my throat. I tried to swallow it back down to where it belonged, but the lump remained wedged against my trachea as I stared into that arresting gaze.

Oh.

Chapter 24

Remus

Oklahoma City
Oklahoma County, Oklahoma

A second guard hurried over quickly. Lynn Highborn only glowered at me once I released her arm. I narrowed my eyes at her before nodding to Bane. “Make sure they get where they’re going,” I muttered to my beta. He nodded before turning to the most senior guard, quickly disseminating directions.

“Where are you sending them?”

Luna’s voice was so quiet I almost didn’t hear her. I blinked, turning back to face her. The steel had melted from her spine. Her shoulders drooped as she watched Bane escort the Lupus Claw holdouts towards the Range Rover. *That woman just tried to hit her*, I thought, my brows furrowing further. *And her father didn’t even speak up. Not a word. How could she—?*

I cut off the internal monologue before I could get myself riled up any further. Reading people was part of running a successful business, especially when that business was selling luxury cars to luxurious individuals. Anger wasn’t going to do anyone a lick of good right now.

“They’re going to be held until they make the right choice,” I said. Luna looked despondent. It still baffled me that she could look so crushed when those people had treated her

so poorly — family or not. Given the way Lynn spoke to Luna, I was fairly certain they weren't blood related at all. "You still have to make a choice too, Luna."

She seemed to miss the second half entirely, pink tongue flashing out over her chapped lips. "Don't hurt them. Please." She lifted her chin, but she wouldn't quite meet my gaze. "I realize they aren't..." She trailed off, gaze shifting back to the Range Rover as it pulled away. Perhaps she rethought what she was about to label them. Her posture exuded defeat and exhaustion, but there was hurt and confusion in her voice. Realization, perhaps. "Please don't hurt them."

I exhaled cautiously, careful not to frown. "I don't hurt anyone for the hell of it, Luna," I said. She finally looked up at me, searching my face. "I promise. They are not going to be harmed. They're being held so they can't assist Marnet in any way."

She paused, opening and closing her mouth. Finally, she seemed to form her question in her mind. "What if they don't submit to you?" she asked quietly. "What then?"

I shrugged. It was perfectly possible. No one had a 100 percent success rate, not even me. A few wolves were going to run instead of submit, and a few more were going to try outright defiance in some misguided hope that their former alpha would swoop in at the last moment to assert their rightness in defending him. "Then they'll be cast out and they will have to leave my territory."

"Okay," Luna whispered. "Okay." She took a deep breath and nodded, more to herself than to me. "I...I need to get back home. My half-brothers..." She trailed off again, looking over her shoulder.

I followed her gaze, finally noting Tala was still there, hanging back and clearly pretending to be busy on her phone. "Your m— Your stepmother put your sisters in charge of them on the first night," I informed Luna.

Her silver eyes flickered upwards, her surprise unmasked. "She did? How? How do you even know that?"

I fought the urge to scoff. “Because when she indicated she had children at home, I allowed her to make a phone call. I’m not a monster, Luna. I wouldn’t let children be left alone in a home unattended.”

She paused, slightly taken aback. “Well...thank you. I really should get back, though. My step-sisters aren’t exactly...maternal.” Her lips twisted into something halfway between a grimace and a frown.

“I’ll take you back to your home,” I told Luna, finally reaching up to touch her elbow. She started — but this time, she didn’t pull away.

Her brows knit together. “Don’t you have things to do? I —”

“You don’t have a car,” I pointed out.

Luna frowned, glancing back at Tala. “Maybe Tala will drive me back,” she suggested.

Tala looked up. “I’d love to, but I have a phone call to take,” Tala replied, checking her watch, “in ten minutes. Sorry, Luna — I’d almost forgotten with all the chaos of the week. It’s business.”

Luna’s frown deepened as she looked back at me. “Shouldn’t you be on the call too, then?” she asked.

I shrugged one shoulder. “It’s a financial meeting. I let Tala handle them unless she specifically requests my presence, which...” I paused long enough to pull out my smartphone to check it. “...she did not. So, I expect she will send me a summary when she is done.” My phone still in my hand, I looked back at Luna. “Let me escort you back home, Luna.”

“You really don’t need to.”

I sighed. “I insist. You’re not going anywhere alone.”

“Because you don’t trust me?”

Where are all these questions coming from? “Because you were barely able to get out of bed yesterday, and you don’t have a car.” When she kept staring me down, I scowled and held up both my hands. “What? Is it so hard to believe I don’t

want you passing out in a stranger's car? Would you stop arguing with me if I just pretended to be your jailer instead?"

Luna considered me for a moment longer. "That's not what I meant," she said. "But I could use a ride, I guess, so, thank you. Where did you park?"

I snorted, already opening an app on my phone. "My beta has it. We'll get a ride."

Luna stared at me for a moment. "Are you serious? That's going to be, like, hundreds of dollars, Remus. I can't let you do that, I'll wait for Tala."

"Already ordered." I pocketed my phone, then pressed a hand to the small of Luna's back to start steering her towards the road where we would meet our ride. "It's really not an issue."

She shot me a suspicious glance over her shoulder. "I can't afford to pay you back," she stated plainly.

"I didn't offer to give you a ride so I could make you pay be back." *What kind of man would do that? Well, Marnet, perhaps.* "I offered to give you a ride home because you needed a ride home, and I'm at least partially responsible for the reason you can't use the ride you took out here." Before she could argue, I held up one finger. "Tala is my employee, after all."

The corner of Luna's mouth lifted at that. Finally, she nodded. "All right. It is a *little bit* your fault," she agreed. "Fine. You can give me a ride."

Despite myself, I smiled.

The ride back to Woodward County felt like it took even longer than the initial drive to Oklahoma City. An anxious silence had settled over us like a blanket. Thankfully, the driver had the good sense to keep to himself once he greeted us, but it did little to ease the way Luna worried her hands and picked at her linen pants as the car cruised down the highway.

I knew she must be worried about her siblings — or step- and half-siblings, I guessed — but it weighed on me anyways.

Enough so that it was positively a relief when the car pulled up in front of a large ranch home, extended around the driveway in an L-shape. Luna all but threw herself out of the car, the door slamming behind her. I sighed, thanked the driver, then followed her out. As the dark Kia pulled away, I paused long enough to make sure to add a generous tip. Drivers who respected my silence were always my favorite types.

I pocketed my phone and hurried after Luna, letting myself in through the front door. In the sixty seconds it had taken for me to take care of the car, the home had already erupted into chaos. One of Luna's step-sisters was perched in a doorway, shrieking something I couldn't even make out. The pitch made my ears ring. I ducked my head, barely noticing the other woman, hanging back and scowling fiercely at Luna.

Luna simply sighed, waving a hand in my direction. I think she got two whole syllables out before the older girl detached herself from the doorway and stormed over to me. For a moment, she looked just like Lynn, pointing a trembling finger at me. "You!" she snarled. I could sense her wolf just below the surface and my own stirred, the skin on the back of my neck starting to prickle. "You are **not** welcome in this home!"

The second woman finally moved, holding her elbows as she glowered. "She's right. We aren't Silverstreak wolves, and we don't plan to be."

The gentle prickle of anger was quickly becoming something much harder to ignore. My nostrils flared as I stood up straighter, about to address the clear disrespect when the front door slammed open. Two blurs racing through the foyer. One yelped, but both boys ended up behind their sisters, peering around their torsos.

Pinching the bridge of my nose, I forced myself to inhale deeply. "I suggest," I growled, looking from one of Lynn's daughters to the other, "that you take some care with how you address an alpha." I offered a wolfish smile. If my vision

flashed red for just a moment, I pretended not to notice. “You’re adults. So, unless you want to join your parents instead of stay at your home, you may want to reconsider.”

“The boys?” the older one asked, pointing at the twins like I couldn’t see them.

“They have another sister,” I replied blithely. “And if all else fails, there are other options. There are plenty of responsible adults I am sure would look after a packmate’s children. But as I would rather not be responsible for splitting up families, I’d prefer to leave that as a last resort.”

After a few moments of silence, the older woman finally dropped her gaze. She turned around. “Nyx, Nox, c’mon. Let’s go to your room.” The boys didn’t argue, allowing their sisters to herd them through the kitchen and down the hall. I huffed, pausing long enough to settle my irritation before turning back to Luna. But she was gone.

The front door had been shut, but her scent was not there. Swinging around back into the kitchen, I sniffed again, following the increasingly familiar scent of lilac blossoms and...something. I’d figured it out eventually, but for now, I followed the smell. The other family members had gone one direction, and Luna’s scent went the other. There were only a few rooms that way.

I stopped in front of a door; it wasn’t fully closed, so I nudged it open with a shoe. “Luna?” The door swung open. Luna stood in the middle of a small, plain room, her back to me as she stared at something on the floor. She bent down, running her fingers over shards of— Honestly, I couldn’t tell what the item used to be, only that it was broken into so many pieces, it would never be right again.

After a moment, she sighed, tucking a loose strand of hair behind her ear. When she stood, she glanced over her shoulder at me, offering a weak smile. “Sorry. I was just looking for my things.”

I frowned, looking around the tiny room. There were so few items in this *closet*, I was fairly certain she could fit everything in a standard moving box. She was already moving

over to the drawers, pulling out a handful of clothing. “Is this how you live?” I demanded. The ranch home wasn’t particularly luxurious, but the Highborns still seemed well-off. Their father had counseled Noah Claw, after all.

Luna shrugged, unbothered. “I think one of the boys must have been messing around in here,” she said, nodding towards the broken item on the floor. “But I don’t need much.”

“Why did you even come back here? These people — these people treat you like dirt, Luna.”

She sighed and studied her fingers for a moment. I couldn’t read her expression with her back to me, but the slump in her shoulders was telling. “They’re still my family, you know. The boys are young; they don’t know any better. You saw their mother. And the girls... Well, they’re my family. Technically. They’re all I have, especially after Marnet...” Luna trailed off.

My temper started to rise again. How could she be okay with this? It was obvious to me the other children had more — perhaps Lynn was more protective over the children she had given birth to, but that didn’t change the fact she had taken her mate’s oldest child into her home. *There’s no fucking reason for this.*

Oblivious to my aggravation, Luna crouched back down and pried up one of the floorboards. She pulled out a small box and carried it over to her desk. “What’s that?” I asked, finally stepping further into the room. The glint of silver on the top of the wooden box seemed familiar, but I had only caught a glimpse.

“It’s from my mother.”

I peered over her shoulder and my breath caught. That wasn’t a random decoration. *That’s the Silverstreak crest.* My gaze flickered to the fingers tracing over the symbol, then to the woman herself. *She’s one of ours.*

“Fuck, I really miss her,” Luna sighed, a sad smile on her lips.

My heart twisted in my chest, and I closed the gap between us, resting my fingers against her soft wrist. “Luna,” I murmured, careful not to pull her any closer. Her eyes were locked on her mother’s box. I kept watching her face. “Luna, you do not have to be alone. You don’t. Pay your respects to me and you will be welcomed to the Silverstreak clan with open arms. You can move to Texas and you never have to come back here. You will be protected for the rest of your life.”

The woman turned, her hands still clutching the small wooden box. “You know what they say about things that sound too good to be true...” she said, still not quite willing to look me in the eyes. “I just learned a really hard lesson about that bullshit, anyways. I don’t think I need another one.”

I removed my hand to tap at the silver insignia. “That? That is the Silverstreak crest, Luna. The Ulfric family is a part of the Silverstreak Clan, and as your mother’s daughter, that includes you, too.”

Luna jerked her hands away, clutching the box to her chest like my mere touch might set it aflame. “Stop it,” she hissed, looking up to glower at me. “I am a Highborn, from the Lupus Claw clan. I have been my entire life.”

“Yes, but you’re an Ulfric, too.”

Chapter 25

Luna

Highborn Family Home
Oklahoma County, Oklahoma

Every muscle in my body tensed. The room went so quiet I thought I could hear the beat of Remus' heart. The warm feeling that had been simmering under my skin since he'd touched my arm suddenly evaporated, like I'd been plunged into a frozen pool. My mind reeled.

Ulfric.

How did he know my mother's family name? I couldn't keep the question to myself. Clutching the wooden box to my chest, I lifted my chin defiantly, staring Remus straight in the eyes. He wasn't my alpha — and even if he was, what did I have to lose at this point? "Who told you that name?"

Remus didn't so much as blink. "Josie Ulfric has been living in Cedar Park, Texas, for several years. Is still living there, even."

My breath caught in my chest. "Don't you dare," I choked out, my throat tight. "Don't you fucking dare. She's been dead for twelve years. Her headstone isn't far from here." I clutched my mother's box tighter, as if it could protect me from whatever kind of bullshit Remus was trying to pull with me. Kissing me was one thing, but this? This was *cruel*.

It took me a moment realize Remus was still speaking. "— I believe you have some cousins about your age, as well. Some

nieces and nephews...wait, no. That's not what you call your cousin's child. Well, you know what I mean. And James Ulfric, he's still alive, too."

"Who?" I asked, feeling dazed. I retreated a few more steps.

Remus tipped his head at me, hazel eyes narrowed slightly. "James Ulfric — Josie's father? Presumably your grandfather. He was...well. He was my father's beta, actually. Obviously, he is retired now, but he has a—"

I tuned him out again, having finally fumbled the latch on the front of the box open. Turning away, I set the box back on the small twin bed to lift the lid and fish out a picture. It had been taken a few days before— I sniffed, barely able to think of the date. The photo had been taken when my mother brought home the car for us to work on together. There we stood, in front of her garage, Mom's arm around my shoulders as I gave the camera a double thumbs-up. I traced a finger over the outline before glowering over my shoulder.

"Shut up," I snapped, startling Remus enough that he did just that. "I don't know what your angle is, trying to bring my mother into this, but it's sick. You have *no idea* what I've been through the past twelve years without her."

He blinked at me, then the corner of his mouth quirked up. He started to unbutton his jacket. All the accusations I had suddenly flew right out of my skull.

"Remus. Remus, what are you doing?" I asked, flummoxed by the sudden turn of events.

"Proving it to you."

"Proving *what*?"

"That I'm telling the truth." He flung his tailored coat onto my bed. Then he began to undo the buttons on his shirt. The first few buttons revealed tan skin and washboard abs, the defined dip of his hips—

Luna! What is wrong with you? I scolded myself. Trying to save face, I whirled around, giving him some privacy as he did whatever it was he thought he was doing. I tried to convince

my cheeks to stop flaming bright red. He was hardly the first man I'd seen shirtless, after all...even if the most attractive one by a long shot. *Wait! No, down girl!*

“Turn around.” His voice was dark and smooth like expensive chocolate.

I shook my head. “No,” I said, mulish. He snickered. “What’s so funny?” I demanded.

“It’s not like you haven’t seen me naked,” he said. I could practically *hear* the way his eyebrows raised; it made me want to kiss that stupid smug look off his face. *No, wait, that’s not right.* “I’ve left my slacks on. Just turn around, Luna. I’m not lying to you.”

Despite my better instincts, I did as he asked. He stood with his back to me, and for a moment, all I could notice was the set of his shoulders, the definition of the muscles across his back. How had I not noticed that before? *I mean, he was practically fucking your mouth with his tongue in the hottest make-out session you’d ever participated in, but besides that...* Tattooed on his skin, though, was the dark ink, the image looking remarkably like—

“That’s my mother’s crest,” I whispered, finally stepping away from the bed and my mother’s box.

Remus glanced over his shoulder, his hazel eyes twinkling. “Almost,” he replied. “It’s the Silverstreak crest, Luna. Your mother was a part of the Silverstreak pack before traveling to Oklahoma, and she’s rejoined it.”

I stepped closer, reaching out to trace gently over his skin. The resemblance was flawless. Every swirl, every angle, they were all there, etched into Remus’ skin. Unless my mother stole the box — and I seriously doubted that, given how much she had treasured it — he was telling the truth. The Ulfric family must have been part of the Silverstreak clan. “Okay,” I said softly, trying to talk around the lump taking up residence in my throat. “Fine. I’ll give you that. But— But that doesn’t explain anything. Why would she come to Oklahoma and leave her pack? Why would she leave *me*?”

Even now, I could scarcely imagine leaving Oklahoma and leaving Lupus Claw — or what little was left of it.

Remus shrugged. I jerked my hand away as he turned around to face me. “I can’t speak for her. She left when I was a small child, and she returned when I was a teenager. All of that was handled by my father, not me,” he said. I glowered. He kept talking, indifferent to my dark look. “But my understanding is that she left Silverstreak to join her fated mate, Arden Highborn, and his pack. James was not a fan of Arden and wouldn’t sanction the mateship, sooo...” He trailed off, giving me a knowing look. “The rest is history, as they say.”

I shook my head, scowling. “What? No! You can’t just, I don’t know. Give me some lame-ass story like that and leave it with ‘and that’s how it goes.’ That’s— That’s—”

Remus reached forward slowly, taking my hands in his own. They were so warm, even when I wasn’t doused in frigid water. A thrill of heat ran down my spine, and I very carefully did not think of the pool. *Now is not the time, Luna.*

“Luna,” Remus said. “She was in love, or that’s what I assume it was. I can’t say any more than that. People do wild things when they’re in love, especially when the person in question is their fated mate. It doesn’t matter what anyone else says to them.”

I frowned, feeling for a moment like he was actually talking about me, not my mother.

“I guess your grandfather was right in the end, but...” He shrugged.

“Right about what?” I prompted.

Remus released my hands. “That’s not my story to tell. Besides, I hardly know the intricacies of mateship, myself. Not sure if you haven’t noticed, Luna, but no mate here.” If I didn’t know better, I could have sworn he was insinuating something.

I frowned, but didn’t take the bait. I’d done enough of that for a night — no, a week — thank you very much. I wandered

back to the bed, collecting the rest of the photos stored in the box my mother had left for me. Most of the photos were of her, me as a little girl, or the garage, but there were a few from my mother's childhood as well. There was one from her high school prom, a photo of an old garage I didn't recognize, and... I paused when I got to the last one. My mother looked to be in her early twenties, give or take, and she stood arm in arm with an older man, leaning into him with a broad smile. The man was smiling, though the expression was considerably more subdued. He had the same silver eyes she had — that I had.

After a moment, I flipped the photo over, curiosity getting the best of me.

Last photo of me and Dad.

Remus leaned over my shoulder as I carded through the images. “Yeah, that sure looks like James. Well, before he went gray, anyways.” He hummed thoughtfully to himself.

“What?” I asked, trying not to sound choked up.

I'm not sure if I succeeded, but if I didn't, Remus at least had the manners not to mention it. He pointed to a child leaning into the corner of the photo. The boy couldn't have been more than three or four, but he was making rabbit ears or a peace sign as he stuck out his tongue at the camera, his hazel eyes twinkling. “That would be yours truly,” he said, sounding amused with his childhood self. “I had this photobombing stage, though I can assure you, my mother did not let that stand for long.”

I stared at the photo, stunned. How had I never noticed that little punk in the corner before? *Probably because you were looking at your mom*, I consoled myself. I put the stack of photos back inside the box before I could damage them. Tears prickled my eyes again, and the last thing I wanted to do was ruin the only link I had left to my mother.

I gently closed the lid and tried not to let the emotion overwhelm me. “What does this mean?” I asked, hating how tiny my voice sounded. I turned. “What are you saying, Remus?”

He studied me for a moment. He reached a hand forward and then he paused. “Is it all right if I hug you?”

He might as well have spoken in French; my brain screeched to a halt. “Wh- What?”

If I didn’t know better, I would have thought Remus’ smile looked a little sad. “You look like you need a hug, and I’d really like to do that, Luna,” he said. “But I’ve noticed that your family...doesn’t seem to think of your needs. Or your wants. I don’t want you to just, I don’t know, let me because you think you have to. Or because you don’t have a choice, or something. I want you to want it.” Remus looked like he might’ve felt a bit guilty that he hadn’t asked sooner. That he hadn’t realized sooner.

It was a good thing I had already put the photos away, or I might have dropped those precious pieces of my memory all over the carpeted floor. *Has anyone ever asked me that?* If Marnet had, it was so long ago, I had forgotten. My vision swam as tears threatened to spill over. I blinked several times, but finally, I nodded.

“Use your words,” Remus said gently. “Please. Would you like a hug?”

I nodded again, a bit more urgently this time. “Yes,” I gasped. “Please. I— Yes, I would like a hug.” I might have hated how breathless I sounded, but Remus stepped forward and swept me into a bear hug. I’d never been given such a sound, secure hug in my entire life. I felt as safe as I had back when I was a girl, happy in my mother’s home. The realization made me delighted and morose at the same time.

Pushing my thoughts aside, I wrapped my arms around Remus and pressed my face into his bare chest. I didn’t care if he wasn’t my mate. I didn’t care if he’d overthrown my alpha. I didn’t care if I’d only known him for a week. He was the only one who’d ever asked me that, and it mattered. It

mattered a *lot*. I squeezed him a little tighter. “Thank you,” I whispered.

Remus held me a little closer. He bowed his head down to press a butterfly kiss to the top of my head. “It’s okay,” he murmured softly against my hair. “I meant what I said. You do not have to be alone, Luna. Join Silverstreak. Come to Texas. It’s not too late to have a good life. A happy life. You can have all of that, I promise.”

I stiffened slightly, though I wasn’t quite willing to withdraw from the warmth of his embrace. “What would you know about the intricacies of having a mate?” I huffed, parroting his statement from a few minutes prior.

Oh, shit. Was that too much? For a second, I feared I might have gone too far with that. We had only known each other for a week, after all. Was that too far? *Do I even know what Remus finds funny?*

Thankfully, after a moment, he just snorted, nuzzling against my hair again. “Yeah, well. Fair point, I guess.” Slowly, he let me go. I was relieved, in a way. I stepped back, feeling a bit dizzy, like I’d hung upside down on the monkey bars at school for too long. I retreated to the bed, finally closing my mother’s box back up and securing the lid’s latch. “But that’s okay. Your mother does. I’m sure she can help.”

I paused, blinked, then finally turned to study him. Even shirtless, he looked entirely earnest. “Remus,” I said, hating that my pulse was quickening. That I actually let this man get my hopes up, after all this time. “My mother died twelve years ago.”

He offered me a sad smile. “No, Luna. Your mother was banished from the Lupus Claw clan and chased out of Oklahoma twelve years ago. She’s living in Cedar Park. Texas. She’s in Texas.”

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They're on enemy sides, and he's determined to win the battle for her heart...

After being rejected by her fated mate, Luna knows better than to trust her heart. Now Remus, the alpha of a rival clan, is making a move for her affections.

Luna knows their attraction is dangerous. But when Remus reveals that her mother, who she thought was long dead, is still alive, she decides to risk going with Remus to his territory in search of answers.

In Texas, she discovers an entire family that she never knew about. Although not everyone is happy about the mother-daughter reunion and Luna is treated with suspicion. Once again, she feels like an outcast, especially when Remus is under increasing pressure to distance himself from her and search for his mate.

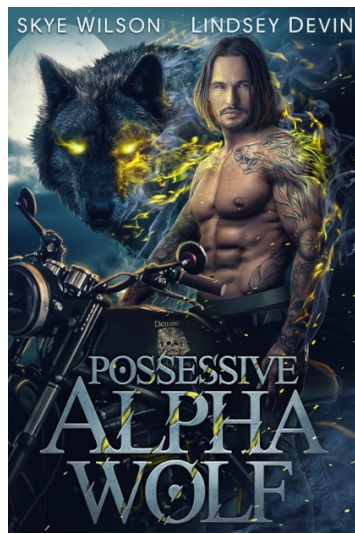
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Then I see Serene for the first time. The wolf in me knows immediately she's my mate and I'm not going to let anyone

else touch her. Except with a contract out on her life, if I don't
kill her, someone else will.

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protect her. But protecting her from my wolf will be an
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Alpha's Betrayal

Chosen By The Alpha: Book 1

Skye Wilson

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