



# ALPHA'S SACRIFICE

SKYE WILSON

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## CHOSEN BY THE ALPHA: BOOK 2

SKYE WILSON

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# REMUS

## Claw Family Mansion

### Woodward County, Oklahoma

I watched through the rearview mirror, struggling not to grind my teeth as I replayed the scene I'd just removed Luna from. The fact that the guards I'd posted earlier in the week hadn't alerted me had been supremely irritating — until Bane found them dead thirty minutes ago when he went to sweep the area to make sure Marnet wasn't springing a trap. They were trained individuals I'd sent, not just regular pack members who needed a job. Either Marnet had some inside information, or some well-trained individuals helping *him*.

The thought made me bristle; I couldn't believe Marnet had slipped past me *again*. He had been so close. *So close!*

I glanced back at the mirror, watching Luna breathe steadily where she rested. *Her loyalties are much more apparent now.* Luna had addressed one of my concerns — she had reached out to me when Marnet appeared. I could be fairly confident she wouldn't go running back to the man; even if I had a question, he had left her in a sorry state. There was no reason, even less than there was before.

*But what the hell did he do to her?*

He hadn't laid a hand on Luna as far as I could tell. There were no bruises and no scent of blood. None of her bones had been broken; no joints were sprained or dislocated. When I'd picked her up, she had barely been able to open her eyes and hadn't opened them since. It was as if she'd fallen into a deep sleep — like she'd bitten Snow White's poisoned apple and fallen into a coma. Marnet didn't seem above poisons or comas.

My lip curled into a snarl; he was such a coward. If she didn't wake up soon, I'd have to have Bane find someone who was both a werewolf and a medical professional — or have someone flown in from Oklahoma. I sincerely doubted that Dr. Rose would appreciate being flown *anywhere*, family doctor or not, but my options were somewhat limited. Taking Luna to the emergency room or the hospital was not an option; they were littered with humans. Even if they didn't suss Luna out as something paranormal, they probably wouldn't be able to figure out what was wrong with her; she wasn't

human.

*Hell.* It was probably naive of me to think I'd have Marnet six feet under by now, that the former Lupus Claw territory would have been folded into the Texas territory, and I'd be back home and back to business as usual. I shut my eyes and leaned back into my seat, surrounded only by the gentle hum of the car whizzing down the freeway.

*I need to come up with a better plan.*

Suddenly, my phone buzzed to life. I scowled and grabbed it from the center console, my eyes flashing open. "What?" I barked. *Can I not get a single minute to myself?*

Bane snorted into the line. "Is it a bad time?" he drawled, clearly nonplussed. "Thought you might want to know we tracked Marnet."

I scowled to myself, bowing my head to pinch the bridge of my nose. *Get a hold of yourself, Remus. Anger isn't going to do anything useful, not right now.* Before I continued, I exhaled. "Go on," I said, forcing my voice to remain steady.

I could almost hear the way Bane cracked a smile. "Found himself a nice little hidey-hole. He's staying with Oklahoma's chief of patrol. Human, of course."

"Of course." I rolled my eyes.

"We can't go in there, Remus, even if we have better numbers. Someone would notice with a high-profile office. No way that wouldn't hit the news."

"Agreed." It was a brilliant idea, really. It was also a coward's plan, using a powerful human as a shield, but still clever. I wondered if Marnet had come up with it himself or if Kate had made the bug-out plan. My lip curled. "We need to come up with a plan to flush him out. I need you to head back to the Claw mansion."

"Will do."

"Has our hacker had any more luck getting names out of the offshore account?"

"No," Bane grunted. "They're getting frustrated. I can tell."

"Well, if they need more resources, authorize it," I muttered, waving a hand. We needed that information, and if we couldn't turn Sophia, we had to count on our hacker.

"Understood. Have you asked Seff? He might have an idea."

I snorted. Just because the location turned out to be in Arkansas didn't mean Seff had complete domain over the entire state. Still. *It might be the*



*fastest way to get the information at this point.* “Inform Tala of this change. We’ll need to speak to the other alphas, and then we’ll be releasing them. We need to consolidate our efforts, but it needs to be as controlled as possible and on our terms. Over and out.”

“Understood. Over and out.”

Bane hung up, and I stared at the phone for a few moments before returning it to the center console. I needed a better plan, but this was not how I thought we would go about it.

LUNA STILL HADN’T WOKEN up by the time we reached the Claw mansion. Once the driver had put the car in park, I let myself out and walked around, carefully removing the seatbelt and scooping Luna’s prone form into my arms. She barely stirred, murmuring nonsensically as her head lolled gently against my shoulder. Her dark, silky hair tickled my neck, and I sighed softly, allowing the driver to shut the car door before hurrying up the front steps to open that door so I didn’t have to fumble the woman in my arms.

I murmured a quiet ‘thank you’ before stepping inside, realizing how exhausted I was. *It shouldn’t be this hard.* Marnet had no idea I was coming unless someone tipped him off — but he would have been better prepared. There were almost no guards at all at the Moonmate ceremony, just enough to break up a potential fight, even though no one ever fought at those things. It was all just part of the pomp and circumstance.

Still, though. It was as if Marnet had an entire network, human and werewolf. Maybe he was just more paranoid than I realized, always assuming someone would come from his territory. Or maybe Noah Claw had been the paranoid one, and Marnet had simply inherited the man’s well-thought-out escape plans once he inherited the Lupus Claw pack.

*Now you’re being the paranoid one, Remus. Get it together.*

Before I could think about it any further, my mother broke my train of thought, standing at the top of the stairs I was currently trudging up. Her brows bounced up, and she opened her mouth to say something. “Save it,” I rumbled, broking no argument. We could have a discussion about this — or whatever it was my mother was concerned about — when I wasn’t carrying a limp woman in my arms.

Luna didn’t have a room here; after she’d recovered and left, the room she was staying in previously was turned over to the cleaners. Almost all the

furniture had been removed; I considered selling what I hadn't already sold. Most of it was Marnet's, and what didn't reek of strangers and the Lupus Claw clan wasn't my taste. I hadn't expected Luna to come back, and certainly not so soon.

To bring her down to the master bedroom was an easy decision. Once inside, I set her down on my bed, gingerly removing her work boots. I frowned, having almost forgotten what she'd told me about her morning at the local garage.

Having unlaced and removed them both, I readjusted her slightly, moving the covers so I could tuck her in. If I hadn't been the one to remove her from the Highborn home, I would have thought Luna was just taking a nice nap. She could have been perfectly relaxed, not — knocked out, or whatever Marnet had done.

Inhaling before getting too worked up, I brushed a strand of hair out of Luna's face. There was nothing I could do for her now, but if she didn't improve in twenty-four hours, I would get my doctor to her as soon as possible. Money was no obstacle. Not for me.

MY MOTHER WAS WAITING for me outside — unfortunately, there were ritual funerals to attend. Marnet had killed the guards I'd placed, and they deserved the proper respects, even if we weren't in Texas. Or perhaps, especially because we weren't in Texas. They had thought they were doing a standard job, a routine watch for trouble... I had expected a local rabble-rouser to try to harass Luna, but not this.

The thought sat heavy with me throughout the rest of the evening; the fact that my mother was forced to lead the rituals as the only member of the council just made it a denser weight. They were good, loyal pack members. They trusted me, and I trusted them; I'd have trusted them with my own life. And what did that get them, in the end? An untimely death.

I would have to visit their families when we returned to Texas. *Where they should have been buried.* But I couldn't leave Oklahoma. Not yet, especially not with Marnet on the loose and under the protection of a police official. My full focus had to be here, or my entire plan would fall to pieces.

It was well after sundown when we got back. I had hung around after the others had departed, wishing to pay a few last respects without the prying eyes of the others.

On the ride back to the mansion, I had sent Tala another quick text. My cousin had been happy to keep an eye on Luna while we were gone; it was much more critical for Bane to pay his respects alongside me. She said Luna was still asleep, no different than when I had left; she even remarked the other she-wolf looked rather peaceful.

Peace was the last thing on my mind right now. When I stepped out of my car, Fiona was there waiting for me at the top of the steps. It was difficult not to flinch, even for me. She was utterly silent as she stared me down and I fought the urge to frown, sparing myself one moment to close the door quietly behind me and jog up the steps.

I opened the front door for her, motioning my mother inside. After regarding me for a moment, she spoke softly. “I need to speak to you before I leave.”

I gave a nod and motioned down the hallway; obviously, my room was now occupied. A private conversation would have to take place elsewhere. “How about the balcony?” I suggested.

Thankfully, my mother was feeling agreeable. “That would be fine,” she replied, allowing me to lead her through the entry and across the room. I paused at the bar as we passed through the living room on our way.

“Do you want something to drink?” I offered, already stepping behind the mahogany wood to get a tumbler. I wasn’t a mind reader, but I seriously suspected I would need a whiskey for this conversation — no, I was certain. I was definitely going to need this drink.

“No, thank you,” Fiona replied simply, waiting in silence as I finished pouring my drink before heading towards the balcony. It was still quite warm outside, despite that the sun had disappeared altogether behind the horizon; the late afternoon was the warmest when the earth had been baking all day long, but the sun hadn’t disappeared yet. It wasn’t *that* late, so the air hadn’t cooled too much.

*At least it isn’t humid out.* A small mercy, but a mercy nonetheless.

Once we sat in a corner, my mother leaned toward me. “I wanted to tell you a story.”

“A story?” I had been expecting a lecture.

“Yes, Remus, a story. Now let your mother speak, hm?” She raised her brow at me the same way she would when I was but a petulant child, so I leaned back into the chair and motioned with a hand for her to continue. If telling me a story was what she needed to get off her chest before leaving for

Texas, I was hardly about to stop her.

“I’ve been reflecting a lot lately, Remus, and I realized — I don’t think I’ve told you much about my life before I met your father. I was... well, truly, I was having a rough time. I’d been expelled from the local school and forced to go to a boarding school specializing in *gifted* students.” She caught my eye, the corner of her mouth lifting upwards. “Wolves, mostly. It wasn’t a big school, so there wasn’t much opportunity to miss friends. I missed the people I had hung out with — pack members and humans. Unfortunately, some of those people weren’t good influences.”

“Hence the expulsion?” I hazarded, still not entirely convinced my mother wasn’t leading me on.

“Yes. Hence the expulsion,” she agreed, nodding. “I did manage to graduate, though I’m not sure that had anything to do with my merit. In retrospect, being the alpha’s daughter likely had more to do with it. As obnoxious as I was, my father did still love me. Dearly. I was his only daughter, and he made sure I never went without, including my secondary school diploma. Of course, it didn’t mean he was *happy* that I didn’t want a job or go to university, that I’d much rather run around with troublemakers and check out all the hottest clubs in London. I’m pretty sure—”

“Wait. Hold on,” I interrupted her, holding up one hand. I sat up, eyeing her keenly. “London? As in London, England?”

“Well, I certainly don’t mean London, Arkansas,” she replied, raising a brow.

I spluttered. “But— You don’t even have an accent! I don’t think you’ve mentioned the UK once! We could have gone there for a family vacation or something.” It certainly would have been more interesting than trips to national parks, that was for sure. My wolf liked the forests, but I was a city boy at heart.

Fiona regarded me silently, her eyes gleaming. “I worked very hard to master my American accent, thank you,” she murmured, the corner of her mouth tipping up. “You wouldn’t even begin to imagine the countless hours of daytime television I watched. I did not want to be pegged as an outsider, and I refused to let something as simple as my accent stand in my way.”

I was more than a little impressed; if she hadn’t had said as much, I never would have thought it. Even now, actively listening for the slightest difference in inflection, in pronunciation, I still couldn’t identify anything that said ‘British’ or even ‘not American.’

She carried on as if she had confided in me that her favorite color was burgundy, not red, completely unfazed by my reaction. “It was a lifetime ago, anyways. But, no matter what I did, no matter how grave or embarrassing the mistake was, my parents always gave me a chance to redeem myself. Always. And I didn’t appreciate what a gift that was until I was much, much older.” Her expression fell slightly, some of the mirth disappearing from her voice. “Even as the alpha and the alpha’s mate, my parents made many sacrifices to make amends for some of the issues I caused. I was so naive at that age — or perhaps willfully ignorant. I’m still not sure which is worse.” She sighed softly and shook her head before looking back up, meeting my eyes. Alpha or not, I was arrested by the depth in them in that particular moment; it almost felt like I was meeting Fiona Silverstreak for the first time. I couldn’t look away.

“I see a lot of me in you, Remy. I know you’ve grown up with friends and family telling you how much like your father you are, but they didn’t know me in my youth. They only have half the information.” The corner of her mouth tipped upwards, but the smile didn’t meet her eyes. “The difference, Remus, is that I was not and would never be an alpha. That is not an option for you. If you make mistakes, that could affect other members whom you are supposed to protect. You could shake the entire pack. You’ve worked hard thus far — and your father worked hard, too. Doubly so. And *I* worked hard, Remus, no matter that everyone always had eyes on your father. I played my part.”

I could feel my smile fading; for a moment I thought we would have a conversation without my responsibility coming up. But of course it did. I held my tongue because Fiona had only paused for a breath. I sat back in my chair, bracing myself.

“I know you don’t believe in mate bonds, Remus, or at least don’t believe they’re relevant in this day and age, but I am telling you, nothing is further from the truth. It is truly a profound thing. You could have learned that from your father, you know.”

I bit back the urge to sigh. I knew exactly where this was going, but she was expecting me to answer — and there wasn’t a way around it. Not right now. “And what’s that?”

Her smile got a little wistful and she hummed. “I remember the day I first met him as clearly as it was yesterday, you know. I had taken a job as a barista at an upscale cafe on Canary Wharf after school. I still had no idea

what I wanted, but university sounded unappealing, and my parents wouldn't stand for me to be idle. I loved the coffee there, and it was owned by one of my father's friends, so...it was a perfect fit.

"It was early June and the weather was just ideal. Warm but not hot; the sky was periwinkle blue and there wasn't a cloud in the sky. I was wearing my favorite dress, and I distinctly remember thinking the afternoon couldn't pass quickly enough — I was supposed to go on a date with a young man from a Scottish pack the following evening, and I was eager to drive up north and check out the area before I met him.

"But then Remington walked in. He was alone, and goodness, the moment our eyes met. He had said something to me, and for the life of me, I had no idea what! I was absolutely stunned by the man before me; he could have been a Greek god, and I couldn't have been more thunderstruck by him. And the way he smiled at me. Oh, Remus..." She shook her head, looking wistful. "He asked me when I got off work and when my shift ended. He was waiting outside the cafe with roses for me. Roses!"

I paused as I lifted my drink to my mouth. *Didn't she tell me she met my father at a Moonmate ceremony earlier this month?* I was almost certain that was part of her speech on the jet when we arrived in Oklahoma. *So, which one is the truth?*

I almost asked her, but instead I said. "So, I take it you never made it to Scotland?"

She opened her eyes, looking at me with a genuine smile. It made something in my chest pang; I still felt guilty about casting my Alpha over the women during the attack, and she had been distant ever since. Frankly, I suspected she was disappointed. My desire to confront her died as she continued regaling me with her treasured memory. "Oh, no, certainly not. That would have been a good match, but nothing is as good as a true mate bond. My father knew that, even if it meant his daughter would be moving an ocean away. Your father knew that, too, and that's why we made it official. That's why this pack — this land — thrives the way it does. It wasn't handed to him like this. Remington put it together because he did the right thing."

I blew a breath out, guarding myself carefully. One wrong move, one wrong word, and this tenuous peace would be over. *But what does that even mean anymore? If Fiona isn't lying to me today, then she lied to me just a few weeks ago.* There was no good answer.

"And what was that?" I finally muttered, realizing she was staring me

down expectantly.

“He came to look for me. When he couldn’t find his mate where he was, he took it upon himself to *look*. He found me, Remus.” My mother stood abruptly, the softness in her features disappearing in the blink of an eye. “You should reflect on that, my son. An alpha emulates those before him. Think about the bigger picture, Remus. Many people who support you and your leadership see the good that you have done. But just as much as they show their support now, they can easily turn on you when you don’t do what’s right by them.”

Before I could open my mouth, she spun on her heel and walked back towards the house, disappearing into the living room.

I stared after her in disbelief, feeling the skin on the back of my neck prickle. *Did she just threaten me? I think she just tried to intimidate me.* My wolf certainly thought so, his mild disinterest discarded in favor of a sharp, prickling aggravation. I threw back the rest of my whiskey and glowered at the door before staring back at the Oklahoma skyline.

I had liked this view when I got here. But now? Now I regretted I hadn’t gone back to Texas sooner. *Damnit, Marnet.*

**LUNA**



## Claw Family Mansion

### Woodward County, Oklahoma

“**M**mm.” I stirred slowly, my eyes opening to tiny slits as I peered up at the dusky ceiling. *What time is it? Did I fall asleep?* I didn’t remember lying down to take a nap; I didn’t remember being that tired. No, I had been frustrated, and I had been upset but not tired.

I opened my eyes a little more, slowly adjusting to the low light. As soon as I could start to make out shapes and colors instead of just shadows, I realized I wasn’t in my room at all — I wasn’t in my house. I inhaled sharply, the gauzy feeling of a good nap slipping away as if someone doused me in water. My body ached as I propped myself up on my elbows. *Crap.*

That’s right. Marnet Fucking Claw had shown up at my house, of all places. There was a point I thought maybe he didn’t know where I lived — or perhaps he was just directionally challenged (conveniently forgetting, of course, that the city wasn’t *that* big and that he did have a fancy hand-sized computer at all times which would allow him to pull up a map or get directions at any moment). Even today when I woke up, I wouldn’t have imagined the alpha — was he still the alpha now, with Remus around? — would show up at my house out of the blue, after hiding for weeks. Whatever he’d done to me knocked me out harder than any sleeping pill ever had.

Stifling a yawn, I tried to pull on my wolf again. This time, she stirred, though she seemed ten times more lethargic than I was. At least she was awake, though. I had no idea what Marnet had done, but when he’d cast his Alpha on me, it had felt like she’d withered away to nothing, or someone had locked her in a box and thrown away the key.

I realized, after a moment, that I was in Marnet’s room. Or former room. It didn’t matter much. The realization was enough for me to get my feet underneath myself, stepping carefully out of bed. My boots sat tucked at the foot, and I stared at them for a moment, briefly wondering how I’d gotten here. *Remus.*

*He* was the last thing I remembered; Marnet had left me boneless on the floor, as useless as a piece of meat, but Remus... Remus had deciphered my

text. And he'd come when I'd asked for help, no questions asked.

Despite myself, I smiled as I sat on the edge of the bed, looking over at the pile of laundered clothing sitting on the nearby nightstand. My boots sat tucked at the edge of the bed. Bathed in the pinkish light of sunrise, the room almost looked peaceful. Relaxing. I allowed myself a few moments to simply bask in it before standing — my knees quaked and almost gave, turning to Jell-O. I sucked in a sharp breath as I caught myself, vowing to be more careful as I gathered up the fresh clothing and slowly padded over to the master bathroom. Each joint creaked out a complaint as I shuffled; I felt like I was a hundred years old, not twenty-four. Or like I'd run one of those crazy desert marathons barefoot... which I did not.

*What the hell did that man do to me?* It had hurt like crazy the first time Marnet had cast his Alpha over me, but it didn't leave me feeling like I'd been run over by three buses and a construction truck. I paused as I stepped on the cool tile; then again, his sister had beaten the crap out of me later that night. Maybe I would have felt like this if I'd woken up.

I caught a glimpse of myself in the large mirror and grimaced, turning to lean a bit closer. I ran my fingers over my skin — I looked *exhausted*. There were bags the size of duffels under my eyes, and there were dry patches of skin. Even my hair looked dull and tired. *You can't go on like this*, I told myself, the grimace turning into a sad little frown. *If you do, you're going to fall to pieces — and who's going to put you back together after that?* Certainly not Marnet. I wrinkled my nose. Not my father or his family, either. And if I fell apart, I wouldn't make it to Texas, and I'd never get those answers I wanted. No, those answers I deserved.

The resolve gave me a little more energy, and I gave myself one nod before I carefully undressed, letting myself into the shower. It was enormous. The size of a room. It was like a spa experience, and for once, I didn't think too hard and simply allowed myself to enjoy it.

I WANDERED down the quiet hallway, tracing my fingers over art frames. There was no dust, of course. There were no portraits, either, though I'd sworn I'd seen images of the Claw family the last time I was here. *It would make sense if Remus didn't want to stare at Noah and Marnet every time he walked up here.*

I paused at Tala's door — or it had been Tala's door, the last time I'd

been here. I raised my hand to knock, but something stopped me. The scent was a bit faded, though present, and I couldn't hear anyone bustling in the room. I didn't want to bother her if she was still asleep, and if she wasn't here... I didn't want to talk to anyone else.

It was early, anyways. I didn't want to be a bother. Dropping my hand, I continued to walk slowly, still tracing the lines of the walls, the wallpaper, the little table set in the middle of the hallway. I had wanted this once. I'd envied the grand entryway and the sweeping stairs, with the lush carpet and oil painting. I descended them silently, sliding my hand along the smooth wooden railing.

I hadn't just wanted this; I truly believed it would be mine someday. I believed Marnet would claim me as his mate — I believed, too, that Kate and Sophia would take me in once it was official. The thought made me grimace; why had I thought those two would be better than Lynn or my stepsisters? Sophia was probably the cruelest woman I knew. *Why had I wanted that?*

There was no need to roll that question over in my head again — what would it be, the two-thousandth time? If I hadn't come up with an answer yet, today wouldn't be different.

I padded across the living room instead, not interested in disturbing the relative silence of the morning. It was soothing in a way I couldn't describe, wrapping me up like a soft blanket as I slowly braced myself for the day ahead.

Instead, I headed towards the balcony; the morning air greeted me as I stepped outside, much cooler than yesterday afternoon when I'd walked home. The amber fields stretched out in gently rolling hills, and Marnet's horses were small dots on the horizon. I smiled slightly, seeing them; I wasn't sure why I was comforted that Remus had left the horses where they were, but it did. They were just hapless animals; they didn't deserve to be caught up in the nonsense between alphas.

Even if I didn't care for the house anymore, I couldn't deny how gorgeous the property was. This was the best of Oklahoma: long stretches of fields under a sunrise so vibrant it looked like an artist had painted across the sky.

“Enjoying the view?”

The voice nearly had me jumping out of my skin — I hadn't even noticed Remus sitting there, tucked in a chair in the corner. He was dressed only in a loose-fitting pair of pajamas; he was watching the reddish-pink horizon with

the same reverence I was. Even though he had spoken to me, he seemed... far away, somehow — a thousand-yard stare glazing over his honey-brown eyes.

I watched him for a moment. *I don't think I've ever seen him with his hair down before.* Dark brown hair usually tied in a neat, tight bun at the back of his head lay gently against his rugged shoulders. Heck. He *did* have nice shoulders. He always cut a nice figure, dressed handsomely in exquisitely tailored suits. I hadn't noticed in the pool — I'd been more focused on his eyes. His lips. Then, I couldn't look at anything else, but now...

Even my sluggish wolf had stirred a bit, her exhaustion now colored by a hint of curiosity. Her renewed presence drew a gentle smile over my lips. Anything that helped her come back was a good thing in my book.

I tipped my head to one side and approached him, sitting down gently in the neighboring chair. He finally turned to look at me, expression still distant as his eyes traced me up and down. "I'm glad to see you're awake," he murmured, his voice slightly gravelly. "How are you?"

I paused and then shrugged. There was no point in lying. "I'm all right," I replied, folding my hands in my lap. "I've been much worse."

He grimaced but declined to comment. After another beat of silence, I spoke back up.

"I made a decision."

"Hm?"

"About Texas. I want to go. I want to get out of Oklahoma. And I'll show you the hidden spots in the woods before I go. I can't promise I know them all...especially given how much it turns out Marnet had been hiding from me for all those years, but I can at least show you the paths I know. Or, heck, you don't even need to wait. Give me a map, and I can mark the locations I know about right now. They're underground caverns."

"I know," Remus sighed.

"You know?" My brows bounced up and I leaned back. "Then why did you need my help?"

He shrugged one shoulder. "There was an underground path leading away from the barn. It smelled heavily of Marnet, but that's where we found Sophia. I assume her brother abandoned her when she slowed him down." Remus huffed and looked down at the ice cubes clinking around his glass. "The paths are vast, though. I just don't have the manpower to check every cave."

"Ah." I offered him a wry smile. "Not many people realize this part of

Oklahoma even has caves. It was a clever system of movement. My understanding is that the house is at least a hundred years old, so — I dunno. It was a good idea, whoever came up with it.”

“An annoying one, more like,” Remus grouched, and I couldn’t help my small smile. He glanced back at me. “I haven’t forgotten your second request, you know. I will still take you to talk to your father, just as I said I would. I meant it.”

I ignored his offer for a moment, a bit confused he hadn’t immediately jumped on my willingness. “Seriously, I’ll mark it right now,” I insisted, leaning a little closer. “Even on your phone, if you’d like.”

Remus shook his head, and if I didn’t know better, I would have thought he looked a bit dejected. “He isn’t far. Right here in Woodward. He’s being housed by the chief of patrol.”

“The what?” I frowned.

He wrinkled his nose. “The head of the Oklahoma Highway Patrol is the chief of patrol, Luna.”

“Oh,” I replied, flushing a little. “Look, I didn’t even have my own car, okay? The highway patrol was a bit irrelevant to me.”

Remus snorted, tapping his finger against the glass in his hands. “I assume that means you didn’t know Marnet was keeping several human associates, then?”

“What? No.” I shook my head. “He didn’t confide in me when it came to pack business. Or personal business. Or anything of any importance, really.” The thought made me grimace a little. How had I become convinced the man was just trying to protect me? “Look, I’ve been thinking, and you were right. There is nothing here for me in Oklahoma. Not my job, not my friends, not even my family.”

My voice broke on the last word, an unexpected swell of emotion rushing up from my chest and making my throat feel tight. I tried to swallow the feeling back down, shaking my head as my eyes began to prickle. “Sorry. It just — Hardly even feels like I can call them that, even if Arden is technically my father and his other kids are supposed to be my step- and half-siblings.” It certainly didn’t feel like we were related. They didn’t treat me like we were.

Remus frowned. “You’re sure you don’t want to see your father before you leave?” he asked, the corners of his mouth tipping downward. “I’ll make sure you’re well protected.”

“I’m not worried about that.” And strangely, I wasn’t, despite everything

that had happened so far. I knew that Remus would make sure nothing would happen while I was under his care. I turned, looking back out towards the morning sky. “I just have nothing left to say to the man. I’ll get my answers from my mother.”

“Talking to Arden might give you some closure, though.”

I snorted. “Sure, but it could do exactly the opposite and leave me with even more hurt. Ignorance is bliss or something, right?”

“That’s fair,” Remus said slowly, “but it might be your last chance. You wouldn’t want to look back on this in five years and regret you didn’t take the opportunity.”

*Last chance?* I looked back at him; brows pinched. “What do you mean?”

He traced his thumb over the rim of his glass, regarding me quietly for a moment. “They’ll be banished soon. Lone wolves. Unless they suddenly have an about-face and submit to me, but I’m a realist. I don’t suspect that is the future we’ll see.”

I frowned, wrapping my arms around myself as I instinctively thumbed the Lupus Claw tattoo on my inner arm. “What about me? Is that what’s in store for me, too?”

“That’s up to you, isn’t it?” Remus shrugged and got to his feet, the movement lazy and still undeniably graceful. I envied his ability always to look so...so *smooth*.

“What if I submit right now?” I asked in a rush, unsure where that had come from. I didn’t regret it, though. I would.

The alpha regarded me for a moment. “When you’re ready,” he said and turned away, heading back towards the glass door that led to the rest of the house. I stared at his back, slightly flummoxed when he paused again, glancing back over his shoulder at me. “Well, come on,” he prompted, lifting his hand towards the door.

I swallowed hard and got to my feet. “Where are we going?”

“Don’t you want breakfast?”

BREAKFAST? I certainly did want breakfast, though that was one of the last things I was expecting Remus to offer me. A bit dumbfounded, I hurried after him; I’d never been in the kitchen before, and the last thing I needed was to get lost in this damn mansion.

Like the rest of the house, the kitchen was decked out with the latest

appliances and highest end trimmings. Large slate tiles announced the transition from the hallway to the kitchen proper. I didn't know what type of wood the cabinets were made of, but they were a deep, earthy wood, crowned with dark, gorgeous granite countertop. It was the kind of kitchen you'd see in home style magazines or the type you'd pull up on Zillow to lust after knowing you'd be lucky if you owned your own condo.

"French toast or eggs and hash?"

"What?" Remus' voice dragged me out of my quiet assessment, and I blinked as I looked up from the countertop I was trailing my fingers over. "Oh. Cereal is fine."

The man snorted and gave me a flat look. "I said I was making breakfast. Pouring out a bowl of cereal doesn't count."

"Oh. Okay. Well, hot oatmeal is nice, too."

Remus rolled his eyes, opening his mouth to argue further when my stomach let out a loud gurgle. I felt my cheeks heat instantaneously as my eyes widened. "Uh..."

"Right," Remus chuckled. "Definitely getting more than oatmeal. If you don't pick something, I'm going to."

I shrugged my shoulders. "French toast sounds nice? I don't know the last time I had that." My father wasn't exactly the kind of person who cooked breakfast for the family on Sunday mornings, nor was he the type to take his kids out for a weekend brunch. If anyone went out for brunch at all, it was Arden and Lynn, and that was it.

"Great. Can you grab the eggs from the fridge? Get whatever looks good for a side, too."

Remus moved to the other side of the kitchen, sorting through cupboards. I assumed he was looking for bread and did as he asked. The refrigerator was massive, just like everything else, and even had a screen on its front. I had no idea what to do with that — my father made a decent salary, but we still had a regular fridge, none of this futuristic stuff — so I just opened the door instead. The eggs and milk were easy to locate, but sides? What did you have as a side for breakfast? *Don't you just make bacon and eggs or something? Maybe Remus just means toast – maybe this is a rich boy thing. I'd just call it toast.*

A few moments later, Remus appeared next to me, opening the other side of the fridge to reach inside. "Enjoying the view?" he asked, just like earlier — but there was an impish grin on his face this time.

I snorted. “Have you been shopping? This fridge is packed.”

“Not personally, no. I sent someone else to restock the fridge. I may be a bachelor, but I don’t drink spoiled milk,” he retorted, reaching past to grab a small box of blueberries. *Right. Fruit. He meant fruit. I guess fruit is a good side dish for breakfast...but why didn’t he just ask for fruit?* But then he reached for butter, and bacon, too.

“Are you cooking a feast? How much food do two people need?”

My stomach rumbled for a second time, but that wasn’t all that rumbled. My wolf was stirring, too, delighted by the close contact.

Remus simply winked. “Guess you’ll tell me.”

WHILE I DIDN’T KNOW MUCH about French toast myself, I certainly knew how to cook bacon. My father wasn’t a weekend breakfast person, but my half-brothers certainly enjoyed it if I made eggs and bacon on a Saturday before I headed to work. It was as much a treat for myself as anyone else, and at one point, I thought maybe since I’d known the boys basically from birth, I’d be able to win them over. After all, I had moved into the house when the girls were young children — exactly the age where they were quite aware of the change, but I’d also taken over as ‘oldest.’

I’m sure, on some level, they must have been worried about sharing what attention was previously split between two children now between five; the boys were months old at most. I felt like I had the right to blame Athena and Artemis for how they treated me, especially now; they were functionally adults, after all, but... it seemed pointless. They were only acting in the way Lynn had taught them to act, and what else had they known? How could you learn to be a good person when your role models were marginal at best and your time outside the home was spent in high school? Teenagers could be the meanest people on Earth.

“Earth to Luna.”

“Hm?” I glanced up from the stone, realizing I had spaced out. I felt my cheeks go a little hot. “Sorry. Making breakfast wasn’t a big thing in my family,” I admitted sheepishly, shrugging a shoulder.

Remus simply hummed, looking back to the two pans he had on the fancy gas stovetop. “My father enjoyed making a big breakfast on a quiet morning. It wasn’t that often, but it was nice. I think he just liked an excuse to have blueberry pancakes.”



“And your mom never made blueberry pancakes for him?” I asked, mildly amused.

He barked out a laugh and shook his head. “Fiona, cook? Never. I can count on one hand the number of times my mother cooked, and none of them were good.”

I couldn’t help but chuckle, imagining the fancy woman I’d seen around the mansion the few times I’d been here. Now that he mentioned it, I did struggle to imagine the chic brunette hard at work in the kitchen. She looked like a retired beauty queen, or maybe a retired executive, but definitely not a homemaker. “I learned to cook because my mother was a great cook, actually... and then I kept cooking because Lynn’s food was, uhm... edible. But that’s about all I have to say about it.”

Remus snorted. “You don’t have to be nice about it, Luna. The woman’s a bitch.”

I sighed and looked down at my hands. “Yeah, well. I don’t know about you, but I have a hard time just flipping a switch in my brain regarding people. I thought they were the only family I had.” I shrugged, knowing he was probably still looking at the food he was preparing. “You’re right, though. The food didn’t kill anyone, but it was no joy to eat. I can’t believe my father had just put up with it for ten years. I guess there’s no accounting for taste.”

When I glanced up, I could have sworn he smiled a little. “There’s really not.”

# REMUS

## Claw Family Mansion

### Woodward County, Oklahoma

“So I seem to recall you mentioning you’re a mechanic?” I asked, flipping the bacon over piece by piece.

Luna made a noncommittal noise. “I used to be,” she groused.

I fought the urge to roll my eyes, glad she couldn’t see me. “Employment doesn’t make a mechanic,” I argued. “Unless you’re telling me you suddenly forgot everything you’ve ever learned regarding how engines work?”

“Well, no...”

“That’s what I thought.” I smiled triumphantly, removing the first set of French toast to a plate and buttering it before placing the next batch in the pan. “So, do you like cars or just the engine parts?”

“Oh, I’ve always liked cars,” Luna replied easily, the hesitation disappearing from her voice. I imagined I could hear her smile but didn’t take my eyes off breakfast. The last thing I wanted to do was burn it — what kind of ponce offered to make breakfast like a showoff and then burnt it black?

“What kind?”

She hummed thoughtfully. “You mean make, or just style?”

“Either or.”

“I don’t favor any particular make, to be honest. I love vintage trucks. The ‘60s, ‘70s, even ‘80s, honestly. I know they weren’t exactly peak performance, but gosh, they look so handsome when someone’s taken good care of them.” She sighed dreamily behind me.

“I like vintage myself, too.”

“Really?” Luna asked. “I would’ve assumed you were a sports car enthusiast since... that’s what you make and all.”

They weren’t mere sports cars, but I let it slide. “Well, I’m not collecting vintage trucks,” I admitted, flipping the toast over. *Golden brown. Perfect.* “But vintage luxury sports cars? Oh, yes.” I nodded, thinking of the collection back at home. It wasn’t a cheap hobby, by any means, but at least I could be assured the cars would only increase in value, kept in pristine condition as they were. Not only that, but their history would be preserved, especially for the rarer models in my collection.

“What’s the most interesting thing in your collection?”

“Well, I suppose that depends on how you define interesting,” I replied.

Luna sighed. I could imagine her rolling her eyes at me. “Fine. The rarest car you have, then. Tell me about that.”

This time, I couldn’t help but glance over my shoulder as I transported toast from pan to plate. “I have a Ferrari 250 GTO,” I replied. Even talking about it made my pulse quicken. Importing that little beauty from Italy had been a nerve-racking experience, even if I had hired the best company to travel with her every mile of the way.

Luna’s eyes widened, and I couldn’t help but continue. “I don’t know if that’s the most interesting, though. Three years ago, I went to an estate sale in Arizona. It was an elderly gentleman who had purchased Silverstreak cars decades ago, and he hadn’t any children, so I was curious to see if I could purchase any back from the estate for our showroom. We have a ‘Silverstreak through the years’ exhibit.”

“Of course you do,” Luna replied, smiling fondly. “I’m going to guess that’s not what you found, though.”

“Well, I did find a nice early ‘80s model I purchased,” I admitted, “but you’re right. In the back of his barn, under blankets and tarps, was the most gorgeous, pristine, exquisite *Shelby GT350 Mach 2*.”

Luna sucked in a sharp breath. “You found a *Cobra* at an *estate sale*?” she gasped, almost breathless at my revelation. I nodded slowly, and she shook her head. “No way, Remus. You’re putting me on.”

I snorted and turned back to the burners, finally switching them off as I began to dole out French toast, bacon, and fruit to the plates. “Oh, I forgot the coffee. Do you need coffee?”

“I’ll make it,” Luna said, practically flinging herself off her chair before I could stop her. “I’m not an invalid, Remus. I know how to use K-cups.”

*At least K-cups are quick.* The food wouldn’t get too cold in the meantime.

While Luna fussed with the machine, I dug my phone out of my pocket and flipped through the photos, looking for a beautiful photo of my pride and joy. As soon as she had the coffee under control, I handed it to her. Luna gasped softly, her silver eyes as round as moons as she flicked through a few photos, cooing like I’d shown her a kitten.

I couldn’t help but smile as I brought the plates of food to the kitchen island, returning to get the coffee. Luna was still planted in place. “The food

is going to get cold,” I murmured, touching her elbow gently.

She followed me as if in a trance. Suddenly, she gasped a sharp intake. “Oh my *god*, you have an Aston Martin too?” she exclaimed, showing me my phone. I grinned and pried it out of her fingers. “Indeed I do. What sort of self-respecting vintage collector doesn’t have an Aston Martin DB4?”

“Maybe one who has a DB5?” she replied, sitting next to me.

“Bond fan?”

“Who isn’t?” she replied, waving the question off. The cars were clearly still the first thing on her mind. “What I wouldn’t give to get my hands on one of those though. I’m sure yours are all in great shape. They look absolutely beautiful... but wow, I’ve never seen an engine like any of those. Not in person, anyways. The best I’ve gotten is old Fords or Chevys.” She sighed again, looking at me like I revealed I owned an actual unicorn, horn and all.

My wolf rumbled appreciatively, all but preening under the attention. It had been a while since someone had looked at me like that for reasons other than the cut of my suit or because they saw me as the richest man in the room. Luna and I simply shared a hobby, one she seemed equally as passionate about, even if in a slightly different way. It made me smile, and I pointed at her plate.

“Eat your breakfast,” I murmured, not quite a command. “It’s going to get cold, and it definitely won’t be as good.”

LUNA DIDN’T NEED any more encouragement than that. She dug into breakfast like she was famished, groaning softly around her first mouthful. “Remus!” she murmured, her hand over her mouth. “This is so good! I’ll be honest, I wasn’t expecting that much, but oh my god. This is better than anything I’ve eaten at a restaurant.”

I couldn’t help but preen at the compliment. The food was good. “Didn’t think I could cook because I’m a man?” I teased.

She rolled her eyes at me as she swallowed her next mouthful. “No, dummy. Because you’re an alpha raised in an alpha household, oh, and also, I’m fairly certain you’re a *billionaire*.” She narrowed her eyes, shaking a fork at me. “I assumed you’ve had a cook or seven your entire life.”

“Two at most.” I tried to reply demurely, but I could feel the smug smile creeping onto my lips. I hid it by taking a sip of coffee, which came as a bit

of a surprise. The bitterness made my eyes widen.

Luna gave me a sympathetic look. “Sorry. The only thing left in the cupboards was dark roast. I assume you haven’t been getting your coffee here?”

“No,” I replied, clearing my throat. “I’d been getting it on the road. I’ll have to make a note for the cook to put it on his next list.”

“You have a chef here too, do you?”

I shrugged. “What was I going to do, fire him and fly the chef from Austin here? It’s not the chef’s fault his boss was an incapable businessman and alpha; besides, he was quite good at his job. And if I don’t end up keeping this house, I’ll invite him to come back to Texas.”

Luna snorted. “So that’s three chefs, then.”

“I...” I frowned. “Well, fine. Yes. You have me there, but that’s still less than half of your number.”

She rolled her eyes, but she was smiling around the forkful of syrup-laden French toast disappearing behind her lips. It made me happy that I could bring Luna genuine enjoyment, especially after everything that had gone wrong these past few days. Or weeks. Time was starting to blur together for me, so I could only imagine what it felt like for her.

We ate in silence, but it wasn’t long before Luna had cleaned her entire plate and propped her arms up on the counter, leaning over to look at me. “You know, I really liked my job at Robby’s Garage, but...it wasn’t particularly challenging. It was fine at first, of course — I was just glad someone was willing to give me a chance. I didn’t care that internships were unpaid. But I think I was probably the hardest worker there, and I’m not trying to brag.” Luna barely paused for a breath. There was nowhere to get a word in edgewise, but I didn’t mind. It was nice to hear her talk with such enthusiasm — without having to drag any answers out of her.

“I mean it in the sense that I felt like I had to be. I was the only female there and the youngest. Robby was part of the pack, but not all the employees were, and I didn’t want to give them any reason to question why I was there. By the end, it felt like I could fix anything; but we never got anything that challenging in? All modern cars. I don’t think there was anything older than the early ‘00s... well, I take that back. Mrs. Murphy had this cute station wagon, and I’m pretty sure that thing was from the ‘90s, but she took care of that thing like clockwork, so it never had problems. The only problems we ever saw were just, like... outright neglect. Someone running their car into

the ground. Someone not changing their oil for twenty thousand miles and wondering why the engine stopped worked. Someone never changing their brake pads and wondering why the car screeched at every stoplight.”

She was still chattering as I sipped my coffee, slowly getting used to the bitterness. I was struck with the urge to move my chair closer — and frankly, I saw no reason not to. I scooped my chair over. The sound of the chair legs on the tile made Luna glance over.

“Aren’t you going to eat?” She pointed at my plate. I had eaten a few pieces of bacon and one slice of toast, but... I shrugged.

“I don’t need much,” I argued, sipping on the coffee again.

She shook her head and stole a blueberry off my plate, popping it into her mouth. “Then you shouldn’t have made it,” she argued, wagging a finger. “I’m sure you’ve never gone without, but that’s not true for everyone.”

She said it so mildly, but the gentle rebuke still stung. I frowned into my coffee cup before I put it down. “I’ll remember that next time,” I said, and I would. She was right. Even if I’d never been without, it certainly wasn’t free, and there was no actual reason to waste perfectly good food. I didn’t even have a dog to feed leftovers to.

Luna shrugged it off, but I reached over, tucking a strand of her dark hair behind her ear. I could feel her tense slightly before she exhaled, and all her muscles relaxed. With her next breath, she leaned softly into the touch, and I couldn’t help my slow smile. I shifted my hand slightly, my fingers settling on the nape of her neck. I began to work slow circles there, carefully working out the tension she held.

Groaning, Luna let her head drop forward. “That feels nice,” she mumbled, sounding sheepish that she was enjoying my touch.

I frowned a little. *She’s probably never had a massage. Not even one from a friend or a partner.* Certainly not Marnet. The thought of him with his hands on Luna made my wolf rumble again. I set the mug in my other hand down and pushed my chair back, getting to my feet. I stepped behind Luna, settling my hands on her shoulders to give her a proper massage.

I made slow, circular motions with my fingers, emulating the massages I had received in the past. I must have been doing something right because Luna’s muscles relaxed beneath me like she’d had one great exhale, and another little whimpering noise escaped her. I smiled, pushing her dark hair over her shoulder and out of the way. Without much thought, I leaned forward and kissed the back of her neck, inhaling her soft, clean scent.

Luna whimpered again and I froze, eyes flicking up. She didn't pull away though. Instead, she tipped her head to the right, exposing the side of her neck I'd just brushed her hair away from. I hummed, pleased by the invitation, and shifted my hand slightly so I could trail gentle kisses up the length of her shoulder to her neck; I paused and then nibbled on her earlobe, savoring each little noise that passed through her lips as I teased her skin.

Finally, she turned, swiveling in the island stool to look at me. Her hands remained folded in her lap, but her eyes roved every inch of my skin, traveling slowly over my torso and arms as if she wanted to memorize each inch, every swell of muscle, each line of ink. I crowded in closer, resting my hands on the island's edge as I leaned in, pressing forward into her space. Gently, I pressed my forehead against hers, allowing my eyes to close, just for a moment. Just to enjoy the moment. The soft smell of peony and clean skin.

Luna made a soft noise, and I opened my eyes. She tipped her chin up, lips slightly parted. Her gaze shifted rapidly between my eyes and my lips, and the corner of my mouth tipped up. If she wanted a kiss, she could damn well have a kiss. I shifted, dipping down to press our lips together—

And then, someone cleared their throat from the kitchen entry.

"I, ah, need to go upstairs. And... do... something..." Luna mumbled, her cheeks bright red as she moved away. I stepped back, having no desire to trap her after we'd been so rudely interrupted. She slipped away from me quickly, but not without the brush of fingertips against my elbow. Disappointment lanced through me like a bolt of pain, and it took all of my self-control not to say anything as I watched her disappear into the hallway and turned my darkening gaze on the intruder.

*Bane.*

"This had better be important," I snapped, my entire body bristling as I turned on my beta. I hated being upset with him, but the man hadn't given me any choice. Anyone with a pair of eyes (hell, anyone with even one eye) would have been able to see I was quite busy just now.

Bane stood without moving a muscle, eyes averted as he waited for me to unleash my temper. After a moment, I sighed and shook my head. Yelling at my beta might make me feel better momentarily, but it certainly wouldn't do me any good in the long run. "Come on. We'll go to the office."



If Bane didn't want to talk in public, there was likely a reason. Someone else could take care of the dishes.

Thankfully, I had the foresight to keep a change of clothing in the office closet (at my office back in Texas, both in my home and at Silverstreak Motors, I kept several — one never knew when they'd have to jump into a last-minute flight to secure an important client. That was less likely here, but the habit stuck.

Once dressed, we sat at the table. At the very least, Bane had had the good sense to bring me coffee from a shop towards the center of town. It was a boutique, but the beans weren't burnt to hell, and it tasted far better than the swill Marnet kept.

"As you said before, we'll have to lure him out," Bane said once we'd been at it for at least fifteen minutes. "I've discussed several other possibilities with some of the others. I don't see how else this could work. There's no other way."

I nodded slowly. None of the other ideas we'd shot back and forth had any merit. They were either too dangerous for my men or too likely to get us exposed by the chief of patrol. There could be human casualties. If Marnet was working with one human, I couldn't rule out the possibility that he was working with several others, and the last thing we needed was to be revealed. That wouldn't be just devastating for those of us here or even all of Silverstreak, but all of the werewolves in the American South, at the very least. I sighed and stared at the lid of my coffee cup.

"We might have to sit on it a little longer," I grumbled.

Bane made a face that mirrored precisely how I felt. "I don't like that. Not at all."

I shook my head. Patience was an important strategy, and I couldn't argue that — but I sure didn't like it, either. "Well, until we come up with a better plan, that's what we'll have to stick with." I took a sip of the coffee. "How's it going with the hacker?"

"He's still stuck. Said they must have realized we were on to their accounts and installed a countermeasure. He's certain he can crack it though."

"Did he say how long it was going to take him?"

Bane shook his head, and I sighed. *That's no good.*

"Did you talk to Seff yet?"

I grimaced at the suggestion. "No. My mother decided she wanted to

*impart wisdom* upon me last night, and I was not in the mood to be diplomatic afterward.”

Bane gave me a sympathetic look. “Probably for the best you waited, then. Tala said they’d be ready when you are. She just needs a half an hour.” He paused. “Isn’t she supposed to leave for Texas today?”

“Yes,” I muttered. “She needs to delay her flight a few hours.” When Bane raised his brows in a silent question, I shrugged. “I am taking Luna to talk to Arden today. I’ll speak with the alphas immediately after. She’ll still get back home before the day ends,” I reassured him, but the look on the man’s face said he didn’t entirely buy it. He opened his mouth and then shook his head, closing his lips before saying anything.

I frowned. “You can speak freely, Bane,” I said, motioning with my free hand.

He studied me with a guarded expression, and reluctantly, he began to speak. “We’re getting stretched thin,” he said slowly, gaze flickering between my face and the table. “With Jimmy and Mark gone, and Bob too...” My beta stopped speaking for a moment, shaking his head. The upset was apparent in his eyes, and something tightened in my chest. Sometimes I forgot the man was just as close with my men as I was — in some cases, perhaps more so. As my second, he dealt with most of the daily organization. The affairs. He knew those men. He likely felt their absence as keenly as I did.

After a moment, he shook his head, trying to shake the grief from his shoulders. “With our limited resources, we need to focus on getting Marnet. Once we get him, we’ll have more freedom in this territory.”

I pressed my lips together, studying Bane for a moment. It wasn’t difficult to parse out what he wasn’t saying. “I understand your concerns,” I said a moment later, taking a sip from the coffee cup. “But I made a promise, and I keep my promises. As I said, I will keep the trip brief, so Tala and Fiona can still return to Texas tonight if they wish.” I couldn’t rule out that Tala might want to oversee the release of the other alphas, as she was easily the most diplomatic of her, myself, and Bane, but I kept that thought to myself for the time being.

Bane watched me for a moment, something unreadable in his eyes, and after a beat too long, he gave a nod and stood up. “I understand,” he replied brusquely. “I’ll inform Tala of the plans.”

“Thank you.” As he left, I stood, walking over to the desk to open my laptop. As the computer registered my fingerprint, I looked up, frowning at

the door my beta had closed behind him. I had told him to speak freely, and I was glad he did — but something about that interaction left a sour taste in my mouth, and I couldn't exactly pin down why.

I stared at the door for several more moments before realizing I wouldn't get any work done and closed the laptop back up. I needed to go for a run and clear my head. As I ascended the stairs and paced towards my bedroom, I scowled.

*Why is it that two of my most trusted confidants can't see this is what the Silverstreak Pack needs right now?*

**LUNA**

## Claw Family Mansion

### Woodward County, Oklahoma

Once I made my way upstairs, I found myself with nothing to do. Remus hadn't grabbed any of my things when he'd taken me from the house — not that I blamed him, it was a rather extreme situation. While I didn't keep much in the way of objects, it would have been nice to have the magazine I'd purchased two days ago at the grocery store. At least I had my phone, but it didn't have its charger, so I didn't want to drain it messing around looking at cars on Pinterest or playing Sudoku.

I didn't want to stay in Remus' room, either. The thought made me pause, that I thought of it as Remus', and not Marnet's...but that had to be a good thing, right? I didn't dwell on the thought; the man had let me stay there last night, and he'd clearly slept elsewhere. He hasn't said a thing, but I didn't want to put him out any further.

That was fine, though. The mansion was huge. I was confident I could find a quiet place to tuck myself.

As it turned out, I didn't have to go far. There were two hallways upstairs, and I'd only explored the right wing; that's where all the bedrooms were. Curious, I turned left instead, and the first room I was greeted with was an expansive library. My lips curled upwards as I stepped in and inhaled deeply, my nostrils tingling as I took in the scent of paper and ink. The children's library downtown was smaller than this room!

*When was the last time I got to go to a library?*

Between working and my chores around the house, I rarely made time for myself to read. At best, I picked up automotive magazines when I went to the grocery store, or maybe the occasional lifestyle magazine if I felt particularly homemaker-y. It was a rare feeling, but it happened.

I loved books, though. I used to walk the girls to the children's library, and then when the twins got old enough, I took them, too. (There was always a small shelf for the guardians taking children to the library, and the woman who worked at the front desk had been very kind. I imagined she was a bit what having a grandmother was like, if I'd had one.)

I wandered further into the library, trailing my fingers over the

bookshelves. There were a variety of titles here, from classic literature to books that looked like texts on a variety of topics. *It can't be Marnet's*, I thought with a wry smile. The home had been in his family for... at least two generations, but I was pretty confident his grandfather had been here, too. Either Noah or Noah's father had clearly been a reader.

*Or maybe one of the alpha's mates*, I thought, finding a shelf that seemed to contain several mystery novels. I pulled and inspected a few, finding a title and a cover that appealed to me.

*One Night in France: A Carol Thorton Mystery*

I found a plush armchair by one of the windows and settled in to read.

"A *WEEK IN FRANCE*? Oh, that's a good one. But wait until you get to *A Month in France*."

I jerked at the sound of a voice, so involved in the book I hadn't heard anyone approach. The first novel sat on the small table next to my chair; the first mystery had been solved, but Carol had uncovered an even deeper plot, requiring her return to France. Naturally, I picked up the second book and started reading immediately.

"There's a third?" I asked, blinking a bit owlishly. I hadn't even looked at the books sitting next to *A Week in France* as I plucked it off the shelf. I frowned at Tala. "Don't you spoil this for me!"

She grinned, holding up a plate of sandwiches. "You missed lunch," she said, clearly avoiding the subject. "I thought you might want to eat. I had a phone call at lunchtime, so I thought we could share!"

I couldn't help but smile back, noting the page number before closing the novel and setting it to the side. "You didn't have to bring me lunch."

"I didn't." She shrugged. "But I eat so fast if I take a meal by myself, and I've been told more than once it's not healthy. Besides, I haven't seen you since you got here. I wanted to say hello!"

I moved the books from the table to the floor, and Tala set the plate on the table before grabbing one of the other armchairs and pushing it closer. When she sat, she motioned at the plate. "I know you're not a vegetarian, I didn't know if you liked lunch meat, so I made veggie and hummus sandwiches. The hummus is delicious; I found a great Middle Eastern market in Oklahoma City the other day and brought back an entire bucket's worth. Have to find a way to use it all!"

I laughed and reached for one of the sandwiches. After taking a careful bite, I made a pleased noise. Despite my hesitation, it tasted great! “I’ve never had anything like this before,” I admitted before taking another bite. “I always thought hummus was just for dipping things into.”

Tala nodded, humming an affirmative before she swallowed. “Me too. Earlier, I had to look up ‘ways to use hummus’ and this recipe came up. We had everything required in the fridge, so I thought, ‘why not?’” She shrugged and tipped her head. “I’d definitely make it again.”

“Certainly beats lunch meat,” I agreed. “I think I made a ham and cheese sandwich for lunch every day in high school. If I never eat another one, it will be too soon.”

Tala snorted and pretended to gag; I couldn’t help but giggle. I had done it because it was simple and easy. I never had to think about putting it together, and Lynn always bought ham and cheese for the boys, so she never complained about it being on the shopping list.

“I always had hot lunch in high school. I thought it made me cool,” Tala admitted, looking slightly abashed. “Never mind that some of my friends brought the most amazing looking lunches from home; I was determined to eat that cardboard-flavored pizza.”

It was my turn to snort and shake my head. “I have no idea what possesses high schoolers to do the things they do,” I replied. “I definitely could have made other things. I just... I didn’t. I was also determined to use a sling bag instead of a backpack, even though it killed my shoulders!”

Tala nodded enthusiastically. “Me too! I mean, I still think they’re pretty cute, but... could you imagine Remus’ face if I arrived at a meeting with a sling bag instead of my briefcase?”

I paused for a moment, trying to picture the alpha’s face. I couldn’t help but giggle again. “Yeah, I don’t think that would fly.”

“Not at all. I wouldn’t call him particularly uptight, but he is pretty strict in how we represent Silverstreak in front of clients and partners, which is fine. The CFO I replaced was... hmm. He was very determined to do things a certain way, even though ‘those ways’ were outdated twenty years ago.” She rolled her eyes. “He was a friend of Remington’s, though, so I think Fiona advocated for him far longer than he deserved.”

“Remus certainly seems like he trusts you,” I hazarded, taking another bite of my sandwich.

She gave a nod. “As he damn should! I finished a bachelor’s and master’s

program at Harvard to prove my financial knowledge. And I took internships outside the company, too. My aunt would have made sure I got a great position at Silverstreak, but I didn't want anyone to think I got my job because I'm Remus' cousin. I'm sure some still do, but..." Tala gave a casual shrug. "Haters gonna hate, I guess."

I smiled a little, admiring how easily Tala let that roll off her shoulders. I had no doubt she was right; she was a young, successful businesswoman. Someone was always looking to pick that apart.

Tala finished off her sandwich and glanced back down at the books I'd been reading. "Okay, I won't spoil it for you but — who do you like better, Craig or Simon?" she asked, referring to Carol's two potential love interests. The main character hadn't chosen either of them at my current reading point, and I wasn't certain that Simon wasn't secretly acting against her.

"Craig," I answered, shrugging one shoulder. "He's a bit stand-offish, but I think there's a good heart buried under that prickly exterior." Tala eyed me with a smug smile and I frowned. "What?"

"What?" she parroted back.

"What's that look for?"

"Oh, nothing." She shook her head. "Plus, he's British, right? He probably has a cute accent."

"Definitely," I agreed, giving Tala a suspicious look. "Why, who's your favorite? Simon?"

She shrugged one shoulder. "Oh, not really. They both sounded pretty hot, but neither were my type."

I raised my brows, suddenly intrigued. "No? Then what is your type?" I leaned in over the arm of my chair. "Is there someone special back in Texas?"

Tala snorted and rolled her eyes. "Nope. I've been on a few dates here and there over the past few years, but nothing's stuck. Either they can handle me outside the sheets but not in, or vice versa. I still haven't found a man who can handle the whole package: a high-powered businesswoman who deserves to be treated like a damn queen."

I almost choked on my tongue; *that wasn't the response I was expecting!*

The other woman's eyes widened and her face flushed pink. "Oh! I'm sorry, that was kind of thoughtless of me, wasn't it?"

I held up a hand and shook my head. "No, no problem!" I said, clearing my throat. "You just surprised me. Marnet Claw is old news." I shrugged.



“I’m ready to leave him behind me.” And even if thoughts of the man still occasionally snagged at my heart like thorns on a briar, I knew I would be better off leaving the entire briar patch behind. Eventually, the hurt would fade, and Marnet certainly didn’t deserve to be taking up my thoughts rent free.

Tala’s expression softened into a warm smile. “Well, that’s good to hear,” she replied, giving a slight nod. “Plenty of fish in the sea, and all that.”

“Yeah,” I replied, very aware of a certain dark-haired alpha now starring in my mind’s eye. “Something like that.”

Before Tala could ask any further, someone else entered the library. We both looked up, spotting Remus’ beta, Bane. I smiled at the man, giving a small nod, but he stared right through me. He didn’t really look at Tala, either. “Remus is waiting for Luna downstairs,” he reported.

My heart lurched. I had almost forgotten what I had to do this afternoon... and I might have imagined it, but Bane sounded... unhappy. I worried the inside of my lip, slowly getting to my feet.

“Jeez, Bane, smile a little. Who peed on your paws, huh?” Tala laughed, scooping up the plate as she also got to her feet. Bane simply gave her a hard look, departing the room without another word.

Tala just shook her head, muttering a quiet “grump” to me before giving me a wave. “I’ll see you later.”

I nodded and hurried out of the library.

REMUS WAS WAITING for me outside, leaning casually against a black SUV. He had changed into a pair of well-fitted slacks, Oxford shoes, and a white button-down. His hair had been pulled back into the signature bun, and he looked casual as he scrolled on his phone. He cut a gorgeous figure (and this was his usual look), but I missed the relaxed version of Remus I had met on the balcony this morning.

He glanced up as I made my way down the front steps, offering me a small smile. “Hello, Luna,” he greeted me. In one fluid motion, he turned, pocketing his phone and opening the back seat door for me. “Your chariot awaits.”

Despite myself, I could feel my cheeks coloring. No one ever opened doors for me. I knew it was a little thing and probably just second nature to a man like Remus, but it still felt...nice. He offered me a hand as I stepped

inside and got myself seated; before I could protest, he leaned over me to buckle my seatbelt. If my cheeks were pink before, I was sure they were bright red now. I could have done that myself, but there was something nice about having him so close.

And oh, he smelled so nice. It took real effort not to lean in and inhale deeply; if the driver wasn't seated directly ahead of me, I might have done just that.

Instead, I could only squeak out a thank you, flashing Remus a quick smile before he shut the door, circling the car to let himself into the front seat. "And we're off," he hummed, sounding much more joyful than I felt. Even the adrenaline rush from having him close couldn't quell the butterflies starting to flap around my stomach.

"We're off," I managed weakly, staring determinedly out the window.

To my great relief, Remus didn't push the conversation any further than that.

THE TWO-HOUR DRIVE to Oklahoma City was silent. After asking if the temperature was comfortable, the alpha hadn't said another thing. If I hadn't been so nervous, I might have minded more, but it felt like all I could do was run through the questions I wanted to ask my father and play out all the possible answers he might give me.

By the time we arrived, I was so lost inside my head, I hadn't even realized the car had stopped until the driver opened the door for me. I startled violently, hand on my heart as it took my brain a second to catch up.

"Apologies, miss," the driver murmured gruffly, looking abashed.

Heat flamed across my cheeks, and I shook my head, quickly undoing my seatbelt so I could escape. "No worries," I murmured back, not sure who was more embarrassed — me or him. Thankfully, he didn't say anything else, allowing me to meet Remus quickly on the other side. If he had noticed that I'd spaced out, he didn't say anything, instead motioning for me to follow him inside the stark, gray building. It was so industrial and plain; anyone walking by likely thought it was a storage unit or a small manufacturing facility.

I lifted my nose to sniff the air and immediately regretted it. The air was thick with pungent smells, but none of them were of wolves, agitated or otherwise. It stunk like old machine oil, the acrid smell of a burnt clutch, and

worst of all, the stench of grease well past its prime. I coughed and gagged as my hand flew up to my nose.

Beside me, Remus snickered softly, head tipped to one side. “Smells like good old industrial America, doesn’t it?” he asked, pausing next to an innocuous door.

I snorted, willing the odor to leave my poor nostrils. “Smells like the filthiest garage I’ve ever been around,” I replied, raising a brow. “How the heck did you get it to smell like an abandoned truck someone decided to drive again out of sheer spite?”

The question made the man laugh. “Because I have someone driving a previously abandoned truck around at least three times a day. Wouldn’t do to smell like anything more interesting, would it?” He raised his brows. “You never know who’s scouting around. Now, come inside.”

He held the door open for me, and I stepped inside, relieved to find the building both cool and blessedly stink free. It looked just as industrial inside as it did outside, but there was a total lack of equipment. Remus didn’t say anything else, leading me down a hallway to a single room. “Your father is in here,” he said, nodding at the door we stopped in front of.

I paused, worrying my hands. “Is Lynn in there, too?”

Remus snorted. “There was no way we’d keep the two of them together. It doesn’t matter if we want information from Arden, Lynn constantly speaks over him, no matter how important or inane the topic is.”

I couldn’t help the small roll of my eyes. *Yeah, that sure sounds like her.* Mildly comforted knowing I wouldn’t have to deal with my stepmother, I reached for the handle but found myself pausing again. I looked over to ask Remus something else, but the alpha was already heading back the way we’d come, clearly giving me privacy. I swallowed the lump in my throat and stared back at the door. *Okay, Luna. It’s now or never. You can do this. You told Marnet off, and he’s an alpha. You can do this, too.*

ARDEN WAS SITTING on a small cot when I stepped inside, reading what looked like a novel. I was relieved to see that even if the man looked a bit haggard, he looked healthy enough — he hadn’t lost weight, nor did he have any symptoms of physical coercion. *Good.* I let out a breath I didn’t realize I’d been holding; I had no reason to think Remus would torture his captives, but... I had been wrong before. I would rather see something with my own

eyes than believe what I'd been told.

That hadn't gotten me very far at all, had it?

"Dad," I said, clearing my throat softly.

He glanced up, slightly disoriented. "Luna?" he asked, setting the book down as he got to his feet. "What are you doing here? Where are the twins? Are they with the girls?"

I blinked, slightly taken aback by the barrage. As long as I'd known him, my father had been a man of few words — and that wasn't specific to me, either. Lynn spoke more than enough for the two of them, and he always seemed content to let her talk and then some. The only way to get him to talk was to go at it for hours or get a few drinks in him. And they couldn't just be standard human-grade drinks, either.

*Well, maybe I'll get a few answers out of him today.* It was a grim thought, but that's why I was here. "Why did you lie to me about my mother? About her death?" I asked, folding my arms over my chest.

The man stared right through me like I hadn't said a word. "Have Nyx and Nox been going to school? I know kids that age don't want to, but they need to. It's important." He paused and then looked at me directly, our eyes locking. "Have you checked on them, Luna?"

I frowned, holding my arms a little tighter. "Of course I did, as soon as I could after the absolute *beating* Marnet gave me," I replied sharply. It came as no surprise that Lynn had been embarrassed by my behavior, but when wasn't she? Clearly, it was too much to hope that my father was concerned about my welfare.

The thought made me scowl. "Is that all you care about?" I snorted. "Wait, don't answer that. You always preferred Lynn's children over me, but clearly, I overestimated your parental care. It was fine as long as I wasn't actively dying, right?"

My father stared at me and didn't say anything, so I kept talking. "Are you going to tell me, then? Why you lied about my mother's supposed death? Or the fact that she was banished and now living in Texas? Or that I had other family members there, like cousins or—?"

"Is that why you betrayed the pack?" Arden asked, straightening up suddenly. "You thought if there were no pack, you'd be free to go to Texas?"

"What?" The sheer absurdity of it made me pause. I shook my head, hard. "Of course not! Until two weeks ago, I thought I had a future with Marnet," I growled, the hair on the back of my neck prickling. "I never would have

endangered that. Or *you*, not that you've done much to deserve that," I added, standing up a bit straighter myself. "I can't believe you know so little about me that you think I'm a traitor."

He shrugged one shoulder. "I thought I knew my daughter better than that, too, but one of us has been free to roam since Remus Silverstreak got here, and one of us has been stuck in a fucking cage, so maybe there was a deal to strike," he replied mildly as if he wasn't throwing down an accusation.

I snorted. "Athena and Artemis are free to roam, too, and it's not because they're minors or anything. And they didn't pledge to the Silverstreak pack. Why don't you ask them?"

"Don't be smart with me, girl."

"Or *what*?" I demanded, my hands flying to my sides as my fingers balled into fists. "You'll keep lying to me? You'll somehow find a way to make me even more estranged from your family than I already am?" I hadn't meant to lose my temper, but I didn't feel bad about it. I didn't think I could have made myself feel bad even if I wanted to. "Are you going to tell me the truth about my mother or not?"

Arden stared at me with a stony expression, now folding his arms over his chest. I sighed. *This was a damn mistake. I don't know why I thought he would tell me anything.*

"Fine," I said, shaking my head. "If that's how it's going to be, *fine*. I've done nothing but be loyal to you and do whatever you and Lynn asked me to do; I took care of *your* kids when you didn't feel like it. I never complained about how shitty your mate was to me, how bratty and vapid your stepdaughters were, or how obnoxious the twins were, but you know what? Fuck. You." I pointed a finger at him, barely aware the digit was trembling with the barely contained rage. "Fuck you. I had a loving home, and you had no right to take me away from it and treat me like *shit*."

Arden stared at me impassively, and I turned to leave. I grabbed the handle, about to open the door, and he muttered something. I glowered over my shoulder. "What was that?"

"I did all this to protect you," he grumbled. "And if you can't see that, you're more like your mother than I thought."

I paused for another half second and shook my head. *The last-ditch effort of a spent man. Besides, I don't have the time or the energy for riddles.* If my father wanted to protect me, he'd had years to do that.

“You’re right,” I said, giving him one last frown. “I’m more like her than I’ll ever be like you.” And it was a damn good thing, too; where the hell would I be now if I hadn’t had my mother to teach me when I was a young girl?

I turned towards the door. “Goodbye, Arden Highborn. Have a nice life.” He didn’t deserve it, but my mother hadn’t raised me to be a spiteful person. I didn’t have it in me to wish him ill.

Without another word, I let myself out of the small holding room and slammed the door behind me. *If I want answers, I need to speak to my mother. My very alive mother.*

# REMUS

~~Claw Family Mansion~~

## Remus' Oklahoma Mansion

### Woodward County, Oklahoma

The sun had started its descent by the time we arrived back at the Claw mansion. (I was going to need a better name for it, but I hadn't had the time to figure out something creative between trying to find Marnet and keeping tabs on business back in Texas. I'd just have to call it my Oklahoma home for now.) Luna had come back from seeing her father with a fierce scowl and had barely said two words since. Even dinner out in the city didn't interest her, so we returned. I didn't mind the silence of the road. That's how I usually traveled when I wasn't on the jet; the car was a place to catch up on my emails as my driver took me from one meeting to the next.

There was something uncomfortable about this, though, and it was only reinforced by the way Luna all but threw herself from the car the moment my driver cut the engine, already halfway up the stairs to the front door before he could even get his seatbelt off. I shook my head as I let myself out. It was obvious Luna needed space.

*I'm going to need to make arrangements for her in Texas.* It seemed obvious to me that she had nothing keeping her here in Oklahoma any longer, so I'd operate under that assumption until she told me otherwise.

Once inside, I reached for my phone, but before I could even open the home screen, Tala appeared from around a corner. "Ah, there you are," my cousin said, straightening my collar. "I've gotten the other alphas ready, as you've asked. They've been waiting."

I grimaced internally. *Right. I'd almost forgotten I'd asked Tala to do that before I left.* There had been an unplanned road trip down to Oklahoma City between the request and now — perhaps it was for the best that Luna wasn't interested in dinner. I could imagine myself being out all night with her if she was in the mood, and while I really couldn't care less about making York wait... making Tala wait hours was something I strove to avoid. She was a good employee and a hard worker, but she didn't thrive in a male-dominated industry by being some weak-willed wallflower.

"Well, let's get this over with, then," I replied, nodding for her to lead the way. I still intended to release them. I couldn't keep splitting my focus, and



the detention had served its purpose. Marnet did not receive aid from any of them (or their packs), though unfortunately, he had found it elsewhere.

Tala gave a quick nod and walked briskly towards the room where we'd been keeping the other alphas. After a moment, she glanced over at me. Before I could remark, she raised a brow. "Remus, is there anything going on between you and Luna?"

Of all the things I was expecting her to ask, that wasn't on the list. I almost swallowed my tongue, covering it with a soft cough. "Are you asking as CFO Tanner or as my cousin, Tala?" I replied, buying myself just a few more seconds.

She snorted softly. "As your cousin, obviously. Your CFO doesn't care if you date, whom you sleep with, or if you sleep with anyone at all, as long as it's not a conflict of interest or an ethical dilemma for the company."

I couldn't help but huff in return. I should have known; of all my family members, Tala was the least likely to judge, and she had always been much better at separating business and personal than anyone else I knew, even Bane. After a moment, I gave a slight nod. Perhaps it would help to get some of this off of my chest.

"She's...had an effect on me, I guess you could say. I'm not sure where it's going, what it might mean. But she's decided to go to Texas." I was quiet for a moment before tacking on one last thought. "Her family's there. She didn't know before. But maybe there..." I trailed off with a shrug, unsure where I was trying to go with that thought. I had so many balls in the air right now, it was hard for me to imagine what 'maybe once we're in Texas' could look like.

I did wonder, though. If we had the time and no distractions, where would our feelings take us? And was that even a valid question? I was the alpha of a rapidly expanding territory *and* the head of Silverstreak Motors. Help or not, I was an extremely busy man. Did I even have the time to try to figure out where this could go?

Yes or no, maybe I'd find the answers in Texas.

Tala slowed her pace a little as if reading my thoughts. There was a small smile on her painted lips as she reached over, this time squeezing my shoulder with affection, rather than efficient quickness. "I know feelings have never come easily for you, Remy," she murmured quietly, her eyes warm, "but it's good you're not ignoring them."

I wanted to argue, but Tala looked... well, she looked relatively happy,

all things considered, and I didn't want to ruin that. She kept speaking. "And as cliché, as it sounds, only time will make things clearer, no matter what 'clearer' looks like." She paused for a moment, pursing her lips thoughtfully. "You know, though, of all the women I've seen you with over the years, Luna's pretty high on my list. Honestly, I think she's lasted longer than any of the other ones, and you haven't even kissed her yet." Tala flashed me a wink. "Maybe that's the secret. We need to start keeping around women you haven't kissed."

While she chuckled, I looked straight ahead — there was no need for her to know about the moment in the pool, and that wasn't about to change. I tipped my head in her direction. "You've always had good taste in character," I said instead, trying to steer the conversation; that part was even true. I often brought her to meetings with potential clients not just because her skill with finance was practically unmatched but because the woman also had an excellent ability to get a read on someone's vibe very quickly. She'd helped us avoid more than one dud over the years.

Tala winked, clearly pleased by the flattery. "What can I say? It's a skill." The playfulness quickly faded back to the undercurrent of familial warmth. "Seriously though, Remus, there is just... hm. There's something about Luna I can't quite put my finger on, but I don't mind that. I kind of like it, actually."

I couldn't help the way the corner of my mouth tipped upwards. *It seems Luna affects Tala, too.*

My cousin reached out and touched my hand before I could grab the doorknob. "Just so you know — I pushed back the trip to Texas. The board will manage for another day or two, and I wanted to be here to help you facilitate... well, whatever comes out of this." She nodded towards the door as she let me go.

I gave her a slight nod. "You didn't have to do that — but I appreciate it."

If Tala had anything more to say, the moment was lost as I reached for the door behind which the alphas were kept. She schooled her expression to a steely neutral, and I straightened my shoulders, taking in a long, slow breath as I settled my heart rate. Settled any adrenaline trying to surge through me. I would give these alphas absolutely nothing to go on. Once Tala and I exchanged a silent look, I opened the door and stepped inside.

JUST AS TALA SAID, all three alphas were waiting for me — York was even awake and looking relatively sober. That was a step in the right direction. He was looking surly, but that didn't surprise me. The man looked unhappy more often than not, and I wasn't under any delusions that a brief stay in captivity improved his mood.

I cleared my throat before the questions could start. "You're all going to be released," I told them once the door was shut behind me. Tala stood nearby; hands folded quietly as she observed. "You and any pack members who have remained in Oklahoma will be escorted to your territory borders where you will be free to go."

Though the other two look impassive, York uttered a low growl. I curled my upper lip in a snarl, my wolf already starting to bristle. At the best of times, I had no patience for that man, and his attitude certainly wasn't helping matters. "I don't *have* to release you, York," I snapped. "I have no lack of wolves both here and in Texas, and they are ready to move if I so much as give the word."

An all-out war was the last thing I wanted, but York didn't need to know that. Of all the wolves, I suspected him to be the weakest alpha after Marnet, and if worse came to worst, I was confident we could handle York and the Shadow Rock Pack.

Gith cleared his throat and raised a brow at York. He said nothing, but the reaction was enough to silence the younger man. "As I was saying — we have located Marnet, and if any of you opt to shelter him, there will be consequences."

I settled my gaze directly on York; I sorely doubted that neither Gith nor Seff wanted any more to do with Marnet than I did. Once the other alpha finally looked away from my stare, I eyed the other two. Where York was itching to leave, Gith seemed impartial — but then, the oldest of the southern alphas was always very careful with his words, so I wasn't surprised he was keeping his cards close to his chest. I looked over my shoulder and nodded to my guards.

York was escorted first, followed by Gith. When Seff stepped forward to follow, the remaining guards held out a hand. His brown eyes met mine, the confusion evident. "Remus, what's going on?" he asked, unable to hide some of the trepidation.

"I need a bit of help," I replied, pushing my hands into my pockets as I tried to relax my posture. Seff was not the man I wanted as an enemy.

“There’s an offshore account I’ve been tracing, and the source goes back to Arkansas. I was hoping you could help me with it.”

Seff frowned, folding his arms over his chest. “While I’m flattered you seem to think I know everything that goes on in my territory, there are some things outside of my reach — especially matters that are run by humans,” he replied, raising one brow.

I shrugged. “Sure, but I’m sure you have your own networks. You can find out. I need that information before you leave Oklahoma, Seff.”

The man’s confused furrow turned into an outright scowl. “Are you serious? What the hell, Remus — I thought we were friends. That’s not how you treat your friends.”

I bristled at the veiled accusation. “It’s nothing personal,” I replied, fighting the urge to snap at him.

Seff held up a hand before I could say more. “No, it is personal,” he replied, jaw tight. I could hear the hint of a growl at the back of his voice, but the other alpha was clearly doing a better job at restraining his wolf. “We were friends, Remus, and if you trusted me like you said you did, you’d have told me what you were planning. Hell, you might have even told me not to come if you didn’t want my involvement! You wouldn’t fucking *imprison me.*”

The tension grew in his shoulders as he stood up a little straighter. If we were in our wolf forms, I’m sure there would be bared teeth and flattened ears as we sized each other up — no one wanted a fight, but Seff wasn’t backing off his point. We stared each other down for a few silent moments before I gritted my teeth.

“Fine,” I hissed, flashing my teeth. “I maintain it had to be a secret, but you are correct. I should have trusted you enough to not contain you like Gith and York.”

Seff narrowed his eyes for a moment and then inclined his head. I was relieved he didn’t push for more — frankly, I wasn’t sure I had it in me to go beyond that at the moment. *Maybe he knows me better than I gave him credit for.*

I shook the thought off. “I need to know what the money is for; if I need to prepare for something Marnet is hiding.” I frowned a little harder. “If anything, I’ve done you a favor sharing this information with you. I have no idea who it’s been given to, or why. For all you know, Marnet is paying someone to overthrow you and take control of the Red Paw Pack’s territory.”

Seff stiffened slightly as the gears began to turn. Apparently, he couldn't rule out that possibility, either. "A favor?" He scoffed slightly. "Don't get too full of yourself, Remus. I will find a way to get the information for you, but only on one condition."

I raised a brow. "And that is?"

"You swear a blood oath to me that neither you nor the wolves of Silverstreak will bring harm to myself or the wolves of Red Paw."

I pressed my lips together in a thin line. "That's not how you treat a friend, Seff," I rumbled.

He snorted. "It's nothing personal, Remus," Seff said, echoing my earlier statement, "but I need an assurance that what happened to Marnet and Lupus Claw isn't going to happen to me or my kin."

I paused, studying Seff for a moment. Obviously, he wasn't going to budge on this particular request; it was only the severity of the matter that gave me any sort of hesitation. Blood oaths were an old sort of magic, sworn between one supernatural creature and another. I'd never heard of a werewolf entering one with any other creature, but the stories old grannies told indicated it could work. I'd even heard such an oath could be struck with a human; I wouldn't be surprised if that were true. The oldest magics were the most powerful types.

That aside, I never considered Seff a threat; I never suspected the man of having any interest in my territory, nor did I think him so unstable he'd lead to his territory's collapse. I even liked the man. Compared to some of the other southern alphas, he was practically a joy to work with. In reality, Seff might even be the key to preventing this from becoming a war of attrition. I needed him; his terms were some I could abide by.

"Very well," I said, nodding my head. "I accept your terms."

The corners of Seff's mouth flicked upwards, and he looked like he was about to say something when Tala piped up.

"I don't mean to interrupt, but a blood oath is an extremely serious matter," she said, stepping forward. "We should contact the elders before engaging in anything that powerful. They can never be broken."

Seff tipped his head in her direction, offering her a small smile. "That's how Remus knows he can trust me," the other alpha replied, his gaze flicking back to me. "And that's how I know I can trust him. Remus wants Marnet, and time is of the essence. With the oath in place, I'll do everything I can to uncover who owns the account Remus found and any other information

related to them.”

I hummed, the mention of trust stirring a memory. “I do have one question,” I murmured, eyeing Seff again. “The night of the Moonmate ceremony — you knew what I was about to do, didn’t you?”

Seff eyed me right back before he shrugged his shoulders and nodded. “Yes. I did. I thought it was a terrible idea, so I came to stop you. Clearly, a bit too late.”

“How did you know?” I asked, narrowing my eyes.

The look Seff gave me in response could have been described as downright cheeky. “You weren’t the only alpha keeping an eye on Oklahoma, Remus. I’d have been the first to agree with you if you’d called some sort of meeting about the territory’s instability.” He shrugged. “I have people tucked away in places, too.”

When my stare didn’t lessen in intensity, he shrugged again. “I had a young woman working on gathering intelligence on some business happening in the city; she came across some heavily armed guards. One of them had a very distinguishable Silverstreak tattoo. It didn’t take a genius to put two and two together to get four. She did call me, but it couldn’t have been more than minutes before you gave an order. Even if I wanted to talk you out of it, I was hardly about to put myself in the middle.” Seff paused. “We agree on the ends, but not the means.”

My expression softened and I shook my head. “You must have a clever agent. No one had any idea.” Knowing some of the guards, a pretty young lady admiring their arms was probably the exact thing they wanted.

Seff was right about one thing, though — he never did try to get in the middle of my plans, even if he claimed not to agree with them. I didn’t have a reason to doubt his intentions. “Fine,” I said.

“Good,” Seff hummed, nodding his head. “A blood oath is a win for us both, Remus.”

I gave a slight nod; I wasn’t sure if I agreed with the sentiment, but I would demand the same allowance if I was in Seff’s position. I glanced over to one of the remaining guards. “Do you have a knife?”

The man nodded silently, approaching to hand me a pocketknife. I nodded my thanks before spreading my right palm, using my left hand to slice a quick gash over it. Hot, red blood welled up immediately, and I quickly handed the blade over for Seff to do the same. A moment later, I held out my hand, and he took it; to anyone else, it may look like we were simply

shaking on a deal, but nothing could be further from the truth.

I felt my wolf surge to the surface, the sensation of Seff's power making my arm tingle like I'd grabbed an electric fence. I felt my skin prickle and my wolf snarl; as soon as the sensation had surged forward, it ebbed away again, like the tide going back out to sea. When I released his hand, neither of us had any wound to speak of.

"It's done," I said, pleased with how smoothly it had gone. I glanced over at where Tala still stood, beckoning her over with one hand. "Since we will be working much more closely now, Seff, I'd like you to meet my cousin, Tala Tanner. She, alongside my beta, Bane, is the wolf you will likely have the most contact with, outside of myself."

Seff beamed as Tala stepped forward, offering her a cheery smile and a beam. "A pleasure to meet you, Miss Tanner."

To my surprise, Tala smiled in return as she shook his hand with a firm grip. "Tala is fine. And I believe the pleasure is all mine, Seff. The pleasure is mine."

**LUNA**



## Remus' Oklahoma Mansion

### Woodward County, Oklahoma

It wasn't even close to a normal bedtime when we returned to Remus' mansion, but I had disappeared into his bedroom anyways. I had nowhere else to hide, and the last thing I wanted to do right now was explain to someone why I was so upset. I didn't want to explain what my father had said or why I thought I'd get a different answer. Even the thought of it now made me clench my jaw and grind my teeth; the stress had left me without an appetite and with a whirling mind.

A bath hadn't helped much, either. The bathtub was certainly roomy enough — I was pretty confident you could fit a party of four in there — but no position seemed comfortable, and I couldn't get the water temperature right. I couldn't figure out how to turn on the tub's jets, either. I got into bed just as frustrated as I'd gotten into the tub, but at least I was clean.

I shut my eyes and tried to count sheep. Every time it felt like I might finally drift off, another thought occurred. My mind supplied me with stupid questions like *How come you didn't realize he was lying?* or *What would it have been like if your father had left your mother alone?* None of the questions would get me anywhere (except for maybe feeling even worse than I already was), but I couldn't stop the internal monologue from rambling on.

I rolled over, pulling one of the pillows over my head. It had a faint scent. Remus?

*What do you think you're doing with him? What if he's just like Marnet?* My mind whispered traitorous thoughts and I groaned, tossing the pillow away and rolling onto my other side. I pulled the blankets tightly against my chest. *Why the hell would Marnet do that to me, anyway? Maybe I could have stopped him if I had just—*

I sat up abruptly, shaking my head back and forth. "No," I told myself firmly, hugging my arms against my chest as I scowled into the dark. I might not have the answer to a 'why,' but I was not responsible for Marnet's crappy behavior. I had to keep telling myself that, and maybe eventually, I'd stop asking myself that question.

I was wide awake now, though. I leaned over to grab my phone off the

nightstand, scowling gently as it cheerily informed me it was 1:07 a.m. Not that late, but I'd had a hard afternoon, and I just wanted to get some rest. Maybe I'd wake up and, miraculously, realize it was all a nightmare. That Arden never actually lied to me about my mother. That I got along with my stepmother, stepsisters and half-brothers. That I had a mate who loved me.

My shoulders slumped and I sighed. Wishful thinking wasn't going to get me very far. *Maybe you just need to get out of this room.* Most of Marnet's things were gone at this point, but I was still thinking about the man. I pushed myself out of bed, gathering up the blanket and a pillow in my arms. I had no idea which guest rooms were currently occupied, and I certainly didn't want to open the door on someone sleeping...

*That's okay. I don't mind the couch if it means I actually get some sleep.*

I trundled quietly down the stairs, careful to make sure each footfall was delicate and quiet. I was grateful the rooms were largely open; combined with the fact I'd been in and out several times now, it made it relatively easy to navigate my way towards the lavish living room without bumping into anything.

I passed the office on my way and I paused, resting a hand on the solid wooden door. *Remus is in there.* He had told me there was a pullout couch or something; the room smelled heavily of him, even out here, so I knew he was sleeping inside. *I should let him know he can have his room back.*

It wouldn't hurt to see him, either. The thought of seeing Remus just woken up, expression still soft and sleepy, made my stomach clench and my heart do something like a backflip. My mouth watered, and I held my bedding a little closer to my chest before I realized I was holding my breath.

*Down, girl. You're just really stressed out right now. Coming on to Remus like this isn't going to solve anything.*

I forced myself to take a slow breath and step away from the room. With a bit of distance, the smell started to fade, and I got a few of my more logical brain cells back in working order. There was no need for that. Whatever was going on between me and Remus was nice, and there was no reason to ruin it because I was having a hard time falling asleep. There were other cures for that.

I finished making my way to the living room and set up my blanket and pillow on one of the fabric couches. The textile was soft beneath my skin, and I was grateful that whoever decorated the house hadn't opted for leather seating instead — the idea of getting my skin stuck to the couch while I slept

made me wince preemptively.

Though the couch was comfortably soft and the room was at a comfortable temperature, I still found myself restless. Every time I closed my mind, more pesky thoughts arose. *Why didn't your mother fight for you?* my mind asked. As soon as I rolled over, it posed another question. *Do you really think things will be different in Texas? Sure, it's hard to get much worse than Arden and his family, but the devil you know is better than the devil you don't.*

I rolled onto my stomach and grabbed the pillow, shoving my face against the fabric to muffle a tiny yell of aggravation. *Just let me sleep!* I pleaded with myself, but the anxious thoughts bubbled up one by one. My restless thoughts were only fueling my wolf, who was practically pacing with her growing sense of frustration. That didn't exactly make my quest to slip into dreamland any easier.

With a groan, I sat back up, rubbing my eyes as I stared blearily into the room. Not far from the couch was the wet bar, a silver tray with a bottle of whiskey on top. It had been opened, but the amber liquid glinted in the low light, more tempting than usual. After a moment, I shrugged and got to my feet.

*Well, maybe a nightcap will help me take the edge off. Nothing else has done me any good.*

I grabbed my phone before walking over to the bar, wincing at the time of 2:13 a.m. The night was slipping away from me, and I was no closer to sleep than I was an hour ago.

Uncapping the bottle, I grabbed one of the glasses on the shelves and poured myself a modest cup. Eyeing it only for a moment, I tossed my head back and downed it, wincing as the whiskey slipped down my throat. It was probably much too nice to shoot like that, I realized belatedly, and poured myself another glass. The serving was a little healthier.

This time, I lifted the glass to my lips to take a sip, opening my phone back up. I flipped through a few apps before deciding that maybe a song would help me feel a little better. The Head and the Heart had always touched my heart in a special way, even if they weren't like most of the other music I listened to. Selecting a playlist revolving around the band, I set my phone on the bar and turned the volume up just enough to hear it.

I glanced over my shoulder in the direction of the stairs and shrugged. The bedrooms were far enough away that I was pretty sure I wouldn't be

bothering anyone, even with a werewolf's sense of hearing.

I hummed softly along with the song, absently swaying to the music as I took another sip of the whiskey. I could already feel the warmth blooming in my stomach and chest, and I eyed the drink with a wry smile. *I should have known.* Of course, Marnet would stock his bar with the top-shelf stuff before the Moonmate ceremony. You couldn't get the really good stuff at any bars; humans didn't have the same tolerance as a werewolf.

I sipped leisurely, eyeing the glass again as I continued to hum. At least with the music, my thoughts weren't buzzing quite so loudly. I tipped my head back as I closed my eyes, murmuring along with the song's chorus. I took another sip, turning myself in a slow spin. Suddenly, a very familiar scent tickled my nostrils.

My eyes widened as I turned back around, knowing at once it was Remus who was approaching.

"Need some company?" he murmured, those dark eyes not sleepy.

I swallowed my whiskey and shrugged. "It's your house," I replied, unsure of the correct answer. He simply snorted and held out a hand, motioning for my glass.

Silently, I handed it over and watched as he poured two glasses of whiskey, handing mine back to me. As I took a small sip, the song turned over, and I realized belatedly I'd left the music on. Flushing, I reached for my phone, sitting on the bar top. "Sorry for making noise," I murmured, fumbling to turn the app off with one hand.

Remus shook his head. "No need to apologize." He held his hand out again, motioning for my phone this time. I raised a brow in question, and when he repeated the movement, I handed my phone over to him instead, unable to keep the small furrow off my face.

He changed the song to one I didn't recognize, but the rhythm was mellow and easy to move to. Before I could ask after it, he had tapped on the screen a few more times; the wireless speakers suddenly came to life, the gentle notes now flowing through the entire room. I tensed instinctively, looking towards the stairs.

"Won't we wake someone up?" I hissed, wishing the very idea didn't fill me with so much dread. I spent no small amount of time ensuring the peace was preserved in the Highborn house.

Remus shrugged one shoulder, taking a sip from his glass. "It's my house," he replied, eyes glimmering. As I turned my focus back to him, I

realized he was sizing me up as he leaned one hip against the bar. I inhaled sharply, feeling my nipples harden almost instantly beneath my nightgown as I flushed under the scrutiny. *What could he possibly be thinking?* The possibilities made electricity jump up my spine and my fingertips tingle.

The ball was in his court now.

As if reading my mind, Remus downed the rest of his whiskey, replacing the glass on the bar before extending a hand to me. I blinked and looked at the glass he'd just filled. "I've still got most of mine left," I murmured, but Remus only stepped closer, reaching for my drink.

"It will keep," he replied, his voice so low and gravelly it made my gut clench. He might not look sleepy, but his *voice*. If Remus could speak like that forever, I could die a happy woman. "Besides, I want to dance."

With no reason left to argue, I shrugged and took his open hand, slipping my palm into his. Remus pulled me close with practiced ease, guiding me towards the middle of the living room with the grace of a man who'd danced a hundred times before. I found myself suddenly quite conscious of my feet, aware I could count the opportunities I'd had to dance on one hand — and none of them had been with such a handsome man, either.

Remus must have sensed the tenseness in my movements. He chuckled softly as he guided me. "Trust me," he hummed, turning us slowly. "I won't let you fall."

I exhaled gently, but fraction by fraction, I finally started to relax against his arms. Against his chest. He practically radiated heat and I wanted to sink into it, allow it to wrap all around me and keep me safe. I closed my eyes as the alpha escorted me around the room, focusing only on the music and the movement of our bodies, pressed chest to chest as we were. It felt divine.

I was loath to open my eyes again, and when I did, I realized there was a glimmer of moisture on Remus' chest. *What the* — and then I realized: my cheeks were damp, too. As well as my lashes. "I'm sorry," I bubbled quietly, realizing exactly what was happening.

"It's okay," Remus replied, equally as quiet. He bent his head forward, pressing a kiss to my dark hair. That was all it took, that one gentle expression of caring and the floodgates opened, silent sobs trembling through my body as my shoulders shook.

*Why is this man so nice to me?*

Why wasn't my family ever this kind? Or my mate? How had I let myself go so far to think that it was okay, the way he was to me?

I WASN'T sure if I cried for a few moments, a few minutes, or longer, but somehow, Remus had maneuvered us to the couch without me realizing it. When I finally came back to my senses, I was sitting on his lap as he held me with one hand wrapped securely around my waist, the other rubbing up and down my back in gentle motions. I sniffled softly but resisted the urge to apologize again, instead, reaching up to wipe at my wet cheeks.

*I can't believe I'm sitting in Remus' lap.*

One could even call it the best seat in the house, but if I stayed here... I swallowed. Who knew where that would take us? And tonight... I wanted to talk to the man. I wriggled carefully and he released me, allowing me to slide to the couch right next to him. Suddenly feeling self-conscious, I grabbed my blanket and pulled it over my lap.

"What's Texas like?" I asked. Hearing my own voice, I realized the room was silent otherwise. Remus must have turned off the music, too.

"Hm? It's not that different from Oklahoma, really. Further south. Bigger state."

I couldn't help the tiny smile. "Well, anyone could tell me that," I sighed, shaking my head. Maybe if I was more specific, he could give me better answers. "What's the weather like?"

"Not that different. A bit warmer. More humid, if you go all the way south — or a bit more tempered, if you're right on the coast."

The mention of the coast made me sigh wistfully. "I'd love to see the shoreline someday. I've never been." Arden had always said beach vacations weren't appropriate for wolves, but now I was beginning to suspect he was finding reasons for me to never go to Texas. Shaming me about wanting to see the ocean had undoubtedly done the trick.

"Just say the word," Remus replied. "The drive isn't too bad from Austin. I have a beach house in Galveston, too, so you could stay as long as you like."

"Of course you do," I huffed, smiling more.

"Should I not mention I also have a place in Florida?" he asked cheekily.

"What?" I stared at him for a minute. "Why would you need one in Florida, too?"

"Why not?" He shrugged. "I like variety. Besides, the one Galveston is in the family, even if the deed is in my name; the one on Captiva Island is

strictly for me and me alone.” He paused. “And any guests I invite, of course.”

I gave him a thoughtful look but decided not to press that issue just yet. “Austin is where Silverstreak Motors is headquartered, right? So my mother is in the city?”

He nodded. “Yes. She’s a mechanic at our main operation.”

I gave another nod. “I’d like to see Austin. I’m looking forward to it, actually. I think... I think I’m done with Oklahoma. I was doing some research, and Austin seems like it has a lot going on. I was able to find some of the Ulfrics on social media, too. I didn’t friend any of them, but I could get some basic information. I think I might have a few cousins in the Austin metro, too. That might be fun. I never had cousins in Oklahoma. Arden was an only child, and Lynn was, too, as far as I could tell.”

Remus lifted a brow. “Why wouldn’t you get in touch with any of them?”

I gave a small shrug, staring down at my hands for a moment. “I know it’s probably old-fashioned at his point, but I want my first meeting with my mother to be in person. I don’t want that to be spoiled because I friended her niece or nephew or something. It’s a fresh start, you know? And not many people get a real fresh start, so that’s exactly what I want it to be — a blank slate. An empty page. A new beginning.”

Remus made a thoughtful noise, but he didn’t say anything. It was like I couldn’t stop myself from talking.

“I sometimes wonder why none of them reached out to me on social media. I guess since my name was always Luna Highborn, and I had pretty strict privacy settings after dealing with Sophia Claw in high school. I didn’t want randos to find me and comment nasty things. I never even went to Texas, so no shared contacts.” I paused, chewing the inside of my lip. “So, I don’t think my cousins were to blame, but I wonder about my mother. It makes sense that she wouldn’t write because Lynn or Arden could just toss her letters. If she called, they could block her number, and my cell number should have been private, so how would she get it? But... I don’t know. If your child was taken away from you against your will, wouldn’t you... try?”

I couldn’t say for sure; I wasn’t a mother myself. I never even owned a pet. Maybe there was something about the trauma of my father taking me away, but that was still hard for me to wrap my head around. I sighed. “Maybe I’m thinking about it too hard. But the point stands. I’d like to go to Texas. Will you take me?”

There was a beat of silence. At that moment, all the anxious thoughts started to pour back in. *That was a silly thing to ask. I haven't even paid respects to him yet! I mean, I did try, but it hasn't happened. He's probably too busy. I'm a grown woman; I should be able to get myself to Texas.*

I could feel the heat rising in my cheeks as the thoughts continued to ramble on. Clutching the blanket to my body, I stood and shook my head. "Sorry," I blurted out. "That was a stupid question. Forget I asked."

Remus simply watched me. I wanted to look anywhere but at him, but I couldn't look away, as he slowly rose and stepped towards me. "Luna," he said quietly, gathering my hands in his. "I told you I would take you to Texas if you wanted, and that hasn't changed. If you want to go, I will take you. If you need anything else, all you need to do is ask."

"I..." I closed my mouth, the argument dying on my tongue. I could see in his eyes that Remus meant it, at least right now, and arguing with him would be pointless. My wolf gave a soft, pleased chuff, ears pricked forward as she relaxed. Her tail was even swishing back and forth. It was a slow, careful motion, but it was there. *When was the last time she felt like this?*

I finally stepped forward, wrapping my arms around Remus in a hug. He pulled me right into the embrace, wrapping his strong arms around my back and holding me close against his body. I inhaled his scent and closed my eyes. If only my family had shown me this much care — but if they had, would I be here now?

I gave a soft exhale — enough *of that*. I was going to Texas, and I would start a new chapter in my life. No, I was going to create a whole new book. I would thrive there, and my stepfamily could watch from afar. Marnet could eat his words. I did not need any of them or the things they'd said to me over the years. I would find something better in Texas.

As Remus' arms tightened a little more against me, my heart gave a gentle shiver as a new question entered my mind.

*Will Remus be a part of my rebirth?*



# REMUS

## **Claw & Co. Construction Headquarters**

### **Woodward County, Oklahoma**

**T**he headquarters for Claw & Co. Construction, the business supporting the Lupus Claw pack much like Silverstreak Motors supported my pack, was about halfway between Marnet's former mansion and Oklahoma City. An hour-long commute could be tiring if one was doing it twice daily, but I sincerely doubted that Marnet had been present more than once a week, if that.

Perhaps that neglect was part of the reason the company was still flourishing, even with its CEO's absence. The business employed both humans and werewolves — it was simply too large to rely on werewolves alone, they'd need to come from all over Oklahoma, and that wasn't feasible for most — and though there was a report of a small walkout a few weeks ago, the business hadn't been badly impacted. Comparing records to the Lupus Claw pack roster, Bane and I were able to identify all the individuals who quit as members of Marnet's former pack; however, there were also several of those who stayed. Those who hadn't submitted to me already had sent a representative to meet me and my beta when we arrived under the guise of a worker's representative, quietly arranging for a proper submission after work when the other employees went home.

As far as I could tell, none of the humans were concerned about Marnet's disappearance. When I had shown up and informed Steve — our current tour guide and the vice president of operations — that I was in the process of purchasing Claw & Co. Construction from the Claw family, he'd only remarked, 'I didn't know the company was for sale.'

When I told him it wasn't, he simply shrugged his shoulders, conferring that he wouldn't be surprised if it were, and Marnet had forgotten to inform him. The management style was much different than what they'd gotten used to under Noah Claw, and perhaps a change would do them all some good.

I didn't press for any more information, suspecting it would all come to light eventually. That Steve was willing to go with the flow spoke volumes about his management style, and I was pleased with what I had seen so far as he walked us around. All of the equipment looked to be in good condition

and cared for, regardless of if it was the latest model. The few employees on site (most crews had left in the morning to their job site for the day) looked curious when they saw Steve walking around, not stressed, which led me to believe the pleasant front the man was currently putting on wasn't just for show.

They were all good signs. I was relieved I wouldn't need to replace him. The more stability I could leave in place for the construction company, the better off it would be. Silverstreak Motors did plenty well to support my original territory, but increasing my income streams alongside increasing my territory was only wise.

When Steve returned us to the admin building, he led us up to the executive office. "Apologies for the dust," he said with a slight grimace. "Cleaning staff comes in about once a week, but Mr. Claw was very particular about how he wanted his things kept. Mostly, he didn't like things moved." The grimace grew and he shook his head. "I lost more than one good employee to his temper, so we kept it to a bare minimum after the third gave her notice."

I shook my head, waving the apology off. "It's not a problem. We will work out a new schedule going forward." I paused for a moment, looking over at the eager man. "Now, if you'd excuse me, I'd like to speak with my team."

Steve hesitated, the smile on his face dimming a few watts before he caught himself. "Of course, of course," he said, nodding. "I'm sure you have a handle on things, though I'm not sure how much Mr. Claw has passed on to you. He wasn't hands-on, as it was, so I'm not sure how... up to date his knowledge on the daily operations was."

I could tell the man was trying to be tactical, and I stifled my amused smile. As far as he knew, Silverstreak Motors was simply expanding its profile. Steve had done an excellent job keeping Claw & Co. Construction afloat during Marnet's reign (and in his absence), but I couldn't leave him in charge of the entire company despite his clear interest. I would need someone I could trust here in Oklahoma. Steve seemed capable but capable wasn't enough.

I gave the man a polite smile. "I'm sure we will manage," I replied calmly, not leaving much room for discussion.

Even if Steve had no idea he wasn't speaking to a human; the alpha presence still affected him. He looked like he might wish to argue further, but

he shook his head and stood up a little straighter. “Yes, of course. Well, I’ll be in my office if you have any questions, just down the hall,” he replied, seeing himself out the door.

I waited a few moments, listening to the steady footfalls leading away before I turned to the three wolves who’d accompanied me on the visit. We all settled at the room’s small table, and I glanced at Bane, Tala, and Seff.

“Thoughts?” I prompted, stretching my legs out in front of me and crossing my ankles.

“You’re sure you don’t want to act as CEO?” Tala asked, raising a brow. “Marnet clearly did.”

I shrugged one shoulder. “In name, perhaps,” I replied, “but I think it’s fairly obvious that Steve handled most of the daily issues. We’ll have to see how involved the board was with decision making.” I shook my head. “Regardless, I won’t have the time to effectively run two companies and one pack, especially not ferrying myself back and forth. This company needs someone who can stay here, at least during the transition, and make sure everything goes smoothly.”

“Too bad we can’t turn a human into a wolf,” Seff laughed, shaking his head. “Not easily, anyways. Steve does seem to know his stuff, and I bet he’d be loyal as hell if you gave him that job.”

I offered a wry smile; he probably wasn’t wrong, but that wasn’t a business I was interested in. “A pity,” I agreed, leaning back in my chair. “Things are running well here, but we need to get more workers in to replace those that left with Marnet’s downfall. Additionally, I think we could improve some of the procedures, especially in the warehouse.” I turned my attention back to my cousin. “Would some of the processes we’re currently using at Silverstreak Motors be useful here?”

“Hmm.” She leaned back in her chair, rubbing her chin thoughtfully as she mulled over my proposal. “We’d need to do a little tweaking — it’s not a one-for-one comparison, after all — but I think on the broad scale, we could certainly implement some of those things.”

“Good.”

“But—”

“But?” I raised my brows.

Tala sighed, giving me a wry look. “This would likely require someone intimately associated with Silverstreak Motors’ operations to be here. I imagine the minimum time to be a year, but it would be wiser to expect two

or three for maximum benefit.”

I studied the redhead for a moment, tapping my finger against my knuckle. “What about you?”

Tala simply blinked for a moment as if not quite believing what she’d just heard. “Excuse me?”

I shrugged, unable to help my growing smile. “You’re one of the wolves I trust the most, and you’ve done excellent work for Silverstreak Motors — obviously, you’re uniquely qualified in that regard. You have practicality, experience, and I think you have the people skills for this job. You’d make an excellent CEO, Tala.”

My cousin blinked again, her look of disbelief vanishing as if I’d imagined it all along. “I would be honored, Remus. As soon as we’re done here, I’ll start digging into the accounts and get you a report on the losses and gains.” She looked like she was about to say something else and then paused, her brow furrowing a little as she tipped her head towards me. “What about Silverstreak Motors? You won’t have a CFO anymore.”

She wasn’t wrong. Just as I couldn’t handle being CEO of two different companies in two states without dropping some sort of ball, I couldn’t expect Tala to handle financial operations in Texas and all executive tasks here in Oklahoma.

I hummed. “I’ll be fine for a few weeks. We can confer about which of your staff members you feel would best suit the position — or start a hiring campaign if needed.” But Tala kept the company in excellent shape. It would be fine for a short interim period.

Bane rumbled next to me. “You’re talking like a CEO already,” he told Tala, an amused glint in his eye.

Opposite me, Seff chuckled and nodded. “He’s right. You’re practically custom made for this position,” the other alpha agreed.

Tala looked between the two men, a bit of color rising on her cheeks before reaching for her water bottle, trying to disguise the crack in her facade. I’d already seen it but opted not to out my cousin. Not yet, anyway.

“It’s settled, then,” I said, looking around the table. “Tala, I think we’ll need to rearrange the trip to Texas — I’ll go instead of you. We’ll get your personal effects to you as soon as possible.” I would also discuss her living arrangements with her afterward. Of course, she was more than welcome to stay at the mansion, but if she preferred to live in Oklahoma City instead, I would be happy to make the appropriate arrangements.

“I think Bane ought to remain here as well, at least for a short period,” I decided, glancing at my beta. He simply nodded, seemingly unbothered either way. It would be good security for Tala, and there was more likely to be unrest in Oklahoma than Texas even after Marnet was dealt with. If anything did occur, it would be best to have Bane on site to deal with it. Putting out fires was his area of expertise, after all.

I shifted my gaze to Seff, nodding to him. “Seff, you’ll continue working with Bane and Tala.” No need to change up something that was already in place. “Speaking of which, do you have any news on the account?”

Seff sat up a little straighter, folding his arms against the table. “We haven’t uncovered anything you didn’t already know, unfortunately. Whoever moved the money was not an amateur — I wouldn’t be surprised to find they were old hat at this,” he replied. The idea made me grimace. If Marnet had the foresight to hire a professional to move his money around secretly, that meant he was planning, and anything he was planning would not be good for me.

“I do have my intelligence team on it,” the other alpha added, likely reading my look precisely as it was. “I also came up with an idea how I might be able to assist you in getting Marnet, too.”

My interest piqued, I tipped my head. “Go on,” unable to mask my open curiosity.

The corner of Seff’s mouth twitched a little. “Well, there’s a lot of damage you can do digitally,” he said, spreading his hands as he spoke. I’d forgotten he’d always needed his hands when he talked. “And my intelligence team is not... a particularly small division, so I could divert a few bodies without compromising the mystery account project. But we can trace the humans he’s connected with fairly easily. Once we get that information, we’ll be able to freeze Marnet’s accounts, his communications, and at the same time, inflict the same damage on the humans who are protecting him. It should leave him vulnerable for at least twenty-four hours, assuming he’d be able to get in touch with someone technologically savvy enough to undo what my team has done.” Seff paused, his smile growing. “And I can assure you, it’s incredibly difficult to undo the digital knots they’ll tie without severing the lines, if you catch my drift.”

I leaned back in my chair, regarding Seff with a small smile. He was the one who had suggested the blood oath, but I was glad I had decided to trust him with it. The other alpha was an incredibly clever man, and I was pleased

to have him as an ally instead of a neutral party — or worse.

Tala leaned in. “I’d be happy to help Seff comb through some of the accounts. Some of what he’s proposing will be difficult without account numbers, and I believe we already have several of those based on the research we’ve already done.”

Seff tipped his head in her direction, dark brown eyes lighting up. “Ah, we’ve got a fair bit of information, too. I can have it sent to you within the hour so we can compare — we have a secure connection here, I assume?”

“I can set something up,” Tala replied, nodding.

I cleared my throat mildly, hiding my mouth with my hand. The enthusiasm rolling off of those two was almost palpable. *I’ve clearly left Oklahoma in capable hands — more than capable, even.* The two of them quieted down, and I turned my attention back to Bane.

“We’re going to need to deal with the remaining Lupus Claw members. Keep Sophia and Kate for now. We can’t rule out a familial bond, and Marnet may be willing to make himself known for one of them.” I doubted it, truth be told, but it would be worse to let them go now, only to have them reunite with Marnet and add to his strength. “As for the others...” I drummed my fingers against the tabletop. “If they haven’t submitted yet, I suspect they don’t ever plan to, even when Marnet is captured and dealt with.”

Bane nodded, humming his agreement. “They’ll all become lone wolves, then?” he confirmed.

I nodded. “Yes. Escort them to the borders, remove their Lupus Claw tattoos, and send them on their way.” It was a ritual in its own right, and a rather unpleasant one. A wolf cast out was different from a wolf born rogue, and any pack they might run into deserved to know the difference.

“I assume we’re avoiding the Louisiana border?”

The mention made me scowl. “Yes. We don’t need to feed Gith’s numbers at all. If that’s where they plan to go, they’ll have to work for it.”

“Very good,” Bane said, nodding.

That should have been the end of it, but the image of Arden Highborn unhelpfully popped into my mind’s eye. I knew Luna’s conversation with him went poorly, but—I suspected she still didn’t want to see the man driven from the territory. I exhaled and looked back at Bane.

“Withhold the Highborns. See if you can turn Arden; he seems to have slightly more sense than his mate.”

Bane wrinkled his nose. “Why that one?” he growled. “Why bother with

any of them?”

“Because that one has school-age children,” I replied. Most of the other holdouts were older than Arden, the old guard who remembered the good times with Noah, perhaps. If they had children, they were grown adults, dispersed, or had already changed their allegiance.

My beta gave me a strange look and shook his head. “Don’t know why this time will be different, but fine,” he said. He obviously didn’t agree — but his role wasn’t to agree with everything I said, simply to see that it got done.

“Good. I think that’s everything, then.” I stood. “I’ll head out to start making arrangements for Texas. I’ll leave the three of you to continue with the planning. I’ll have my cell on me if anything important comes up.”

There was a murmur of confirmation, and then Tala and Seff were back to discussing cyberattacks, Bane listening in with a mildly interested look on his face. I let myself out and down the hall, my phone buzzing while riding the elevator back to the ground floor.

*LUNA: Ready when you are.*

I HUFFED a pleased noise and checked my watch before typing out a reply.

*BE THERE IN AN HOUR.*

THE CAR WAS WAITING for me when I exited the building, and I let myself into the passenger seat, feeling rather satisfied as we pulled away from Claw & Co. Construction and headed back towards my Oklahoma home.

I EXPECTED Luna to be waiting outside when we pulled up to the mansion’s front entrance, but she was nowhere to be seen. I instructed the driver to turn the car off as I stepped out before asking for the keys.

“I’ll take it from here,” I told the man, frowning slightly as I glanced



around. I eyed one of the guards near the garage and motioned him over with one hand. Once he'd jogged over, I asked, "Where did Luna go? She was supposed to be waiting for me."

The man's bushy brows knit together, and he jerked a hand towards the car barn he'd just come from. "In there," he replied gruffly. "She's helping with a car. Boss told her not to and that we'd be just fine, but..." He trailed off with a helpless shrug.

I snorted, unable to help the small smile as I imagined Luna summarily ignoring the gray-haired man in charge of that specific crew. I followed the guard back to the barn, and he pointed me to the appropriate bay. Inside, I found Luna bent over the front of an SUV, the hood shadowing her body. She was standing on the balls of her feet as she reached for something inside, giving me a rather gratuitous view of her finer...assets.

I shook the prickle of warmth off and began to walk over, clearing my throat as not to startle her. "Hello, Luna," I rumbled, stopping once I'd reached the vehicle. I peered over its innards. "Anything I can do to help?"

She glanced up, blowing a strand of dark hair away from her face as she fixed me with a funny look. "You know anything about fixing cars or just making fancy ones?" she teased, taking a step back so she could stand up properly. There was a tiny smudge of grease on her cheekbone, and I couldn't help but think it was the cutest damn thing I'd seen in a long time. I wanted to reach out and wipe it clean, but she was looking at me expectantly.

"What if I want to learn?" I countered. I was rewarded with a slow smile spreading across her cheeks.

Though I wasn't dressed to be working on a car, I took off my jacket and rolled up my sleeves; there was nothing a dry cleaning couldn't fix, and if I was wrong about that, none of my clothing was irreplaceable. Luna handed me tools one at a time, bending back over to explain what I should be doing and where. I knew I was slower than she would have been, but she showed no signs of impatience; if anything, it was the most at ease I'd seen Luna. She was clearly in her element.

"So, is this what you've always dreamed of doing?" I asked her, tightening a bolt.

She laughed. "Well, yes and no. I always wanted to be a mechanic, but when I was young, I dreamed of something a little more exotic. I wanted to restore vintage vehicles like my mother or design custom builds based on my own ideas."

“I don’t see why you couldn’t,” I replied, handing her one tool before giving me the next.

Luna shook her head. “Because I need to pay the bills?” she replied. “Finding a job will be one of the first things I do when I get to Texas. I could probably do that someday, but I need to get established first. I hardly imagine Robby will give me any sort of recommendation at all.”

I paused in what I was doing, looking up at her. “Come work for me at Silverstreak Motors. You could even work with your mother.”

Luna took a step back from the SUV, pulling a rag out to wipe her hands. She held it out to me; assuming that was a signal we were done, I stepped away too, trying not to look too relieved to remove the grease from my hands. After chewing on her lip, she pointed at the vehicle for a moment. “Get behind the wheel. Keys are inside. See how it starts up,” she said.

Ignoring that she hadn’t answered my question, I did as I was told. I opened the door and got behind the wheel. When I turned the key, the SUV purred to life as if there had never been an issue. Luna dropped the hood and gave me the thumbs-up. I cut the engine and stepped back out of the vehicle, returning to her; when I got there, I realized she was staring at the front of the car with a blank expression, her eyes looking a little glassy.

“I don’t know, Remus,” she sighed, worrying the rag in her hands. “I don’t want people to think I’m just... I don’t know, there because you’re doing me a favor. Besides, what if things don’t go well with my mom? That could get so awkward so quickly.”

I shook my head and stepped closer, leaving only a whisper of space between us. When she looked up at me, I dipped in, pressing my lips to hers. She made a soft noise, and I hummed, deepening the kiss. Luna melted a little closer, parting her lips. I rumbled my approval, pulling back only because we were in the middle of the garage, and at least two guards were within eyesight.

Luna sucked in a wavering breath, her cheeks slightly flushed. “What was that for?”

“For being you.” I shrugged. “You taught me something today; your passion for this is so evident. I’m sure others will see it.” I paused for a moment and then forged on. “And I’m sure your mother will see it, too. She will love that in you, among all the other things.”

Luna was quiet for several more minutes, and I began to worry that perhaps I had said the wrong thing. I hadn’t thought Luna wanted empty

assurances; even if I did believe Josie would be delighted to see her daughter, would love everything about her, I didn't think that was what Luna wanted to hear. Or even could hear, at this point. One thing was manageable. A good first step. But she wasn't saying anything.

After a few more heartbeats, she looked back at me. "Thank you," she said, straightening her posture a little. "I appreciate that."

It wasn't a very satisfying answer, but it didn't feel appropriate to push for it, even if I wanted more. Not now.

*Patience*, I told myself. That was going to be the only way to win her trust. *And maybe her heart.*

**LUNA**

## **Highborn Family Home**

### **Woodward County, Oklahoma**

I had hardly expected a warm welcome when I returned to the Highborn house to get my things, but the smoke—that was unexpected. I had seen the empty driveway and no signs of life in the windows, so I had thought I'd stop quickly at the house and gather my things. At first, I had assumed the smoke was from one of the neighbors starting up a barbecue or a fire pit; we didn't own any of those things... but as soon as I saw the state of my bedroom, I knew what was burning. Now I stood staring at the thick smoke curling up into the sunset, well aware that it wasn't a bonfire my siblings had started. It was a ceremonial burning of sorts; they'd jammed my possessions into an old metal barrel and lit it up like some sort of effigy.

I sighed as the breeze carried the smoke away from me, holding the small bag I'd brought with me. The few pieces of clothing that were strewn on the ground were now tucked inside, as well as the small wooden box from my mother. Fortunately, none of them thought to look for any secret compartments; it was strange, to see my things burn, but the Silverstreak box was the only thing that wasn't replaceable. Looking back at the flames licking up the sides of the metal, I felt strangely empty. Perhaps I should have felt sadder — or angry — that they'd done such a thing, but...

There was nothing. I didn't feel any sense of surprise, and perhaps that added to my distant feeling. They were clearly pushing me out, but... in a sense, I had always thought they would. It wasn't as if they had made an effort to make sure I had felt wanted or valued. They certainly didn't make me feel needed, even if they came to expect me to perform certain tasks that no one else would.

Even as I reflected, the sadness never came. The anger never sparked and built. I was left with only a strange, hollow feeling, like I was watching from afar. As if those things were never really mine, even if they were once in my possession. It allowed me a calmness as I studied the flickering flames and the ash beneath. Those were my things, once. Now, they could be spread on the wind. Maybe those ashes would fertilize a field somewhere. Help flowers bloom.

My lips tugged at the corners, threatening to smile just a little. Hadn't I been thinking about rebirth? A phoenix rose from the ashes. Maybe a ritual burning was needed first.

A pair of leggy, awkward wolves came wheeling into the backyard before my thoughts could wander any further. My peace shattered immediately, and I scowled as I recognized the two juveniles. Like me, they were both a dark brown, but with yellow eyes and a matching white sock on their left front paws. I scowled, holding my bag closer, but Nyx and Nox dove for my ankles, nipping at me like they were herding dogs and I was the sheep.

"Knock that off!" I snapped, kicking my foot out as one of them grazed my skin. "I wasn't going to stay!"

I hadn't planned on it to start with, but coming across what was basically a burning effigy? Yeah, I knew where I wasn't wanted. There was nothing good that could come of me loitering around here. I probably shouldn't have even spent the time to come out back and confirm my theory, but I was curious. I needed to see for myself.

I swatted at Nyx, only for Nox to duck behind me and nip at my calf. I hissed as he drew blood, kicking back blindly. I could feel him skitter away, but Nyx swept in — they were making it almost impossible for me to walk, much less leave, the way they were darting underfoot like a pair of chihuahuas. My wolf surged forward as I snarled, bristling just below the surface as I gritted my teeth.

"Nyx! Nox! Get back over here!" someone yelled.

At once, the boys wheeled around, darting to the fence and slipping through. Athena and Artemis stood on the other side. I turned and walked closer to the fence, hands folded over my chest. Artemis refused to look at me, but Athena glowered over the planks; I was sure if it were possible, her eyes would have glowed red with anger.

"What are you doing here, Luna? Can't you see where you aren't wanted?" Artemis snapped, tipping her chin up a bit. At that moment, she was a mirror image of her mother. A bitter thought crossed my mind. *Lynn would be proud.*

"Oh, I got the message loud and clear," I grated out, feeling the skin on the back of my neck prickle. "The only way to be less subtle would be a rocket flare."

I rarely fired back at the girls; it wasn't worth my effort. The look on Artemis' face, though; her expression shouldn't have been any sourer if she'd

swallowed an entire tarantula. Even Athena had looked up from her phone, slightly shocked by my spice.

No one answered me, and I rolled my eyes. “Fine.” I turned and started heading back towards the house. This was a waste of my time.

I hadn’t gotten more than three strides away before I heard the sound of footsteps; Artemis raced forward, snaking her hand forward to grab my arm. She flipped it over, scowling when she spotted my Lupus Claw tattoo fully intact. “Why the hell do you still have this?” she demanded, all but throwing my arm back at me.

“What’s that supposed to mean?”

“You’re a lone wolf, aren’t you? You should be. You should be banished for what you did.”

*That again?* I fought the urge to roll my eyes. *How many times do I have to plead my innocence? They’re never going to listen, are they?* I shook my head. “I wasn’t banished because I didn’t *do anything*,” I growled, rubbing my arm. “Furthermore, I haven’t given the new alpha any reason to banish me.”

“This isn’t fair!” Nyx whined, following behind Artemis.

Nox was right behind his brother. “No, it’s not! What about Mom and Dad?” he huffed, giving his older sister a plaintive look. Athena was the last to follow, and he turned his gaze to her when it was clear Artemis was focused on me. “You said the plan would work! That it would fix things!”

I narrowed my eyes, focusing my attention on Athena. “What plan? What did you do?” I had strong suspicion precisely what it was the younger of Lynn’s daughters had done, but I wanted to hear it out of her mouth.

Artemis moved around me at once, putting herself between her sister and me. “We did what we needed to do. We obeyed our alpha — our *real* alpha — and did what we could to help him as a good pack wolf *should*. Something *you* should have done, too. But I guess you don’t care about Lupus Claw or the Highborns, do you?” She sneered. “I should have figured, honestly. The only one you think about is yourself.”

I didn’t break my gaze from Athena. She was already starting to squirm, looking back down at her phone. “What did you do, Athena?” I asked calmly.

“How stupid are you?” Nyx pipped up, brave from where he stood. “We were the ones who helped Marnet find you. Athena said that once word got out that you were alone with Marnet, that Silverstreak guy would know exactly what kind of woman you were.”

He sounded so *proud* of himself, like selling out his half-sister was a badge of honor to wear proudly upon his chest. I was certain Athena and Artemis had told him as much, anyway. In his twelve-year-old mind, he and his brother had done the right thing. Out of everything that had happened, *that* was what made me sad.

I'd tried, though. I had.

Athena sniffed and looked up, apparently finding her spine. "That should have been enough for Remus to do what needed to be done," she huffed. "But I guess I'm not surprised. You would do whatever you needed to save yourself, huh, like some kind of rat. I don't know what men see in you, though. What makes you so special?"

"Have you ever asked yourself that, Athena?" I shot back, raising a brow. I looked from her to her sister and then the boys. "Your parents spoil the hell out of you – all four of you – but they aren't going to be around forever. You're going to have to act like adults." I frowned, looking back at the girls. "The two of you *are* adults, even though you still act like you're in high school." They constantly reminded me of the movie *Mean Girls* – they even dressed in matching clothing even though they didn't have some clique to sit with every day at lunch. "You need to grow the hell up – if not for your own sakes, then at least to give Nyx and Nox at least one good role model in their lives."

Athena looked uncomfortable but Artemis sneered. I knew I hit a sore point, but I could feel something in me snap like I had stretched a rubber band just a little too far. There was no more sisterly advice to give. At once, my wolf was back at the surface, all but scrabbling to get out and put these whelps in their place. I pulled my lips back to snarl. Athena flinched and both boys stepped back; they were brave when they thought they had the upper hand, but against a fully grown wolf, two juveniles didn't stand much chance. Athena had always struggled to shift herself; of the four, Artemis was the only one who might present a threat. Even then, when I was last living there, she often skipped pack hunts or runs in the woods, finding them 'too boring.' I would bet money I was in better shape than her. She looked braced for a fight.

But...

Even if they were being utterly putrid towards me, and I was within my right to give Athena and Artemis a what-for for setting me up like that — Marnet could have killed me if I hadn't been able to signal Remus — I found



that I didn't want to. Not in my heart of hearts. Revenge would probably feel fucking great right now. It would likely provide some salve for the wounds on the surface, but... but I know I would regret it later. Beating on my stepsiblings would haunt me.

At the end of the day, it wasn't their fault. They were raised by a shallow mother and a barely present father. Nyx and Nox were still just *kids*, and they didn't know any better. Marnet, the man they looked up to, told them they were doing the right thing, and they honestly believed that. Artemis and Athena were barely out of their teens themselves. They were still naive and easily misguided. They needed someone to set them straight, all four of them. I had been there to ensure they had what they needed, but I'd never been that. Someone would, someday, but it wasn't going to be me.

I took a deep breath and shook my head.

I didn't need to carry that for the rest of my life.

I inhaled deeply and pulled away, finishing my walk back to the house. Artemis yelled after me, and Nyx and Nox soon joined in, but I did not listen. Did not turn. Soon, I could not even hear the words anymore.

REMUS WAS WAITING for me out front, standing outside of the car. He leaned against the passenger side door, casually poking at his phone like he hadn't heard anything, but I knew he was only being polite. Any wolf would have been able to hear that, especially when the shouting started. He glanced up as I approached, eyes questioning.

I sighed and shook my head, holding up the single small sling bag I'd been able to pack. Funny how I'd been complaining about how small they were, and now one held all of my belongings.

There must have been more written on my face than I realized because his expression softened as he pocketed his phone. "I'm so sorry, Luna. We should have come to get your things sooner," he said quietly, gently touching my elbow. I shrugged noncommittally.

"This is the past now. Texas is my future." I looked over my shoulder at the house in which I'd spent half my life and frowned, a bit of concern still coloring my thoughts. After a moment, I looked back at the alpha. "I need you to promise me something," I said, remembering almost immediately that I'd said something when I'd asked Remus to allow me to speak to my father. *Look how that turned out for you.*

I shook my head before I could talk myself out of the request. “Give them a little more time. I know they haven’t submitted yet, but they’re all turned around. They’ve never had to do things on their own before, and I’m sure they imagine that if Marnet was still there, they wouldn’t have to... grow up. But they’ll come around, and when they do, the boys will too. They’re stubborn, but they aren’t fools.” I paused, frowning. “Well. Maybe it’s more like they have flashes of brilliance.”

*I don’t think so, anyway.*

Remus regarded quietly for a moment, and then he nodded, opening the passenger door for me. “I can do that.”

I smiled. “Thank you,” I said, setting my bag in the wheel well before climbing inside. “As for me, I—”

Remus shook his head. “One day at a time. I’m not worried about it. It will happen once we’re in Texas.”

IT FELT like the days dragged after that. I understood that Remus, Tala, and Bane had to get several things settled before Remus returned to Texas, but it didn’t make the time pass any faster for me. I spent my time in the library, visiting the horses’ fields, or running the woods as a wolf. Even then, it wasn’t enough. All I wanted to do was sift through social media on my phone, trying to soak up any information I could about the Ulfric family, but I had to stop myself. I knew better than most — just because it was on the internet didn’t mean it was true. I wanted to know these people for who they were, not what they posted... or other people posted about them.

Even now, as we pulled into the private airport, I found myself turning my phone over in my hand, wondering if I should look my mother up. Before I could stop myself, I had pulled up Josie Ulfric’s page, studying a few of her photos. She looked just like the woman I remembered; she’d aged well. Only a few more wrinkles than before, a streak of gray in dark hair where there wasn’t one before. It looked distinguished. *Will I look like the same person to her?*

“Are you ready?” Remus asked, breaking my train of thought. I hadn’t realized the SUV was coming to a stop. I closed my phone and looked out the window, realizing we were driving right up to the jet. It looked like the kind of thing you’d see in a movie or a music video, not real life. The Silverstreak Motors’ emblem was plastered proudly on its front.

I swallowed hard. “No,” I said, almost breathless. “But there’s no turning back now. Gosh, that jet is beautiful, though.” It might not be a car, but I could appreciate a handsome piece of machinery when I saw one.

Remus simply smiled at me, ushering me out of the vehicle and onto the private jet. Once we were inside, he pointed to a plush chair — they were *all* luscious, practically armchairs, and there was even a stewardess bringing something over to someone already on the plane. I sank into the leather, smoothing my hand over the luxurious upholstery. The stewardess moved, turning to address Remus, and I realized who the other passenger was.

*Fiona Silverstreak.*

I stiffened slightly, our previous encounter coming to mind. I folded my legs carefully and looked away, wanting to give the woman no reason to come after me again.

For better or worse, she turned on Remus instead. “I thought Tala and I were going to Texas,” she said to him, sipping at her drink as he sat.

Remus simply shrugged, looking up to thank the hostess as she handed him something to drink. Next, she moved to me, but I simply shook my head, not wanting to cause a scene. That would be just fine if Fiona could forget I was here altogether.

Her attention was focused on her son for the time being. “Plans changed,” Remus was saying, looking largely unconcerned. “Tala will oversee Claw & Co. Construction, so she’s needed in Oklahoma for now.”

“Hm,” Fiona replied, narrowing her eyes slightly. She tapped a perfectly manicured nail against her glass. “Well, that is good for Tala, but it would have been nice if *someone* kept me abreast of these changes.” She fixed the alpha with a stern look, but the man simply stared straight ahead, completely unbothered by it.

Tension hung thick in the air, but that seemed to be the end of the conversation. Fiona pulled dark shades down over her eyes and turned, peering out her window. Remus turned to me when the stewardess reappeared, touching his shoulder gently.

“The pilot would like a word, sir.”

Remus flashed me an apologetic look before getting to his feet, following the young woman to the front. I watched him go, mildly curious what the pilot might want. Once he disappeared into the cockpit, I turned, only to realize that Fiona was staring right at me from behind those dark glasses. I swallowed.

“Things do change quickly, don’t they?” she remarked.

I nodded, not entirely sure what she was trying to imply. “They do,” I agreed, looking around the plane’s interior. It felt like I saw a new feature every time I turned my head.

Fiona snapped her fingers, dragging my attention back to her. “Marnet is nothing like my son, Luna Highborn. He doesn’t play games, and he doesn’t leave business unfinished, so do watch yourself.”

Despite myself, I felt my brows furrowing. “I’m not playing any games,” I said softly, unsure how else to reply.

“We’ll see,” Fiona replied airily. I had half a mind to argue, but she had already turned away, staring back out the window as if the conversation had never happened.

*What the heck was that?* I sank back into my plush seat, brows knitted together as I stared ahead. I know I was initially a Lupus Claw member, but I wasn’t sure what else I could have done to earn that sort of animosity from Fiona. Maybe I shouldn’t have been surprised. Maybe Fiona was just like Lynn and her friends, looking only at the exterior, determined to dislike someone a little outside the mold even if they hadn’t done anything.

*Screw them,* I thought, turning to stare out the window until the plane took off.

My wolf huffed her agreement.

# REMUS

## Remus' Penthouse Suite

### Austin, Texas

**T**hankfully, the flight from Woodward to Austin was less than an hour in the air. My mother's attitude was so frosty; we didn't even need the forced air in the plane. I knew she was a bit upset she'd been left out of the planning, but frankly, installing Tala as the CEO of Claw & Co. Construction didn't concern her. Technically, my mother wasn't even on the board of Silverstreak Motors, but enough of the members liked her that I often included her. It hadn't been a problem before, but she kept giving me the stink-eye when she thought I wasn't looking, which was beginning to make me wonder if she'd be as helpful back in Texas as I had initially hoped. Honestly, I'd hoped bringing her home would brighten her mood in general — clearly, Oklahoma hadn't agreed with her. Thus far, it seemed my plan hadn't won me much goodwill.

I had thought, however misguided, that perhaps trying to engage my mother in some planning now would ease some of the hurt. I was clearly mistaken. She shot me a look so full of daggers I could sense it even through her dark glasses. "We do not discuss board business when there are non-members present," she replied frostily. Even if she hadn't shot Luna a look, it was obvious who she was talking about.

The one small mercy was that Luna seemed far more interested in the jet itself and the views out the window than any 'shop talk' I might have been trying to initiate with my mother or the imperious looks she was doling out.

The silence pervaded until we landed, but I didn't mind. It gave me a chance to catch up on emails from my tablet. Fiona simply sulked, but if she wouldn't talk to me, there wasn't much I could do about that. Once we'd landed, she practically threw herself out of her seat as soon as the plane had stopped, all but knocking the poor stewardess over as she came around to collect our glasses. I tucked my tablet away and raised a brow. "Where's the fire?" I asked mildly, watching my mother stand impatiently as she waited for the door to be opened.

"My car is waiting," my mother replied coolly. "And I am not sure what your plans are, but I've been kept away from business for far too long. I will

see you at the board meeting, Remus.”

The airport employees opened the door, and my mother descended without another word, disappearing into her black car before her bags could even be taken off the jet. Luna stared after her, mouth twisted into an unreadable expression. “Is she okay?” she asked quietly, looking at me.

I shrugged one shoulder. “She was expecting to fly back with Tala while I stayed in Oklahoma to handle things. I think she’s a bit hurt I changed the plans without letting her know.”

Luna paused for a moment and then gave a small nod. “I guess it’s hard letting go once you’re not in control anymore. Did she work with your father?”

I held out a hand, tipping it side to side. “Yes and no. As I mentioned, being a housekeeper was never in her... hm, never in her wheelhouse. Her education was not in business, though.” I paused, rubbing a hand over my beard. *I’m going to need to trim that. It got a little unruly when I was away.* I shook my head and discarded the thought for later. It felt like I had a hundred things to do now that I was back home. “Anyways. She doesn’t have any formal training, but despite her behavior today, she’s actually quite good with people. She functioned in a partner management position. And...” I paused, frowning a little. “My father did value her opinion. Highly.”

*Maybe that’s part of the issue.*

I had always been closer to my father than my mother, even when I was young. It wasn’t as if Fiona neglected me — that was far from the truth. She just didn’t particularly go out of her way; now I could look back and see that she was determined to prove herself to the pack and my father, which made a bit more sense if that story about coming from London was true, but it was my father who taught me to shift and took me on my first hunt. He taught me all the things I needed to know about being a wolf and an alpha. He taught me about the family company.

It felt like Fiona had only started trying to dispense her wisdom once Remington had passed away, and she felt that his work wasn’t finished. Or something. I couldn’t say.

“Sir,” the stewardess said softly, interrupting my thoughts. “I assume your companion is traveling with you? You would like her bags in your car as well?”

I stirred and looked up at her with a charming smile. “Yes, that would be good. Thank you.”

She gave a small nod and turned away to ensure everything was taken care of. I finally stood, stretching out a little. It wasn't a long flight, but despite my mother's attitude, I felt... relaxed. It was *good* to be home. I glanced over at Luna, but she was already on her feet, peering out the door at the tarmac.

"You can go outside," I said, hiding my small smile. Sometimes I forgot that traveling by jet was unusual for most; these days, it simply felt like part of my job.

I opted to lead the way when she hesitated, stepping down the stairs and into the Texas sunshine. The driver opened the door for us as I strode over. Luna was a stride behind me, head on a swivel as she looked at the other jets and the cityscape in the distance.

I slipped into the back seat, sliding to the window. Still watching everything around us, Luna slid in after me, only a whisper away once she stopped. She was so distracted with looking out the window that I wasn't sure if she noticed she'd taken the middle seat, but I didn't mind. The car set off, escorting us out of the airport and towards the city proper, and Luna craned her neck, constantly switching views between my window, the front window, and the window on the other side.

"I know you've seen cities before," I teased gently, watching the look of awe on her face.

Luna glanced at me briefly, eyes drawn back to the lines and shapes of the city in an instant. "Oklahoma City wasn't this big," she argued, her voice far away. "It didn't have a river, either. And those buildings!"

I knew that it wasn't much of a comparison. Technically, Oklahoma City was significantly larger than Austin itself, but with the concentrated area came more building *up*. When you took the Austin metro into account, the population was almost double the size of Oklahoma City's metro. If these two cities were your only data points, Austin probably felt like New York City in comparison.

*I wonder how she'll like city life. Visiting the city and living in it were two entirely different things. At least it seemed like she was used to walking places. She'll have that available to her if she likes.*

"Where will I be staying?" Luna asked, finally looking over at me.

"Hm?" It took me a second to shake myself from my thoughts. "Oh, I have a guest room in my apartment. I've had it made up for you," I replied.

"Oh. Thank you," she murmured, a bit quieter. Something in those silver



eyes shifted before she looked away, back out the window.

My wolf rumbled as I stared at the back of her head. *What was that look supposed to mean?*

WE ARRIVED at my apartment building with relatively little traffic, one of the many boons of traveling in the middle of the day. I let myself out and offered Luna a hand. Her cheeks grew a little pink, but she murmured her thanks anyways, turning towards the trunk of the car. I trailed my fingers over her wrist, catching her gently. “I can have someone bring your things up,” I told her.

Luna pulled away, reaching for the car anyways. “I have one bag, Remus,” she argued, the corner of her mouth tipped up. “And it’s not exactly heavy. You don’t need to waste someone’s time on that.”

I sighed but didn’t argue further, watching as she retrieved her sling bag and my leather satchel. When she offered it to me, I reached for her sling bag as well. “Fine. At least let me carry it, though,” I said, raising a brow. “I have manners.”

“And I have arms,” Luna said stubbornly, placing the bag on her back. “I’m not an invalid, you know.”

“Okay, okay,” I said, sensing the growing tension. There was no need to start off this adventure on the wrong foot. Dismissing the issue, I motioned for her to follow me. The doorman gave me a nod and a small smile.

“Good afternoon, Mr. Silverstreak,” he greeted me, opening the door with a flourish. “Back from business?”

“For now,” I replied with an easy smile. “We’ll see what the week ahead brings.”

The older man laughed, a twinkle in his dark eyes. “Hopefully, everything you wish it to. Have a good day, Mr. Silverstreak.”

Luna seemed slightly stunned, but that was nothing. As soon as we walked through the lobby, I could hear her suck in a sharp breath behind me. She stepped closer, her eyes wide as she leaned in. “Are you sure we’re in an apartment?” she whispered, eyes darting over the walls. “Because this looks like an art museum to me.”

I couldn’t help my grin. “The designer they hired has excellent taste,” I agreed, gently steering her towards the elevator. “I’ll take you on a tour of the building later. There are two Olympic-sized pools, gardens, a marketplace,

and a resort-style spa.”

Luna outright gawked at me as the elevator doors snicked shut behind us. “A whole *marketplace*?”

“Mhm, yes. Some of the residents don’t care to make a trip out if they’re missing something; I believe there are several folks who’ve retired here as well. It is more convenient for them that way.”

“Oh,” Luna replied, slightly breathless. She seemed to be in shock. It wasn’t as if I’d built the place, but it still left me feeling a bit smug. Perhaps it shouldn’t, but my wolf wagged his tail slowly back and forth, and I saw no reason to ruin the moment for either of us.

Once we reached my floor, the door chimed softly. I waved a hand to allow Luna out first, but she didn’t wander far, sticking close to me as I took out my keycard to open my front door. I ushered my guest inside and closed the door behind us. “How about a tour?” I suggested.

Luna looked up at me, looking a bit agape again. After a moment, she gave a small nod. “I thought you lived in an apartment,” she said, her voice almost a whisper.

I shrugged one shoulder. “I do. It’s simply the penthouse,” I replied, guiding my guest into the kitchen. It was clean and modern, with dark slate floors and deep wooden cabinets. The countertop was a handsome marble, complementing my stainless-steel appliances.

The majority of the apartment had an open concept, so it was easy to guide Luna around to the little breakfast nook and the living area. There was a large live edge table and eight chairs poised around it. Of course, it was meant for entertaining, though dinner parties weren’t really my style. I was about to escort her to the terrace when she paused. “Is that a piano?”

“Yes.” I shrugged. “Do you play?”

She shook her head, raising a brow at me. “No. Do you?”

“No.” I shook my head, motioning for her to follow me down the hall. “But it came with the apartment, and frankly, it would be more hassle to get it removed than to style around it, so it got to stay.”

She followed me reluctantly, and I noted each door as we passed. “The laundry is in here — please feel free to use it whenever you need, you don’t need to ask — this is the first bedroom, but as I rarely have guests, I’ve converted it to my office.” We walked a little further to the last door. “And this is the den. You’ll see most of the bookshelves are in here.” We kept walking, and I reached the door to the outside.

“Wait,” Luna said, frowning as we walked back outside. “I thought you said I could stay in your guest room.”

“I did,” I said, nodding. “There is the master, and a third bedroom, which is a bit larger than the one I just showed you — that one retained itself as a guest room. I don’t think I’ve ever had two guests stay with me at once.” I shrugged. “Anyways, this is the terrace. I’m afraid I’m not much one with plants, but the view is exquisite.”

Luna finally glanced over, and her jaw almost hit the floor. “Oh, Remus,” she exhaled, brushing by me to walk to the railing. She planted her palms and leaned forward, the breeze catching her dark hair. “The view in Oklahoma was nice, but... Wow. Just...wow.” She looked back at me with a soft smile. “This is what they call a million-dollar view, isn’t it?”

I smiled as I joined her, looking out at the Austin skyline.

“Indeed it is. We could have dinner out here if you’d like — but maybe you’d like to see your room so you can put your things down?” I’d dropped my bag off when we walked by my office.

Luna took one last look around the terrace and then nodded. “That would be nice,” she said, and I led her around the terrace to the other door. It let us in at the kitchen, but Luna caught sight of something as we walked inside.

“Was that another terrace?” she asked.

“Mhm,” I replied, glad she couldn’t see my grin. If she thought the large terrace was nice, she would love the one off of her room. We looped back through the foyer, going to the right instead of straight ahead. We stopped at two doors. “On the left is your room. It also includes a complete en suite. The master is to the right.” I opened the door to go inside, and Luna trailed after me, seemingly more interested in admiring the master than checking out her room.

“You have a door onto the deck!” she exclaimed, stopping next to my wardrobe to stare out the sliding door.

I shrugged a little. “It’s a private terrace,” I said. “That’s what the wall was. Your room has a door out to it, too.”

“Really?” She smiled and drifted over to my bed, sitting down to stare at the view. “It’s so beautiful. Why would you ever want to come to Oklahoma when you have this?” Luna laughed softly and shook her head, tracing her fingers over my satin sheets. After a moment, she tossed me a little grin over her shoulder. “This bed doesn’t look like it gets much use,” she teased, smoothing her hand over uncreased sheets.

Of all the things I expected that woman to say, a comment on my bed and its *use* wasn't on the list. I choked on my tongue before I managed a laugh, actually taken off guard. "It gets enough," I finally croaked. I couldn't take my eyes off of her. It was a side of Luna I'd only seen a few times — the pool of water came to mind — and I began walking towards her when the phone in my pocket began to buzz. I pulled it free and scowled as I read the name. "Sorry," I murmured to Luna, making a small face. "I do need to take this."

I took a step back to answer, but her silver eyes never left me. Even as I greeted my assistant at Silverstreak Motors, she watched me with a slanted smile. As my assistant returned the greeting and immediately jumped into details about the upcoming board meeting, I realized Luna had slipped her bag off somewhere, and she was walking towards me. I lifted both brows in question, but the she-wolf simply smiled at me, the picture of innocence.

The assistant said, "The meeting is scheduled for 3:00 p.m. on Thursday, Mr. Silverstreak. I know you prefer morning meetings, but the majority of the board could only make afternoons."

"Understood," I said, but I could barely make sense of her apologetic tone. Luna had started tracing her hands over my sides, over the hems of my shirt and the lines of my slacks as if she were trying to memorize the pattern and there wasn't a man underneath. Or maybe she was *very* aware of the man underneath if the look she was giving me from beneath her lashes meant anything. I strangled a groan — which I quickly had to turn into a cough, realizing I was still holding the phone to the side of my face.

Luna's eyes widened, and she bit her lower lip.

"Are you all right, Mr. Silverstreak?" my assistant asked.

I grunted. "Fine. Was that all?"

"Yes. I'll update you again tomorrow morning."

"Good. Thank you."

I hung up the phone and looked back at Luna. "What are you doing?" I asked, aware my voice had gotten a bit deeper. My wolf stirred and rumbled as heat coiled in my belly.

Luna watched my face for a moment longer before drawing away, taking a step back. "Could I see my room?" she asked. "You said it was right next door, right?"

I huffed out a breath and shook my head, forcing myself to inhale, long and steady. There was no need for me to lose control, even if Luna was being

impossibly cute just now. “Right,” I said, bending over to pick up the bag she’d set by my bed. I led her to her room. Once she opened the door, she gently took the bag from my hand and turned so we were standing chest to chest again.

“Thank you,” she murmured softly, that impish look returning to her eyes. Luna leaned a little closer and whispered, “I’ll see you for dinner,” before she stepped back, gently closing the door between us.

I stared at the wooden door for a moment, unable to comprehend what had just happened. It was like taking Luna out of Oklahoma had given her a fresh breath of life. It was a good look on her. No, it was a fucking *great* look on her. I was so hard right now that I had half a mind to rip the door right open and finish what that woman started. My wolf growled in agreement.

*Patience.*

I took a step back and adjusted my slacks, growling softly to myself. Luna required patience. I was certain she was worth it.



**LUNA**

## Remus' Penthouse Suite

### Austin, Texas

Remus had said each room had its own private bathroom, but I still hadn't expected something so lavish. Perhaps I should have, given everything else I'd seen in the apartment so far, but walking into my ensuite almost took my breath away. The bathroom itself was almost double the size of the room I'd had in my father's house, complete with double vanity, a shower, and a separate soaking tub. I traced my fingers over the lip of the white marble, lips slightly parted. The room itself was practically a work of art. If Remus hadn't told me to make myself at home, I might have been afraid to actually touch anything.

In truth, I was still a little nervous, but I'd told the man I'd see him for dinner. The idea of meeting him still wearing the same thing I wore on the plane without washing my hair was... ugh. Yeah, that thought was way more stressful than figuring out the bathtub.

Fortunately, though it looked fancy, the faucet worked exactly as expected. I thanked whoever the designer was for being practical despite being stylish and began to strip out of my clothing as the warm water filled. There was even bubble bath, shampoo and several scented oils on the built-in wall ledge. *This is like a spa.* I decided on the bubbles and a gentle lilac oil. It smelled amazing and turned the water a beautiful pale purple color. *Remus did say there was a spa in the building. Maybe he meant the bathrooms?*

I mean, that would make sense. It made more sense than an *apartment building* with a private spa for its residents. The building had been quite tall, but how many people could really live here? Were there enough residents to keep a spa busy? *I guess he did mention some people retired here. They'd need more things to fill up their day.*

Maybe I could go exploring tomorrow. I dipped my toe in the water; the temperature was just right, so I slipped into the soothing warmth, a pleased exhale escaping me. I hadn't had much to unpack, but I did have the few things from my mother I'd hidden in my bedroom — or my former bedroom. One of the items had been a small alarm clock she'd given me when I was about six years old. She had told me her father had given it to her when she



was about my age. The little silver clock didn't work anymore but had a nice vintage look. It was currently sitting on the vanity across from me; I thought if I got a few more vintage pieces at a thrift shop, I could add my own touch to the room, and it would be easy to move once I found my own place.

The idea of moving made my heart flutter. Remus hadn't put a time frame on how long I could stay with him, but I didn't want to be a freeloader. I would be happy to clean up around the apartment until I could contribute financially, and then I could save up enough to get a place of my own. It was beautiful here, and I could easily imagine living the rest of my life in such luxury... but it wasn't mine. Remus was being generous, and I didn't want to take advantage of that.

*Don't be so hard on yourself, Luna. You haven't even been here for twenty-four hours. Remus hasn't seemed put out at all.*

While I was sure he didn't need a roommate for financial reasons, it could be possible he'd been a bit lonely. The penthouse was quite large for one man — even if that one man was throwing lavish parties or something — and as far as I could tell, he didn't have any pets. That didn't surprise me, though. Cats, understandable, didn't take very kindly to werewolves in general, and dogs could be really hit or miss. Some got overly attached and some constantly felt threatened; it was hard to say how it would go, and most shifters I knew found that it wasn't worth the effort.

*I wonder if my mother lives alone now. She was one of the only Ulfrics I hadn't found on social media. That in itself didn't totally surprise me — after all, Facebook became popular after she was an adult, and maybe she was trying to avoid my father by all means necessary. Still, I knew almost nothing about what she was doing now, except that she was still a mechanic, and she apparently worked for Silverstreak Motors. I was fairly certain Remus would have mentioned it if she'd had other children, but the rest?*

*Does she have a mate? Does she live alone? Does she live with other werewolves? Did she decide to buck the trend and get a dog or a cat? If there was any shifter I knew who'd say 'to hell with it' and try to befriend a domestic animal, it was definitely my mother — or how I remembered my mother. I couldn't wait to see her — but I dreaded the meeting in an equal amount, afraid of who I'd meet.*

*I'll have to ask Remus for her contact info... or maybe he'd be able to set up the meeting? I want the first meeting to be face to face, not over the phone.*

I shook my head, swirling my fingertips through the water. The bath was supposed to be relaxing, not a brainstorming session. *It's nice to be thinking ahead for a change.* It was much nicer than reflecting on all the things that had happened over a day or a week — and how I wished they were different. I closed my eyes and sank a little deeper into the warmth.

THERE WAS a silky robe left in the bathroom for me. Just another layer to add to the decadence. Once I had dried my hair, I wandered back into the bedroom. I had laid the few items of clothing I'd managed to rescue out on my bed. Thankfully, several underthings had been strewn in the chaos, but I'd also gotten a few tee shirts, a flannel, a pair of shorts, and a dress. The only pair of pants I had were the work pants I'd been wearing when Remus had rescued me, which would get me through until I could get a job and buy another pair. Outside of my shoes, I had a pair of flat sandals.

And that was it.

At least there was the dress, though. I picked up the dark blue number; Lynn had allowed me to buy it when Athena graduated high school, and they threw her a large party at a local restaurant. Of course, Athena was the girl of the hour, decked out like a local princess (tiara and all), but Lynn hadn't wanted her other children to detract from Athena's moment but looking out of place. She'd even let us pick our own outfits, as long as they were dressy. I had always wanted to wear this dress out on a date but never had the chance.

*Until now.*

Was dinner on the terrace a date?

*Why not?*

Shrugging out of the robe, I laid it to the side and began to dress before returning to the bathroom. The basic toiletries provided included a brush, but unfortunately, I didn't have any makeup outside of the chapstick I kept in my bag — and that didn't really count. Given how much my sisters valued their eyeshadow palettes and bags of brushes, I was confident the little makeup I did own was among some of the first things to be tossed into the burning barrel.

*That will be a nice treat for yourself after your first paycheck.*

Hopefully, Remus wouldn't mind much, but I hadn't exactly been wearing any recently, so. Why should he? Once I was done brushing my hair, I looked in the mirror. All the bruises and cuts from the past weeks had faded

away, but I could still remember them. Marnet had left scars far beneath the skin. It was a sad thought, but...it wasn't as sad as I had thought. Even though I could almost still feel his boot on my back or his hand on my face, I was here. Without him. I was here, and despite everything, I was okay. I felt lighter than I had in... in years. Looking at myself in the form-fitting dress, I actually felt pretty. I felt *pretty*, and that was something Marnet would never be able to take away from me.

The thought made me smile.

Deciding I was as ready as I'd ever be, I fluffed my hair one last time and left the bathroom. I eyed my sandals for a moment before shrugging — Remus didn't wear shoes around his apartment, and I didn't want to break house rules. I'd go barefoot.

The matter settled, I picked my things up off the bed to set on the dresser (I could organize tomorrow) and left my room. Despite the size, the penthouse wasn't that difficult to navigate. Bedrooms on one side, living space in the middle, and the bathroom-turned-office and den on the other side.

I could smell food cooking in the kitchen, and a cloud of butterflies suddenly kicked up in my gut. *What's going to happen tonight?*

REMUS WASN'T in the kitchen cooking — there was a woman I didn't recognize with her dark hair pulled back tightly and a white chef's coat on. She looked quite intense, so focused on whatever was on the stove that she didn't even notice me walk in. I didn't want to break her concentration, so I slipped towards the terrace door. It was the only place that made sense to find Remus before dinner.

He was standing at the rail, looking out at the city skyline as the sun sank towards the buildings. I couldn't help my small smile. "You like a good view, huh?" Every time I found him alone, Remus was staring out at some landscape — or cityscape.

The alpha turned, his head tipped to one side as the corners of his mouth perked up. "What's wrong with appreciating a good view?" he murmured, something about the tone in his voice making my cheeks heat up. The full intensity of those eyes locked on me, and I suddenly felt a bit self-conscious, like I was the thing Remus wanted to gobble up instead of dinner. "You look stunning, Luna."

I looked down at the fabric of my dress and smoothed my hands over it. While I had felt pretty when I'd looked myself over in the mirror... stunning? That seemed like a bit of a stretch. I could feel my cheeks getting a bit warmer as I glanced back up at him, struggling for some sort of pithy comeback.

When I looked up, however, I realized the table behind Remus was only set for two. There were roses on it, arranged so that they looked like someone had casually strewn them. There were even two small pillar candles, burning merrily as the sun continued to sink. I blinked. "Is it just us tonight?"

For some reason, I hadn't thought of that. *I guess I assumed a man as important as Remus had nightly dinner plans — with clients or... I have no idea who else a CEO needs to meet with.* The realization made me flush a little harder.

"Yes," Remus said as if that were no big deal. He motioned to the table. "I thought it would be nice. Is that a problem?"

"Oh, no," I rushed out. It was a wonderful idea — I *loved* the idea. The last thing I wanted him to think was that I was disappointed or something. "I was expecting... Well, I have no idea what I was expecting," I admitted, chuckling softly. I tucked a strand of hair behind my ear. "So, who's in the kitchen?"

"Elena?" He looked briefly towards the door. "She's my chef here." He paused for a moment, wagging his hand. "Well. She's the chef for the Silverstreak family; I think my mother would lose her mind if I told her to find her own cook. Regardless, she's a full-time employee. I texted her earlier to ask if it was possible to cook a dinner for two at the last minute, and because she is an absolute magician, here she is." He smiled. "You like Mexican food?"

I shrugged. "I... maybe? We didn't go out to eat much, and when we did, my father had a steakhouse he preferred wildly over everything else. I've had tacos a few times, but I suspect that doesn't count."

Remus shook his head, the skin around his eyes crinkling. "No. Not really. Elena's mother was a chef in Mexico City when she was younger, and she taught Elena everything she knew. She's really quite good. And she cooks much more than traditional Mexican fare, but that's her specialty." Remus motioned towards the table, motioning me over as he pulled a chair out for me.

I sat, trying to ignore the fizzy feeling in my chest. "You sound close," I

said curiously, watching as Remus poured us both a glass of wine before sitting across from me.

He hummed. “I don’t have any siblings. Martha, her mother, worked for my father. I’ve already told you my mother basically wouldn’t — couldn’t — cook, and my father was too busy for that, so.” He shrugged. “Martha was over almost every day, and she brought her daughter with her. When I wasn’t being nagged by my mother to do homework, we would play together sometimes, especially when we were younger. When I got older, there were *pack duties* to learn — and I assume that is when Elena learned the most from her mother.” His smile was fond, if not a bit far away. He shook his head. “We had someone else after Martha retired, and Elena was off at school. I was delighted when she showed back up to interview for a job when I took over my father’s role. She really is a good cook.”

I smiled as he spoke; it felt nice that he told me a bit about his past — that he spoke fondly of someone, too. Marnet had a sister through blood, but I think I could count on one hand the times he talked about Sophia with any sort of affection, and those were passing comments at best. He always had disparaging things to say about her and his mother. At the time, I found some relief in that, like I wasn’t the only one who had sibling strife, but... looking back, it was probably a red flag on how he treated women in general.

Before I could comment, Elena appeared as if the story had summoned her, two plates in hand. “Tonight, you will start with ceviche de Sierra,” she told us, offering my plate first before Remus’. “Should I tell you the rest of the menu?”

Remus shook his head. “Surprise us.”

Elena nodded. “Enjoy the ceviche,” she said and turned to head back inside.

I peered at the fancy cup sitting on the plate before glancing back up at Remus. He had already started eating; the expression on his face was one of pure bliss. “Ah...” I could already feel my cheeks turning pink again. “What’s a ceviche?”

“Fish cooked with the acid of a citrus fruit instead of heat,” he replied without missing a beat. “It’s very refreshing in the summer.”

“Oh!” I had always enjoyed seafood. We didn’t get that much in Oklahoma, but we did get some; the coast was closer for us than for many others in the States, after all. It was a treat I always looked forward to. I dug in and closed my eyes with the first bite, the flavors of ocean and lime

dancing across my tongue. “Oh, wow. This is lovely,” I gushed, opening my eyes to smile back at Remus. “I feel like such a country bumpkin, though. Eating this fancy food on this lavish terrace with this amazing view.”

He winked, and I felt the skin on the back of my neck prickle. “It’s all relative. Oklahoma and Texas really aren’t that different. You’ll see.”

THE REST of dinner followed the same vein. Elena brought out something I’d either never heard of or never seen in person, Remus had to explain to me what it was, and it ended up being absolutely delicious. After this evening, I was sure Mexican food was my new favorite cuisine; I could even say I’d eaten the real stuff now, not just whatever my stepmother begrudgingly whipped up on a Thursday night.

I sighed dreamily as I put another spoonful of flan in my mouth. I’d at least heard of the dessert before, but I’d never encountered it in the wild. It was ridiculously smooth and creamy. *I could probably eat this every day of my life and never get tired of it. What an amazing night this has been.*

I had run through a few scenarios in my head of what might be waiting for me at dinner, but Remus treating me to a gourmet meal was not on that list. I smiled over at him. “Thank you.”

He looked up from his glass of wine, confusion warring with his smile. “For what?”

I shook my head. *For everything.* “For everything you’ve done since that conversation with my father — honestly, for taking me to that conversation even though I wanted to forget it.” It wasn’t a particularly... healing experience at first glance but perhaps it was upon further inspection. Sometimes you had to drain the wound and let the poison out. I had been afraid of the hurt that would come with it, but I felt worlds better now that it was done. “It... it clarified many things for me,” I said, nodding once. I reached for my wine and took a sip. “And it made me feel more certain about coming to Texas, too.”

Remus stood and walked to my side of the table, offering me a hand. When I allowed him to take it, he beamed. “It was my pleasure, Luna. I’d do anything to make you happy,” he said, leading me over to the pair of chairs overlooking the view.

I almost coughed on my mouthful of wine, surprised by the admission. Even as I sat, I wasn’t entirely sure what to say in response. *Thank you* felt

entirely too trite. When I looked over, brain still working, on how to ask him ‘*Why?*’ he reached over to rub his thumb over the corner of my mouth, removing a crumb or something.

The motion made me flush, but I couldn’t look away. Remus was still looking at me with the same intensity he had before when I’d walked out onto the terrace in the first place. I shivered; it felt like electricity in the scant space between us. Even my wolf had taken notice; her entire focus trained on Remus. Excitement thrummed through her, too.

It was familiar and strange at the same time; Marnet used to give me a thrill, too, but there was no real sense of gentleness. Marnet looked at me, but Remus *saw* me. He probably knew more about me than Marnet did, and that man had known me intimately for six years.

The hurt of having been rejected was still present, though no longer as raw as before. A few weeks had done a lot to temper the hurt; the conversations I’d had in the time since had given me a lot to think about. All the same, my wolf had been deeply injured by it, and I had come away with quite a few new scars myself. It would take more than a few weeks to get over the man entirely, even if I would be perfectly happy if I never saw him again.

“It could take months,” I whispered, leaning closer to Remus.

His dark eyes studied me for a moment, and he gave a slight nod, seeming to understand exactly what I meant. The simple acceptance made my heart skip in my chest, and I slipped a little closer, unable to explain how such a little thing could mean so very much. I set the wine on the table next to the chairs and turned to Remus, tipping my chin up.

“Kiss me,” I said.





# REMUS

## Remus' Penthouse Suite

### Austin, Texas

“**K**iss me.”

The word bounced around the room in the space of a moment. After that first encounter in the pool, I had resolved to wait for Luna to come to me, but it still took my brain a second to catch up now that the moment had finally come. My wolf pressed against the surface, frustrated that we hadn't thrown ourselves at her immediately, chairs and table be damned.

Luna hovered close but made no further move, like she thought I could possibly deny her in this request. Like any man could resist those quicksilver eyes or those plush lips.

Not wasting another breath, I cupped her cheek in one hand and pulled her into a kiss. I swept my tongue over her lips; she tasted like caramel and vanilla. She was almost tentative in the way she kissed me, soft and sweet. I couldn't help but think that maybe she wasn't sure if I really, truly wanted her. After what happened with Marnet, I couldn't blame her for that.

I banished the thought quickly; there was only room for Luna in my mind's eye. Whatever this woman wanted, no, whatever she *needed* from me, I would provide. It could be a shoulder massage or a thorough fucking, and I would deliver. *Fuck, I really hope it's the latter.*

The thought made me groan deep in my chest; that was all the encouragement Luna needed. The she-wolf sighed into the kiss, one of her hands settling on my knees as she leaned closer, encouraging a deeper kiss. Her lips parted as her tongue swept against mine. My grip tightened just a little on her cheek. When we finally parted for air, just by an inch, I brushed my thumb over her cheek. “*Luna.*” I almost didn't recognize the sound of my voice, it had gone so rough — and just from one kiss.

Apparently, it worked for her. Luna's eyes darkened to a shadowy shade of silver as she gave me a quick once-over. Seeing what she needed to see, the she-wolf all but threw herself off her chair, doing her best to straddle my hips despite her form-fitting dress. My hands found her hips all on their own, tugging her closer against my core as she wriggled her skirt a little higher,

allowing her the flexibility without ruining the dress.

My fingers flexed against her sides, and Luna whimpered into the kiss. Her fingers found my shirt, kneading and tugging aimlessly as she squirmed in my lap. Now that she'd moved, she didn't seem to be able to stop, and it was playing hell on my patience. Heat coiled tightly in my gut as my cock began to thicken. If we kept kissing like this, we'd be naked on the terrace before either of us knew what happened.

I shifted forward on the chair, using my hands to direct her thighs. "Wrap your legs around me," I growled into her ear. Though Luna made a puzzled noise, she did as I asked, linking her ankles behind my back. I got my hands around her and stood, holding her securely against my torso as I strode towards the door inside. It was a short walk from the terrace to my bedroom, and I kicked the door shut behind me, finally depositing Luna on my bed.

Her hair splayed around her like a dark halo, and she reached for me as if she couldn't stand the momentary separation. "Remus," she sighed, and I groaned at how it made my cock jerk.

"All I've done is kiss you," I growled, unbuttoning my shirt. "Wait until you see what else I can do."

"Please," Luna murmured, propping herself up on her elbows. She was already starting to wriggle out of her dress, though with much less success. I offered her a wolfish grin and bent over her, grabbing the fabric to tug it back over her head.

Her full breasts sprang free as I tossed the blue fabric aside. "No bra?" I asked, lips curling up in a grin.

To my delight, Luna's cheeks turned a bright shade of pink as she squirmed, as if torn between lying there and pulling the sheet over to cover her chest. She shook her head. "Didn't have a cute one, so..." She trailed off with a shrug.

I pulled my belt off and dropped it on the floor before climbing onto the bed to join her, planting another kiss on her lips. "We can fix that. Later though," I growled. I dipped my head as I cupped one of her tits. Luna groaned as I bent my head down, swiping my tongue over that sensitive bud of flesh. She squirmed and whimpered as I lapped at her nipple, stopping only to pay the same attention to her other breast. I kneaded and pinched; Luna shivered and whined with each lick and pluck until she was writhing all over the sheets.

"Remus!" she gasped, her sides heaving.

“Should I stop?” I asked, looking up from her chest. She stared back at me, her expression slightly dazed; that meant I was doing my job right.

Luna shook her head and reached a hand out for me. “Kiss me again,” she murmured, urging me closer. “I want to touch you.”

That was a request I had no intention of denying. I crawled over her, leaning down to press our mouths together. Her delicate fingers traced down the length of my chest as if she was trying to map the expanse of my skin, the light touch sending sparks up my spine. She hesitated when she reached the waistband of my pants, and I groaned, my impatience growing. “You can touch,” I growled against her lips, rolling my hips forward.

Luna grinned against my mouth. She dragged her fingers over the fabric, tracing the lines of my erection through my slacks. When she brushed her thumb over the head, my cock jerked, and I couldn’t help the small snarl. “Tease,” I hissed, digging my fingers into the mattress.

“I’m touching,” she cooed back. “Isn’t that what you asked for?”

I growled softly as she gave me an innocent smile, like she had no idea what she was doing to me. I didn’t believe that for a second. I ground down against her again, rubbing the length of my dick against her. Luna squirmed again, spreading her thighs wider as she arched up; I could feel the heat radiating from her core, even through layers of cloth. *Too much clothing.*

Rearing back onto my knees, I shuffled just far enough away to shed the rest of my clothing. Luna whimpered, suddenly bereft of contact, and propped herself up on her elbows, giving me a small pout. I couldn’t help but grin at her, more than happy to press back into her space, her fingers tracing the length of my ribs before she shifted suddenly, grabbing two handfuls of ass to drag me closer as she arched back up to meet me.

I grinned against her skin as I trailed kisses across her neck and collarbone, dipping my fingers between us to pluck at her panties. “You’re wet,” I huffed, rubbing my fingers against the damp spot left on the dark fabric.

Luna wriggled again, trying to get my hand exactly where she wanted it. “I’m soaked,” she replied, sounding slightly breathless. “Are you going to do something about it?”

“Absolutely.”

Before she could say anything else, I pulled out of her grip, looping my fingers into her underwear and sliding them down her legs in one quick motion. They were tossed to one side and immediately forgotten as I settled

between her knees, my palms placed firmly against her inner thighs. Bending forward, I flattened my tongue and licked a wet stripe between her folds, unable to help the rumble as I was overwhelmed by her taste. Her scent. It was so alluring that it almost overwhelmed me, and I wanted little more than to bury my head between Luna's legs and make her sing my name.

"Remus," she gasped, one hand finding the top of my head. Her fingers curled into my hair, nails raking gently against my scalp. Each little movement sent a spark of sensation down my spine, and I redoubled my efforts, lapping at Luna's pussy. Each touch made her squirm a little more, so I tightened my hold on her skin, anchoring her down against the sheets as I worshiped her core.

"Remus," she said again, voice already airy and shaky. "Remus, if you don't stop..."

I lifted my head briefly, swiping my tongue over my glistened lips. "If I don't stop?" I prompted, my voice rough and gravelly. "You'll what, Luna?"

"You're going to make me come," she whimpered, finally propping her head up to look at me. Her silver eyes looked a little glazed over.

"So come," I replied, dipping my head to swipe my tongue over her clit.

Luna nearly shrieked with the sudden attention to the sensitive nub, both hands now tugging on my hair. "Remus!" she gasped, tugging again as she tried to urge me to relent. "Remus, please – I want to come on your cock."

I inhaled sharply, my dick jerking sharply at the implication. "With a request like that, how could I say no?" I rumbled, finally allowing her to guide me away from her pussy and back up towards her face, kissing me like she'd never tasted anything sweeter. I groaned against her mouth, regretfully pulling away.

"Remus--"

"Give me one moment, Luna," I rumbled, leaning over to my nightstand. With no patience left at all, I almost jerked the drawer right off of the tracks. The contents rattled inside. After a moment of fishing, I retrieved my prize, ripping the small packet open with my teeth to free a condom.

"Just to be safe," I rumbled to my partner, wasting no time in rolling the rubber over my erection.

Luna hummed, and I could see her nod out of the corner of my eye. "Just to be safe," she echoed, and I was glad she agreed – even if she was on birth control, shifters were particularly virile. That was not something either of us needed to deal with right now.

I rolled back over, and she spread her legs in welcome, folding her limbs over me as I positioned myself again. I took her by one hip before I dipped two fingers inside her velvet warmth. Luna shivered in delight, digging one ankle a little harder into the small of my back. “I’m ready,” she murmured softly, tipping her head to one side as she bared her neck. “Fuck me, alpha.”

If I had any doubt she might be appealing to my wolf, it was erased in a second. My wolf growled, and I withdrew my hand, replacing my fingers with the head of my erection moments later. Luna whined and rolled her hips, bearing down as I began to press forward, groaning as I began to slide inside. “Fuck.”

She felt divine. Warm – no, not warm. *Hot*. Searing, delightful heat and a perfect fit, her pussy clenching against my dick even as I bottomed out, grinding skin against skin. I stilled for a moment, trying to give Luna a minute to adjust as she panted; her hands never stopped moving, tracing every inch of my skin as she writhed beneath me.

“Remus,” she whimpered, clenching around me again. I choked back another moan, pulling her closer. “More. Please.”

“Needy,” I rumbled, but it wasn’t a complaint. I fucking loved it. I delayed only long enough to steal a kiss from her soft lips, and then I was moving again, sliding in and out as I built up a steady rhythm. There was no reason to rush this; if she felt good now, I wanted her to feel positively divine by the time we were done.

Luna wrapped her legs against me a little more tightly, her hands settling near my spine as she wrapped her arms around my shoulders, clutching me tightly against her skin. I shifted my angle slightly, and she whimpered, curling her fingers and daggering her nails into my skin. The prickle of pain registered only as pleasure, and I rumbled deep in my chest. “Fucking gorgeous,” I murmured, mouthing at her skin.

“Remus.” It was like the only word Luna remembered how to say, and I loved it. I loved the sound of my name falling from her lips.

“Perfect,” I murmured, kissing her throat. I raked my teeth over the delicate skin of her throat, and she whined, pussy clenching around me again. “You’re fucking perfect, Luna.” But I couldn’t bite her. Not on the throat. Not like that. Not unless we were mates.

*But boy, I fucking want to.*

Even my wolf stirred at the idea, and I began to increase my pace, each thrust met with a breathy, reedy noise from Luna. It was only a matter of time

after that. Luna trembled, and I bent down until there were no gaps between us. “Come for me, Luna,” I growled, tipping my head to bite her collarbone again.

As if on command, she gave a breathy cry, clenching against me as she began to tremble. That was all it took, Luna’s divine pleasure, and I followed her over the precipice into pleasure moments later, satisfaction running through me as I released, groaning Luna's name into her skin.

I SAT in the armchair in the corner of my bedroom, flicking through stock reports on my tablet. Tala had mentioned that things had gotten a bit unstable and rather unexpectedly, but I was starting to suspect my cousin was downplaying the nature of the variability. After all, she was my chief financial officer at the time, and she often took pride in handling things without needing to involve Fiona or me unless a signature was involved. To that end, she was also quite good at breaking down the details if requested. I was still one hundred percent confident she was the best choice to take over Claw & Co. Construction, but shit. I was going to miss her input at Silverstreak Motors.

*Especially right now.*

Frowning, I clicked out of my reports and opened another app, looking at the stock market’s behavior over the last several weeks. It didn’t seem like there were any issues with other motor companies — high end or otherwise. Frankly, most of the stocks in the United States seemed fairly stable, as much as you’d expect them to be. *This doesn’t make any sense.*

The company hadn’t made any shocking announcements lately that could shake someone’s faith in our stability. Our quarterly statements had been solid, meeting our expected growth marks. Our most recent report was released in July, but that was well over six weeks ago. If that were going to impact the market, it would have happened long before I traveled to Oklahoma. The 2023 models weren’t expected to debut until the fall at the very earliest, so we weren’t behind the times. I scowled at my tablet and closed the window, looking up.

Luna was still tucked into my bed, the covers arranged over her as she slept peacefully. She was facing the other direction, her arms wrapped around my pillow, but I could still see the smooth curve of her shoulder. I smiled despite myself — but the moment was short-lived. I had to figure out what

was going on with the company. The trend certainly explained why the board was getting squirrely, and Tala felt it would be easier to deal with them in person, but what explained the trend?

*It's like someone decided they had a personal vendetta against Silverstreak Motors and then decided they'd act on it.*

The thought made me frown, and I raked my memory for our clients over the past year, both new and returning. While it was impossible to make every last client perfectly happy, they'd all left satisfied in the end. We hadn't landed every single deal we'd cast out for, but nothing unusual came to mind. *Unless a sales agent didn't report something to their manager?* That seemed unlikely; we had no new sales workers, and the sales manager had been with Silverstreak Motors for years. If anything even had the possibility of coming back to haunt us later, I was fairly positive she would have told me.

*Maybe I need to check last year's files. This just doesn't seem like normal consumer behavior, even for Wall Street.*

I looked back at Luna, still sleeping peacefully. A small corner of my mind wanted nothing more than to crawl back into bed behind her and fall back asleep. Ignorance was bliss and all that. Unfortunately, this problem was not going to just magic itself away, and I would have to get to the bottom of it, even without a CFO to help.

*Coffee will help. Leave it alone for a bit and get some coffee.*

My best thoughts always came after coffee. I stopped in the bathroom long enough to brush my teeth and comb my hair before I crept out of my bedroom, careful not to disturb Luna. She looked so peaceful; if she wanted to sleep until noon, I don't think I'd have it in me to wake her up. *Hopefully, the smell of coffee and breakfast will do that for me.*

Given that I had gotten in touch with Elena with almost no warning yesterday afternoon and asked for a three-course dinner, I had told her to take the day off. Besides, it meant I got to spend more time with Luna without anyone else in the apartment. I certainly didn't mind Elena's presence, but I knew Luna was still rather withdrawn around people she didn't know. I would rather see the Luna who hadn't retreated back into her shell.

Once I brewed myself an espresso with the machine on the counter, I opened the fridge. Elena had stocked it when she'd brought the groceries over for dinner, bless that woman. It wasn't enough to cook a feast, but there were eggs, milk, cream, and a few fruits and vegetables. There was a loaf of bread on the counter and a bag of bagels. *That woman needs a raise,* I thought



fondly.

*Well. As long as I get to the bottom of this stock bullshit.* The dark thought followed a moment later, and I scowled. Silverstreak Motors was established well enough that one rocky quarter wouldn't sink us, but it was certainly not something I could just let go and hope it sorted itself out.

I shook my head and reached for the eggs. *Breakfast first.* I had made Luna French toast the last time I'd cooked breakfast. I'd make scrambled eggs this time. I had learned a rather fancy recipe a few years back — the eggs came out creamy and perfectly done, with just a little tang. It surprised almost everyone I'd made it for, which was why I'd learned it to begin with. I'd never been interested in seeing a woman for more than a weekend when I was younger, but I still enjoyed being a good host—being a good memory and all that.

My thoughts drifted back to Luna as I prepared the eggs and put a pan on the stove, turning the flame to low. (That was one of the secrets of these eggs.) For the first time, I wanted to be more than just a memory, good or not. I wanted to be present, too, not just past. *And future...?*

I let that thought trail off with a shake of my head. *One thing at a time.* It would take more than a few good breakfasts to maintain a present, though, no matter how good the sex was. The memory of Luna beneath me flashed across my brain, and I had to force myself to think of something else, or I'd ruin these eggs and end up waking her up after all.

*Maybe I ought to surprise her with something. Nothing ordinary like flowers, though. She'd think I was being trite.* I mulled over a few possibilities as I stirred my eggs, staring into the pan like it might contain an answer. A few moments later, a truly excellent idea popped into my head. *Ah! That's perfect! After breakfast, I'll—*

My train of thought screeched to a halt and came right off the rails as a pair of hands slipped against my torso, delicate fingers tracing over my abs. I'd forgotten I hadn't even put on a shirt before coming out here, but now soft lips were pressing against my shoulder blades. The eggs were almost done, so I pulled them off the burner; the residual heat from the pan would finish them off. I turned in those arms, and Luna smiled up at me with warm, sleepy eyes.

“Hello,” she said quietly, a tiny smile on her lips.

My heart did something strange in my chest, and my wolf rumbled. I ignored the feeling as I bent down, kissing the crown of her head. It earned me a sweet giggle, so I did it again. “Good morning,” I greeted her. “I made

breakfast.”

As if on cue, the toaster oven pinged, and I was forced to pull away, rescuing the toast. “Butter?” I asked, plating the pieces.

“Yes, please,” Luna replied, taking a seat at the kitchen island. “Lots.”

I grinned and did as I was asked, adding the eggs to the plates. The finishing touch was a bit of spring onion from the small selection of produce that Elena had left, and then I served it to Luna. “Hot sauce?”

She shook her head. “Coffee?” she asked. When I moved to turn the machine back on, Luna paused. “Oh! Sorry, I assumed you had a pot or something. I can wait.”

I waved a hand. “It’s not a problem. I just have to tell it what to do,” I countered, grabbing a mug. “Do you prefer your coffee on the stronger side?”

“You ever met a wolf that didn’t?” she countered, and I couldn’t help my smile. We ate quietly as the coffee percolated. “Would you like to see the city of Austin today?” I asked, polishing off my plate. “I don’t have the board meeting until tomorrow, and I suspect free days will be harder to come by after that.”

Luna nodded, smiling as I handed her mug over. “I would love that,” she replied, smiling over at me. “I need to get some new clothing before I get a job, so it would be great to know where to go.”

I smiled. “Your wish is my command. I suppose I ought to put some clothes on.”

Luna offered a wistful sigh. “I suppose,” she replied, sipping at her coffee. “Their loss, though.”

WE ENDED up leaving my apartment a little later than intended. I shot Bane a quick text and after we finished our coffees, my shower turned into a shower for two — and that evolved into some very different adult activities. Luna made the most delicious noises pinned against the natural stone tile as I worshiped her from top to bottom. Even the sight of Luna as I got her on her knees in return was not one I’d forget for a long time. Her lashes looked even darker, her face colored by the warmth of the water as she hollowed her cheeks—

*Down, boy.*

If I kept up that line of thought, I’d need a third shower, and we’d only just finished lunch at a Parisian cafe. Once I paid, I led Luna down the street,

content to pause as she stopped to stare at several windows. There were plenty of shops with handsome displays, selling everything from luxury clothing to supplies for artists. One colorful window offered bespoke children's toys, while the one following advertised rare and antique books.

"Do you want to go in?" I asked Luna, nodding towards the door when she spent a particularly long time eyeing the display.

She laughed and shook her head. "Oh, no. What would I do with old books? I'd only have to move them again once I've found my own place, and besides — I think I'd be afraid to pick them up, much less read them. And that's what a book is for, isn't it? Reading."

I paused, looking back over at the she-wolf. "Your own place?" I queried, raising a brow. "You haven't even been here for forty-eight hours yet."

Luna flushed and ducked her head, tucking a strand of hair behind her ear as she moved to look at the next boutique. "Yes, well, I appreciate you letting me stay with you, but I don't want to take advantage of that," she explained quietly. For some reason, the sentiment warmed me a bit. I was used to people assuming I had so much money that I wouldn't miss it — regardless of if that sentiment was true, it felt nice not to be taken for granted, even if it was unwarranted.

"You're welcome to stay as long as you'd like," I replied easily. If she really wanted to leave, I certainly won't make her stay, but I'd rather enjoyed having her in my penthouse so far. "Ah! Here we are. This is one of the places I wanted to show you," I said before she could argue. I moved to open the door and ushered her inside. "Elena told me about it, actually. A store particularly meant to cater to women in the trades." Despite being in the twenty-first century, they were still the minority, so it made sense that a shop offering clothing and tools for women in a male-dominated world would do well in a large city.

"You and Elena were talking about me?" she asked, a bit of hesitation in her voice.

I shrugged one shoulder. "I did tell her who the dinner was for. Her sister is an electrician; she said she got her Christmas gifts here."

Luna gave me a look I couldn't read, but the answer seemed acceptable enough because she stepped into the deep store, drawn towards the section styled for mechanics like she was being drawn by a magnet. I followed at a much more leisurely pace, offering the woman behind the counter a small nod. I didn't mind watching as Luna browsed, murmuring to herself about the

options. “So many colors,” she whispered to herself. “And there are even options in fabric type. This is like — this is like heaven.”

I couldn’t help but grin. Most women I knew would feel the same way about Prada or Louis Vuitton, but Luna was currently fawning over a pair of coveralls. She wasn’t like anyone I knew. *Except...* I remembered what I had been planning earlier and pulled out my phone as she gathered a few things into her arms, sending another quick text.

“I think this will do,” Luna said, nodding. “At least until I get my first paycheck.”

She carried her selection to the counter, and I followed, eyeing the coveralls and work boots. When she began fishing for her wallet, I stepped over, laying a hand on her arm. “Allow me,” I said. I smiled at the woman behind the counter. “She’d also like the complete toolset I saw in the window,” I added, pulling my AmEx card out.

Luna sucked in a sharp breath, eyes wide as she stared at me. “Remus! I can pay for my clothes,” she whispered as the saleswoman retreated to fetch the toolbox and accompanying tools. I wouldn’t pretend to know what all the tools were, but I’d seen the same thing in the hands of my head mechanic, Zack. I knew he wouldn’t skimp on quality.

“I know.” I shrugged. “But I feel bad we hadn’t gotten your things earlier. Let me buy this.”

“That wasn’t your fault,” she sighed, folding her arms over her chest. “You don’t have to apologize for it.”

“Then consider it an investment into your career,” I argued, smiling as the saleswoman returned with the box and began packaging it up for us.

Luna frowned. “What if I don’t get a job at Silverstreak Motors?”

I shrugged. “Luna, you taught me about engines while fixing that SUV the other day. I am sure you will get a job wherever you want — and if that’s not Silverstreak Motors, that’s fine,” I added. My wolf rumbled a bit at that idea, having enjoyed having her nearby, but that wasn’t for him (or me) to decide. If she wanted to work for a garage or independently, that was her decision, not mine. “You deserve your own set.”

She hesitated a moment longer, and then she nodded. “Well...thank you. I appreciate it, Remus. I really do.”

THOUGH WE MOSTLY WINDOW-SHOPPED, we did stop in a few more stores.

Most of Luna's clothing had been destroyed, and even if she refused to allow me to replace her wardrobe, she needed at least a week's worth of clothing to start. The rest could come later. I was just thinking about suggesting we start our walk back to the apartment building when Luna paused, making a slight noise of interest as she peered in a window. When I glanced over to see what caught her attention, I couldn't help my smile.

"Let's go inside," I suggested.

Luna flushed a bright pink. "Ah, we don't have to. I'm sure that's expensive, and I have enough."

"Nonsense," I replied, moving to open the door for her. "Just last night, I seem to recall you telling me—"

"Okay, okay," Luna said quickly, her face heating up even more. She stepped inside before I could finish, but I knew I'd made my point.

I followed her inside, and she held one of her bags close, as if she had no idea what to do or where to look. *She was much more at home with the mechanics' clothing.* I gave her a small smile. "It isn't going to bite, Luna."

"Well, no, but..." she said, looking at the wide selection of colors, textures, and styles. "I've never been in an actual lingerie store before? Anything I've gotten, I bought online."

"Then you need to be measured," someone said from behind us. "My name is Terry. If you get your bust size and shape measured, you can get a bra with a much better fit, dear." A silver-haired woman appeared at Luna's shoulder, patting her arm. She relieved Luna of her bags, handing them to me. "Come with me. Not only will the bra show your assets off better, but you'll also find they're so much more comfortable when they're actually sized to fit you, too."

Luna glanced over her shoulder with a look of mild panic as Terry escorted her towards the back. I waved a hand. "Go on," I said, amused.

Terry glanced at me as well. "You can take the first private room on the right," she said, pointing to the other corner at the back. "There are some refreshments. I'll send her along when we're done with the measurements." She gave me a knowing look. "No funny business in the private room."

I folded a hand over my heart. "I'd never dream of it," I replied.

I DIDN'T MIND WAITING for Luna to reappear in the room; the chair was comfortable, and the snack selection was rather nice. The shop was even

nicer inside than it had initially appeared.

My phone buzzed, and I pulled it out, answering a few texts and emails as I waited. At some point, there was a gentle knock, and Luna poked her head through the door. "Can I come in?"

"Of course," I laughed, glancing over. I motioned her in with a hand.

Luna let herself in, a few things in her hands. "Terry told me to try on one of these, and if it fits and I like it, these others should also fit," she said, staring down at the fabric. She exhaled heavily.

"Are you all right?"

"Hm?" She glanced up, giving me a small smile. "Oh, yeah. Just a bit overwhelmed, I guess. I had no idea you were supposed to measure your boobs like that? I mean, it made sense when she explained it. Just feeling like a silly country bumpkin again."

I gave her a sideways smile and shook my head. "How were you supposed to know if you didn't have a store to go to?" I replied. I made a shooing motion. "Try your things on, and don't worry so much."

She flushed and turned around, standing at the other side of the dressing room for a moment. "Don't look."

I snorted. "Luna, I saw you naked last night. And this morning."

She made an exasperated noise. "Yes, but I was cute then, not awkward. Let me keep some of the mystery alive, would you?"

"Okay, okay," I said, holding my hands up in surrender. If she didn't want me to watch her change, then I wouldn't. I pulled out my phone to recheck my texts. "Not looking," I told her, even going so far as to turn and face the door instead of where she was standing.

I heard the shift of clothing and then a few more rustles as she started to change. A few moments later, she gave me permission. "Okay. You can look now."

When I glanced back up, Luna was standing in the middle of the room, doing her best impression of a super model's swimsuit pose. She only managed to hold the serious expression before she giggled, motioning to the little ensemble with her hands. "What do you think? Does it look all right?"

"It looks stunning," I said, slightly breathless. "Turn around?"

She smiled and just as I said, gave a little twirl. The navy-blue lace looked just as good in the back as it did in front, framing the lovely curves over her ass and hips. When Luna turned to face me again, she bent forward and gave a little shimmy, unable to help herself. She giggled again. "I have to

admit; it does feel nice. Nicer than anything else I've owned."

"It looks amazing."

Her smile brightened as she looked at me, biting her lower lip. "You think so?" She sauntered a little closer. "I think so too."

"I think blue might be my favorite color on you."

Luna beamed. "I think I'll get this pair. I'll put the rest back."

I shook my head. "Try on another one. You can't wear the same bra every day."

Luna gave me an exasperated look. "I can't afford more than one set right now, and you need to stop buying me so many things, Remus."

My wolf rumbled as I grinned. "Oh, Luna. You mistake me. This is a treat for me," I replied.

Her flush was delightful as she seemed momentarily at a loss for words. "Oh," she said, like the idea that someone found her pretty to look at almost unbelievable. "I'll try on the black bra then?"

I nodded. "If you like it, you should."

She gave a small nod and turned back around, taking off the navy piece to exchange it. I looked away again — I said I would after all — and my phone buzzed. This time, it was Bane. He'd gotten the number I had asked for, and I smiled at the screen.

*Perfect. This is going to work out perfectly.*





**LUNA**

## The City of Austin

### Austin, Texas

I'd never been shopping for lingerie before, much less with a *man*, but I was finding the whole ordeal to be oddly... exciting. I had thought I would feel more embarrassed about trying on lingerie in front of Remus, but instead, I felt quite comfortable, swaying my hips as I teased my hair. The fabric felt like butter, and the glimpse I got in the mirror looked — well, it looked quite flattering. I felt even better now than I had looking at myself in the blue dress.

I pouted my lips and looked up, only to find Remus looking down at his phone and smiling at something. Abruptly, I stopped, slightly taken aback. *What is he doing? Was he just humoring me a second ago?* He wasn't pointing the phone at me, so I was fairly certain he hadn't taken a photo without my knowledge — but what did that leave?

*Only one way to find out.*

“What are you doing?” I asked, suddenly going still. I had thought my dance was at least cute, if not sexy — but maybe I had been mistaken. Mortification threatened to crawl up from the pit of my gut, and I could already feel my cheeks starting to turn pink.

Remus looked up, slightly startled — that expression quickly transformed into one I'd never seen on the man's face before. If I didn't know better, the alpha looked slightly abashed. “I'm sorry,” he replied, putting his phone back in his pocket. “Nothing can take my attention away from you.”

I raised my brows, not entirely sure if I believed that. It wasn't the phone as much as... well, I didn't think anyone could feel that way about me. I allowed my arms to relax anyways, giving a cute little shimmy in a way I hoped showed off my curves.

It must have worked because suddenly Remus was reaching for me, pulling me across the little dressing room and onto his lap. I laughed and giggled, placing my hands delicately on the alpha's chest. I could feel myself flushing with desire as I gave a little squirm, enjoying the heat I could feel rolling off the man. I enjoyed how his fingertips felt against my bare skin, as light as butterfly kisses. Heat began to pool in my gut.

“Remus,” I huffed, trying not to whine. The woman working out front had had no qualms about Remus checking out what I was trying on, but she distinctly said *no funny business* and made eye contact with me. It might not have bothered the alpha as much, but it certainly stuck with me!

I kissed his jaw and nibbled on his ear; the sharp inhale I earned was exactly the right thing I needed to push myself away, dancing back to the other side of the changing room to fetch my clothing. I offered him a wink. A little waiting was good for the soul, right?

THE REST of the day was just as exciting. We visited several other shops; some of them, I pointed out. Others, Remus suggested. We probably hadn’t even seen five percent of the city, and already, I knew that the alpha was wrong — Oklahoma and Texas were very different places indeed. Still, I was enjoying what I’d seen so far. Even the coffee shop we stopped at for a quick bite and a bit of caffeine had a great vibe. I could imagine myself living in this city — I could imagine myself making Texas my home.

We didn’t get back until the afternoon. Once we’d gotten back inside the penthouse, Remus turned to me. “I have a few things I need to take care of before dinner,” he said, an apologetic look on his face.

I waved him off. “That’s okay!” I didn’t want to take up all of his attention; I’d already had a wonderful morning. (And the evening before... No, I couldn’t dwell on that right now, or I wouldn’t be able to let him get some work done.) “Thank you for everything, Remus. Seriously. You didn’t have to take me out today, and I... I really appreciated it.” I still felt like I was walking on air.

His expression softened into a small smile. “Of course, Luna. I meant what I said.” He checked his watch and sighed. “Now, I do need to go take a call and send some emails. I’ll see you for dinner again?”

The way he said it made a small cloud of butterflies burst free in my stomach, flapping around. I nodded. “I would love that,” I said, unable to keep the smile off my face. “I’ll go unpack.” I gave the bag a little shake, and my grin lifted a little more. “There might be a few things in here for you, too.”

Remus’ eyes darkened, and it seemed like it took him physical willpower to walk down the hall towards his office. I couldn’t help but grin at his retreating form before taking my bags back to my room. I didn’t have much,

so it wasn't difficult to find a place for everything to go. There was something very soothing about how organized my drawers were. My closet was...well, it still looked a bit sparse, but it was also organized. I stepped back, giving myself a mental pat on the back, when my phone began to buzz.

I hurried over to where I'd left it on the side table, almost surprised to see Tala's number. I picked it up before it could go to voicemail. "Hello?" I answered, a bit puzzled. "Is everything okay?"

"Hi, Luna! Everything is fine. Can't a girl call?"

"I guess," I laughed, feeling a bit silly. "I guess before, you didn't have to call to talk, did you?"

"Nope," she agreed; the sound of her laughter made me feel a bit better. "Is now a bad time? I just wanted to catch up."

"Not at all. Now is perfect!" I had thought about taking another bath, but I didn't need one. A quick shower was all I needed before dinner with Remus. I sat on the side of my bed, flopping backward as Tala launched into a ramble about her new position as CEO at Claw & Co. Construction. Somehow, I wasn't surprised to hear that Marnet had all but neglected the place, and it had held together out of sheer spite and one human's willpower.

"I miss having another woman to talk to," Tala sighed into the phone. "Seff has been great in the work setting, but that's not the same. And Bane..." She trailed off and giggled to herself. "You've met him. He says as few words as possible."

"It's like speaking physically pains him," I agreed, recalling the strangled look he'd worn the entire time he'd spoken to Tala and me. Some people weren't social; maybe Remus' beta was really good at pack duties, but social behaviors just weren't his thing.

Tala's chuckle rolled into full-on laughter, and before I could help myself, I was laughing too. I felt a bit bad, but honestly, Bane had looked like he'd stepped into a sauna while wearing a full coat in the middle of summer, and we were hives of bees waiting to sting him.

"It's true," she finally said, slightly breathless. "It's really true. I wish you could have met Steve before you left; I'd have loved to hear your read on him." There was a sound like she was shaking her head. "Anyways — have you had much downtime? Finish the trilogy yet?"

I flushed slightly. "Ah, no, not really. I had to go back to my father's house, but my half-siblings had destroyed most of my things." Tala made a soft noise, but I didn't want sympathy or pity. I kept talking before she could

say something. “I was, uh, pretty tired after we got here, but Remus took me out this morning to replace some of my things. So not much reading time yet!”

*I hope she can't tell we did more than go out this morning.* I liked Tala, but the last thing I wanted to do was tell her about my romantic night with her cousin right now. That felt like crossing some sort of line.

“I’m sorry to hear that,” Tala said after a moment of silence. “I’m glad you’ve gotten some new stuff, though. New life, new start, right?”

“Right,” I said quickly, eager to change the topic. “Definitely ready to leave Oklahoma and Marnet behind.” I paused, a thought cropping back up that I couldn’t shake. “You know... when you first started talking to me, I thought you only wanted information on Marnet.”

“I... yeah.” Tala sighed. “Well, I wanted to get information. I wanted to help my alpha and end this conflict before it went any further, but... It turned out that you were an interesting person, and I really liked talking to you.”

Out of all the answers Tala could have given me, that was probably one of the better ones. I’d had enough lies to last me a lifetime, so I was glad the woman respected me enough to tell the truth, even if it wasn’t particularly nice. “Thank you for telling me.”

“I miss you, you know. Not just like, talking to another woman. I miss that too, but I miss you specifically. You have a sneaky sense of humor.”

“Aw, Tala. You don’t have to flatter me,” I replied, blushing even though I was the only person in the room. “I like having conversations with you, too. I feel like we’re actually able to have discussions, you know? About books, about Texas and Oklahoma... I haven’t had that in a long time. I’m glad we started talking. I’ll have to come to you for my next book recommendation.” I couldn’t help my grin; maybe Tala and I could even have our own little book club.

“Oh, definitely! But you need to know how the Paris trilogy ends first. As soon as you finish, text me immediately. Promise me, Luna.”

I couldn’t help but laugh. “Okay! I promise! But no spoilers, Tala.”

“Yes, yes, fine. We better stop talking about books. How are you liking Texas so far? I know you’ve only been there for like two days, but.”

“Well, the view of the city is gorgeous. Remus keeps telling me Texas and Oklahoma aren’t that different, but Austin is nothing like Oklahoma City.” I hummed. “If I had one complaint, it’s that I haven’t seen anything green yet. I didn’t expect to see the woods in the middle of a city, but still... I

miss the green.”

“I’ll give you a grand tour when I’m back in Austin. I bet I know better green spaces than Remus does.” She snickered. “I’m just going to have to make time in my new schedule. I knew being a CEO would be busy, but damn.”

“I’m sure you’re killing it.”

There was a muffled sound before Tala spoke back up. “Ugh, sorry. Apparently, my next meeting is here early. I’m going to just get this over with — but let’s catch up soon, okay?”

“Yeah, let’s,” I agreed. “Have a good night, Tala.”

She hung up and I lay on the bed a moment longer, turning my head to look at my phone. I was smiling. I was pretty sure Tala and I were actually friends, and that idea made me feel like I could float away on a cloud.

AFTER A QUICK SHOWER, I checked my phone. It was getting close to dinner time, so I decided I’d go find Remus and ask him what the plan was. I knocked on his bedroom door and it creaked open. He said he’d be on the phone or answering emails, but I didn’t hear any sounds coming from inside. I poked my head in to find the room empty. It also looked pristine. The bed, which had been a ruffled mess after last night, was now perfectly made. There wasn’t a single wrinkle. Not a single hint to give away what we’d done. I felt my cheeks flush as I shut the door.

*He’s probably in his office.*

That made sense if he needed to make a business call. I walked down the hall and knocked on the office door. Again, I couldn’t hear anything inside, even with my werewolf hearing. “Remus?” I opened the door slowly, just in case he was on a call — but there was no one there.

*Did he sneak out while I was talking to Tala?*

No, that seemed weird. Remus never needed to sneak anywhere. He wanted to do something, he did it. I was about to retreat back to my room to grab my phone, so I could check for a text I’d missed when a scent, both familiar and strange, hit me square between the eyes. I sucked in a sharp breath and whirled around, staring further down the hall. Now that I stopped to listen, I could hear Remus’ voice — no, I could hear multiple voices.

My heart began to thunder in my chest as I walked towards the den at the end of the hall, my eyes already starting to prickle. My jaw ached as I

clenched my teeth together. I didn't want to believe what my senses were telling me. I knew that scent. I *knew* that scent. It was like the first breath of fresh air after being underwater for too long. It was like walking into your home after being out in the rain all day, and your favorite meal was on. My hands had started to tremble. My wolf whined and paced, clearly agitated, but I was so distracted I couldn't tell if the smell was getting to her or my reaction to it.

I'd known that smell my entire life; it was probably the very first thing I did smell when I'd entered the world. That smell meant I was safe. That smell

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I almost couldn't hear myself think over the roar of blood in my ears as I turned the corner into the den. I don't think I'd ever been that apprehensive, not even when I planned to confront Marnet. Because if this wasn't real, if my mind was just playing tricks on me... I don't know how I'd get over that.

Remus' guest said my name, and my mind screeched to a halt. I flung one hand out to grab the doorframe, barely supporting myself as my knees turned to butter and threatened to give out. "Mom," I croaked, unable to believe my own eyes. Remus had said she was here, in Texas. Said that she was alive and working for Silverstreak Motors no less, but... but...

A sob forced its way up my throat as I covered my mouth with my other hand; I felt like I was barely in control of my body as hot tears spilled over my cheeks. *This has to be a dream. For all the times I'd wished when I was younger that my mother was just away — that she was coming to get me any day now — I had no idea that it was actually true.*

Just one state away!

My mother said something else, but I couldn't hear what she said. I could barely see for the tears in my eyes, clouding my vision as quickly as I could blink them away again. Without another word, the woman stood, striding across the room quickly to wrap her arms around me, pulling me into a fierce hug. "Oh, Lunaloo. I'm so glad to see you," she whispered.

I slumped forward into the embrace, wrapping my arms around her. Even when I hugged her, she didn't suddenly disappear. She was real. Solid. Up close, she smelled even more strongly and exactly the way I remembered, even down to that slight hint of motor oil. I sniffed and buried my face closer. "Mom. I can't believe you're actually here."





# REMUS

## Remus' Penthouse Suite

### Austin, Texas

Fortunately, Luna and Josie migrated to the living room without me needing to interfere. All I had to do was play the gracious host. I had ordered dinner up from one of the restaurants downstairs tonight. After all, I had invited Josie over, and didn't want to take away from the moment by having Elena up to cook. While I was sure she would be nothing but respectful, it was still easy for me to imagine Luna trying to guard her emotions with an extra person in the room.

By the time I had the table set and the drinks ready, my doorbell rang. I saw Luna startle out of the corner of my eye and flashed her an apologetic smile. "That would be dinner," I explained, walking to fetch it. "I hope everyone likes Italian." I would be shocked if anyone objected, frankly.

Thankfully, Luna and Josie understood my meaning, moving to the table as I brought dinner over. It took a moment to unpack the meal, but once I had it spread out, I pointed to each item. "We have vitello tonnato, bucatini all'amatriciana, and braciola di maiale." I sat, eyeing the last dish. A bit of fish sounded excellent, actually. "Oh, and dessert will be brought up in about an hour, though we can always call down if we need the time changed. I just didn't want it sitting at room temperature for too long."

"Mr. Silverstreak," Josie said, giving me a downright maternal look. "I realize you are our alpha, but—"

I frowned and shook my head. "Remus. Just Remus. While you're in my home, it's just Remus." When she arched a brow at me, I mirrored the look. I'm sure she'd cowed many a young man with that look, but I'd grown up with Fiona Silverstreak, Queen of the Icy Glower. It would take more than a stern brow to deter me. "If you don't, I'll start calling you Ms. Ulfric."

That made the woman snort and she shook her head. "Fine. Remus. How many people were you expecting to feed, exactly?"

I could see Luna duck her head and hide her smile, even as she reached forward to help herself to some of the veal.

I shrugged, not feeling remorseful at all. "I didn't know if you'd prefer seafood or meat or vegetarian," I replied. "And I didn't think to ask ahead of

time. It would be rude not to have something you could eat.”

Josie studied me for a moment, but there was a bright sparkle in her eye. “Hm. You better not waste what isn’t eaten.”

“Of course not.” I might have grown up with a cook in the house, but that didn’t mean I didn’t know how to eat leftovers. Besides, Luna might want some of it tomorrow for lunch when I had to go to that damn board meeting. *Ugh. Don’t let thoughts of that ruin your mood right now.*

As I served myself, Luna turned back to her mother, the look of wonder still on her face. “How have you been, Mom? You look—” She paused, laughing softly. “You look *alive*.”

Josie beamed at her daughter, reaching over to pat her hand before serving herself some pasta. “Well, thank you,” she said. Luna wasn’t even exaggerating. Her mother looked positively radiant. She always had powerful energy about her, but now? Now was entirely different. I was sure it had to do with the other woman in the room. “I’ve been well enough. A steady job, my health has been good. I really don’t have room to complain.”

Luna nodded, chewing slowly. It almost seemed like she was drawing the moment out before asking her next question. Her voice was much softer. “Why didn’t you ever come back to Oklahoma?”

The smile fell from Josie’s face, her expression dimming as she set her fork down. “Because I was banished from the Lupus Claw Pack and its territory,” she said, equally as quiet. “It had nothing to do with what I wanted. If I had what *I* wanted, I would still be in that damnable pack.” She sighed and shook her head. “When you’re banished, you are not allowed to cross back into a territory without an alpha’s explicit permission. *Period*. And while Noah Claw could be a reasonable man, Arden Highborn had his ear, and I would never have that. I was not allowed to contact any current members of Lupus Claw, or they could be subject to banishment, too.”

“Even me?” Luna asked, brows pinched together.

Josie nodded. “Even your own children — or your parents, if it were the other way around. I would have needed Arden’s explicit permission and supervision to speak with you, much less see you. I’d written several letters, but I never got an answer, so I assumed that was your answer in and of itself. I thought you were upset with me, and I didn’t blame you one bit for that.”

Luna frowned and shook her head. “I never got a letter. I even checked the mailbox sometimes. I never saw anything.”

Josie sighed softly. “I guess I can’t say I’m real surprised. Lupus Claw

was always a little stranger than the rest. A little less open than Silverstreak or any of our neighbors. A little more controlling... honestly, more than a little. It looked a lot different once you weren't looking at it from the comfort of another pack. Arden probably had someone in the post office or something." Her gaze drifted back to me, and the corner of her mouth lifted into an amused smile. "Though, I can't say Silverstreak wolves don't have their own oddities."

I snorted but didn't interject; this wasn't my conversation. Even Luna laughed softly. "What's that supposed to mean?" she asked.

Josie hummed. "Well, fortunately for me, my father was Remington Silverstreak's beta — and not just his beta, but his friend. Usually, once a wolf is banished from a pack, they aren't ever taken back. They wander and become a lone wolf, and we all know what happens to lone wolves."

*They all go a bit mad.* It was a grim thought, but she was right. A wolf was a pack animal, and werewolves were no different. A lone wolf might get lucky and find a new pack to join, or in an even stranger stroke of luck, band together with other loners, but both were highly unlikely events. Usually, a lone wolf wandered — and they suffered.

"But why...?" Luna asked and Josie offered a small smile.

"Because I was banished from Silverstreak before joining Lupus Claw," she answered, offering her left forearm to display the old, grotesque scar over her Silverstreak tattoo. The sight made my skin crawl, and Luna seemed to respond similarly, subconsciously reaching for the mark on her own forearm. "As I said, I was very lucky I was allowed back — a fact I was and continue to be grateful for." She gave me a slight nod. I simply nodded back, even though I had always thought it to be a given. If my father had decided to grant someone clemency, I saw no reason to go against him unless she did something new and truly awful.

"You were banished," Luna exhaled, looking from the ugly mark to her mother. "How did that happen?"

Josie inhaled sharply. I noticed her shoulders shake as she shook her head. "That's a story for a different day," she said quietly. Even I could sense that the issue was closed. "I feel like I've done most of the talking so far. How are *you*, Luna? How long are you staying in Texas?"

Luna perked up a little. "Actually, I'm hoping to stay in Texas. I'd like to live here. I'd like Texas to be my new home, if you don't mind."

"Luna!" Josie's expression was like a sunrise, brightening the entire

room. “If *I* mind. First of all, you should live where you damn well want — but more importantly, I’d be happy to have you here!”

Luna’s hesitant little smile turned into an actual beam of sunshine; she only nodded, and then she nodded again. A warm feeling spread through my chest as I watched the pair of them. I had wanted to surprise Luna. I’d gotten in touch with Josie earlier — arranging a meeting. If one of the participants had been unwilling then things would have gone in an entirely different direction — but we’d exchanged texts a few times. I had to explain that Luna had thought her mother was dead until now, and how much she had wanted to arrange this but didn’t know how.

I was glad the surprise had panned out. There was always that ten percent chance a surprise would be received poorly, but it was worth the risk. Luna had even called Texas home. I wanted to reach across the table and squeeze her hand — better yet, I wanted to kiss that beautiful woman. But this wasn’t about me. This was about Luna and Josie right now. If Luna stayed in Texas, then we would have the time to explore... To explore whatever this was. Whatever these feelings could be. It wasn’t just *desire*, not anymore. If that’s all it was, I would have already gotten it out of my system and been on my way.

*But I don’t want to get this out of my system. I don’t want to ‘get over’ Luna.*

That was a different feeling for me — but it was one I liked.

JOSIE’S happy stories of Luna’s childhood and her time in Texas continued through dinner as Luna peppered her with questions. I only interrupted so we could order dessert. Given Josie’s reaction earlier, I thought it wiser to allow the woman to choose her own order. Soon enough, the waiter arrived at the door, and I exchanged our empty containers for cannolis, tiramisu, and limoncello mascarpone. When I returned to the table with my sweet bounty, Josie fixed me with another dark look.

“Remus Silverstreak, what did I say about feeding an army?”

I grunted, reaching for one of the cannolis. “Are you really going to judge me for wanting to have an extra cannoli before bed?” I asked, raising my brow in return.

The retort almost stunned Josie into silence, and Luna burst into giggles, reaching for one of the chocolate-dipped pastries herself. “I hope you save

one for me,” she said, wiggling her brows.

My wolf rumbled, and I forced myself to only smile as I polished off my treat. The last thing I needed was for Josie to think I was some sort of lewd creep. “If we run out, I’ll order more,” I assured Luna.

Josie rolled her eyes and reached for her limoncello dessert. “I’m not sure what I expected out of you. You were quite the little hellion when you were knee-high to a grasshopper,” she remarked, shaking a spoon at me. “Luna was a spirited little thing, but by comparison? She was a downright angel.”

Luna leaned forward as she reached for another cannoli, looking intrigued. So far, all of Josie’s stories had been about her. She gave me a mischievous look. “Was he?” she prodded. “Did you know him well when he was young?”

Josie snorted. “Did I?”

*Oh, no.*

“Remember that I said my father was Remington’s beta? That meant I was elected babysitter sometimes when pack meetings ran later than planned and Fiona wasn’t available. As far as I could remember, she was usually part of the meetings.” She shook her head before looking at me. “I spent several evenings trying to convince that boy to go to sleep before his parents came home. Terribly stubborn.” Despite what she was saying, she was smiling at me. “He also liked this one video movie, made me play it over and over. What was it again? Barney? No, that wasn’t it...” The look Josie gave me was positively devilish.

I sighed, shaking my head. “Spare me,” I grumbled, playing along, but only because they were both watching me with such intrigue. *I* knew exactly what childhood video she was talking about, but didn’t every kid pick a favorite show and watch it until the tape came out of the videocassette?

Fortunately, Josie appeared to be feeling benevolent, at least for the moment. “Ah, your secret is safe with me, *alpha*,” she teased, taking another bite. “But only because you provided such a tasty meal, and only because I’d still like that tiramisu on the ride back to my apartment tonight.”

*As if I’d withhold dessert.*

She looked back at Luna. “Here, this is a sweeter memory. He was still quite young when I left Silverstreak. I think he was about four — he definitely wasn’t older than five. Arden had come to take me to Oklahoma with him, and I was *quite* pregnant with you. Remus told me that I was ‘as big as a tree’ and then pointed to this grand old bald cypress tree in the yard.”

She rolled her eyes, still smirking a little. “Kids say the darnedest things, don’t they? Anyways, I remember that, but I also remember how fiercely you were kicking that day, Luna. I couldn’t say why, but it felt like you were trying to use my spleen as a punching bag. You were always fairly active, but that was something else entirely. And then little Remus comes over to say goodbye to me, and he asks if he can touch my belly — he wanted to say goodbye to my pup, too. I said, of course. Honestly, it was probably one of the cutest things he’d ever done, and I was well into my broody emotions by then. I don’t think I could have possibly told him, no.

“And the strangest thing happened, Luna. You settled right down, as if you could hear the little boy talking to you in the outside world. Goodness knows I spoke to you almost every day, but... if anything, I had expected the hand to set you off even worse, but no. You quieted right down and stopped beating me up for the rest of the day. I was so relieved.” She shook her head, expression slightly wistful as she looked at her daughter.

Luna’s gray eyes had drifted to mine, and we locked gazes across the table. Until Josie had shared that story, I had almost entirely forgotten about that day, remembering the babysitting and not much else. I did remember it, though. I remembered feeling rather put out that my babysitter was leaving, and I didn’t get to see her pup. I also remembered wanting to feel the pup move, but the pup had settled right down when I spoke.

Except that pup was Luna. Luna stared at me with wonder, and I couldn’t help but feel a bit awed myself. I could feel my wolf stir again, rumbling quietly as he leaned forward, as if he could simply break away and meet Luna’s wolf without me. Josie looked between the two of us. “Fate has a strange way of twisting things around, don’t you think?” she remarked. If I didn’t know any better, I’d think she even looked a bit smug.

I cleared my throat and reached for my drink, trying to ignore how my pulse had stuttered and quickened. The pull to Luna felt stronger. That story could mean nothing — in reality, it was probably just a sweet story about a little boy saying goodbye to someone he was fond of. But still...

It made me wonder. I didn’t *want* distance from Luna. I didn’t *want* to move forward in my life without her, even though we’d fallen in bed together. I wanted to know more about her. I wanted to make her smile. Yes, more than anything, I wanted to make Luna *smile*.

*Is this what love feels like? Am I falling for her?*





**LUNA**

## Remus' Penthouse Suite

### Austin, Texas

After dinner, Remus turned on the fake fireplace for us. He made a few coffees with a fancy espresso machine, foamed milk and all, and mother and I moved to sit near the fireplace. I didn't think of Remus as a very domestic person, but it was clear he was trying to stay out of the way as he picked up plates to put in the sink. Admittedly, I wasn't surprised he didn't do anything to clean them. If he had a chef, I was confident he had a housekeeper employed too, even if I hadn't seen them yet. There was no way the Remus I knew made the bed up so pristinely.

It was nice to curl up after that large meal, tucked into the plush couch. I was glad we had moved on from the heavier topics. Currently, Mom was detailing her work at Silverstreak Motors for me. Remus had mentioned something about vintage vehicles to me, but I didn't realize the company was busy enough that my mother could work almost exclusively on the special projects.

"They rarely need to pull me over to another project, and if they do, I know they really need my help. I don't mind," Josie said, sipping at her coffee. "It's nice to be needed."

I smiled wistfully at the idea. At Robby's Garage, I had always thought they needed me. I got plenty of the difficult cars, or difficult clients, and it was a rare day indeed that someone complained about my work. Remus had told me to apply at Silverstreak Motors, though, and since my mother spoke very positively about the company... I would definitely keep it at the top of my list. But that was a thought for later.

"Do you have any pet projects right now?" I asked, curious if she still fixed up old cars in her spare time.

The grin she gave me over the mug's rim said that she did. "I have two I'm working on. One's almost done; the other is waiting for a few parts to be shipped. It can be difficult finding the right things over the internet."

"What are they?" I asked, leaning forward. I felt like a dog (or a wolf, ha ha) being offered the scent of a treat.

My mother's grin turned a bit mischievous. "What if I don't tell you, and

you'll just have to come over and see for yourself?" she teased.

I couldn't help it — I jumped at the bait. Honestly, I didn't even need it. I'd want to visit my mother at her home even though she didn't have a single project and — and seven hundred cats or something. I'd want to visit her even if she had too many angry cats. I made myself laugh at the thought. "I'd love to," I agreed. "I have to look for a job, but maybe on the weekend or something."

"Whenever," my mother agreed, smiling. "If you'd like, you could come visit me at Silverstreak Motors during your job hunt. You know, see if it's the kind of place you'd like to work." She gave me a look from her side of the couch. "You seem plenty of fond of Remus, but the mechanics don't work with him regularly. Honestly, we rarely see him unless it's his car that needs work, and even then, it's usually a driver to get the car."

I flushed and shook my head, not sure if I should be embarrassed that my mother had picked up on whatever electricity was crackling between myself and the Silverstreak alpha. "That's fine. I wouldn't take a job just to be around a guy," I said, sipping at my coffee. "I would take one for an opportunity to work on luxury vehicles, though." I snorted. "I would also definitely take one that offered me full-time employment and benefits."

Josie laughed and nodded her head knowingly. "Yeah, not a lot of those for mechanics, is there?"

"Nope." I shook my head. "But I'd love to see the place, anyways." Even if I didn't get the job, it would be cool just to see the inside of one of those machines. I bet my mother would probably let me look around under the hood.

My mom only nodded again, staring into her coffee cup for a few minutes. "Luna," she said, her expression serious. My heart stumbled over itself in my chest. "I want to apologize to you. I did what I could, but I know — I know that doesn't change how you felt all those years. And it doesn't make up for the fact that your father lied to you, and my communications never got through. I can't even imagine." She looked like she wanted to say something else and shook her head. "I really am sorry, Luna. And you don't need to say anything or forgive me today — or ever, actually — but I just want you to know that."

I paused, my grip tightening on my cup a little. "I..." I had no idea what to say to that. I hadn't expected her to apologize; the more I found out about the situation, the more complicated it got. If anyone was at fault, it was

Arden. “Well. Thank you,” I said quietly. It felt like extending forgiveness would just get rebuffed, but I appreciated the sentiment.

Josie offered me a weak smile. “Remus mentioned some bad business with Marnet.”

I made a face, tongue suddenly tasting sour. “How much did he tell you?”

“That was it. Bad business. He didn’t go into the nature of it at all. Was he going to banish you, Luna?” she asked softly, her expression concerned. “I don’t know how detailed Noah had kept his records, but if it was something about me—”

*Ah. She thinks she was causing my banishment.*

I smiled bitterly and shook my head. “It wasn’t that. If he knew that, he never mentioned it, and I’m pretty positive he would have.” Anything to keep me on the line, right? And the fact that my mother was alive... yeah, that was bait I would have allowed him to dangle in front of me.

I cleared my throat. “He’s my mate, actually. Well. My fated mate. We are not bonded.” Strangely, I didn’t even feel bad saying that — there was no remorse or could-have-been feeling. I wanted to tell her. I wanted to get it all out. “We were, hell, well, *I* thought we were dating for six years. Right after I turned eighteen, I found out that he was my fated mate, but he had been cheating on me for at least four years. It was probably all six...” I inhaled deeply, steeling myself. It was something I thought about a lot, but saying it out loud was a lot more difficult, but I needed to. Telling my mom would be like an exorcism.

Josie inhaled sharply once I finished and scooted closer to me on the couch. “If I ever get my claws on that man, I’ll kill him,” she hissed, her eyes dark and intense.

I snorted softly. “I think you’ll have to beat Remus to that,” I said, eyes drifting over to where I’d last seen him. He’d disappeared from the open space, but I didn’t blame him. I appreciated that he let us have this time in some semblance of privacy.

“Not you too, huh?” she asked, some of the venom dispersing from her tone.

“No.” I shook my head. “If I went the rest of my life without ever seeing him again, I’d be just fine. I don’t need revenge — I just want my own life.” It still hurt to think about how much time I’d given the man, and he just... threw me away like a piece of trash. My breath caught and I shook my head, looking back down at the last dregs of my coffee.

My mother reached over, gently placing her fingers over my wrist. “It gets easier with time,” she said softly. “I know it hurts. I know. I should have been there then, but I’m here now, and I’ll help you through it.” I could see her offer me a little smile through my peripheral vision. “And I think you have Remus, too. I don’t think that many alphas would take that much of an interest.”

I flushed and swallowed hard. *Yep. She definitely noticed some of that chemistry or electricity or whatever it is between us.* I was not ready to talk about that yet. Not out loud.

“Yep,” I said, so that she couldn’t say I was ignoring her. “I was wondering, actually — do I have any cousins? I don’t have any on Arden’s side.” Which was probably a blessing, really. If I did, they probably would have sided with my father and his other children.

My mother hummed. “I can write you a list. Or a family tree, actually, that would probably be the least confusing. Would that be okay?”

“That would be great,” I said, grateful she allowed the change in subject.

“Good, good. You just let me know when you’ve gotten a little more settled, and I’d be happy to arrange a meet-up with them whenever you’re ready. We can do small meetings or just one Ulfric family get-together, whatever’s easier.”

The thought of having to meet a whole new family was a little daunting, but I found myself smiling anyways. “I guess I’ll let you know when I have my feet a bit more underneath me,” I said. It was something to look forward to. My mother still seemed like the same no-nonsense woman I remembered from my childhood. She wouldn’t let anyone get too rowdy.

“Oh! I almost forgot. We’re actually having a barbecue in about a week. You’re welcome to come — and if you aren’t ready, I won’t tell anyone you’re here, so no one will bug you about it later.” She smiled.

I laughed. *Maybe she really will have my back.* It was a nice feeling.

“Ms. Ulfric.” Remus’ voice startled me and I jumped, grateful I didn’t still have a mug full of coffee. Josie and I glanced over the back of the couch. My mother made a face at him; he seemed completely unrepentant. “I hate to disturb you, but the front desk called. Your ride is here.”

“Ah,” Josie said, nodding. She set her mug down and got to her feet. “Better not keep him waiting.”

I set my mug down and followed after her, not wanting the moment to be over. A quick look at my phone said she’d already been here for hours, but it

felt like the visit had flown by in mere minutes. “Let me walk you to the car,” I said quickly, hurrying to get the door for her.

My mother just smiled, allowing me to walk her to the elevator. “Don’t worry, Lunaloo. We’ll get to meet up soon. Have Remus share my contact information with you and text whenever you want. Maybe you can come down to Silverstreak Motors; you’ll love the vintage car Remus had brought in earlier last month.”

Before I could comment, the elevator pinged and a man stepped out. “Ah!” My mother beamed and leaned forward, kissing the man on the cheek. “Luna, this is my boyfriend, Simon. Simon, this is my daughter, Luna.”

“Pleasure to meet you,” the dark-haired man said, offering a hand to shake. I took it, slightly at a loss at what I ought to say.

My mother beamed at the two of us before she turned, herding Simon back towards the elevator. “Right. Well, I have to be at work bright and early tomorrow. We’ll have a proper dinner between the three of us so I can introduce you two at a better time.”

The pair of them stepped into the elevator, and I watched them with misty eyes, trying not to get too emotional. “Drive safe!” I called.

“Good night, Luna. I love you,” Josie said, waving as the door closed.

“I love you, too!”

*I hope she heard me.*

I turned, hurrying back towards the penthouse. Remus had barely said anything all night, but all this was thanks to him. I bit the inside of my mouth, trying to hide my smile, and went to find him.

REMUS WAS IN THE KITCHEN, fiddling with something near the sink. Maybe he was rinsing something; I wasn’t sure. I couldn’t get past one single thought – *Remus*. As soon as I was close enough, I bent over the counter and turned off the faucet, reaching up to cup the man by his cheeks and pull him close.

“Wh—” was all he managed to get out before I sealed our lips together, kissing him until one of us needed to breathe. By that point, he had settled both hands on my hips – I didn’t even care that they had been wet, and now my shirt was damp. I wasn’t planning on needing that for much longer, anyways.

“Remus,” I cooed gently, kissing his chin, his cheek, his jaw. “Remus, you glorious, thoughtful, lovely man. Thank you.”

His expression softened by a few degrees, and he stepped closer, leaving only a whisper of space between our torsos. “I’m glad you’re happy, Luna,” he murmured, shifting to press a gentle kiss to the crown of my head. “Always a bit of a risk with a surprise like that.”

I shook my head, ignoring his modesty. Remus was a man with a plan; I was quite sure he’d been confident that I’d like the surprise. And I didn’t just like it. I felt so strongly about it; I wasn’t even sure I had a word to describe exactly how I was feeling right now. Instead, I leaned up on my toes, pressing another kiss to his lips. “Come to bed with me,” I murmured, wrapping my hands into his shirt and giving a gentle tug.

Remus followed easily. “You don’t have to thank me with sex,” he said, even as I started leading him towards the short hallway to the bedrooms. “I did it because I knew you wanted to see her. And I wanted to be able to do something nice for you – not for the promise of a reward.”

The admission made me smile; I hadn’t considered that he’d arranged the meeting for his benefit, but it was sweet nonetheless. I paused for a moment, releasing his shirt and smoothing my hands over his chest. “I *am* happy,” I replied simply, unable to keep the grin off my face. My cheeks were starting to hurt from the sheer smile I was wearing. “And I want to have sex with you because I’m happy, and I like you, and you make me happy – I want to share it with you.” I paused, looking up at him through my lashes. “But if you aren’t interested tonight, you just need to say so...”

“Oh, no, no, no, no,” Remus replied, laughing. His hands found my hips, and he started walking us back again, steering me towards his bedroom. “I am absolutely interested.” He reached behind me to open the door, and then we were moving again. “I just wanted to make sure you were.”

I huffed, shaking my head as I stepped back, wriggling out of his grip. Before he could say anything else, I pulled my shirt over my head, revealing one of the bras we’d picked out earlier. “Remus,” I said, waiting until he met my gaze before continuing. “I’m very interested. I want you.” I tipped my head to one side, smirking as I unbuttoned my pants and started slipping them off. My socks went next, and I slid back onto his bed, wiggling my fingers towards him. “Come here, and I’ll show you just how much.”

Remus’ eyes darkened as he shut the door behind him, storming across the room like someone had lit a fire beneath him. His shirt was discarded before he reached the bed, his deft fingers working with his belt when he stopped in front of me. I grinned, reaching out to poke him playfully in the

chest. “Take it all off,” I hummed.

He raised his brows at me. “Calling the shots now, are you?” he teased.

I shrugged one shoulder, still smiling. “At least a few of them,” I replied before scooting back further onto the mattress, slipping out of Remus’ reach. He made a frustrated noise, and I simply beamed up at him. “All of it, please. Then lie back.” I motioned towards the pillows. “I promise you’ll like it.”

The alpha studied me for a moment longer, but he did as I asked, finally pulling his belt free before he began with his slacks. I wasn’t treated to a striptease or anything of the sort — though now that I thought about it, maybe that’s something I’d ask for down the road. Remus got himself naked with practiced ease, giving his thickening cock a few lazy strokes before joining me on the bed.

He reached forward and I leaned back, clicking my tongue and pointing at the pillow again. “Fine,” he huffed, but he smiled as he made himself comfortable against the pillows and the sheets.

“Thank you,” I murmured sweetly, shifting onto my hands and knees to crawl closer. I ran an open palm over his chest, enjoying the feel of the way his muscles flexed beneath my hand as I leaned down, pressing a chaste kiss to the taut lines of his stomach. He was the most handsome man I’d ever seen, in real life or on a screen. I kept petting his skin, enjoying myself as I traced the lines of some of his tattoos. When we had been intimate before, Remus had driven me so wild that I hadn’t gotten to do much of this. I fully intended on enjoying it now.

The alpha reached up, trying to cup one of my breasts in a hand and I tutted, arching my frame away to deny him the touch. “Keep your hands to yourself,” I teased, swatting his hip playfully. “I want to enjoy this.”

He arched a brow, but he dropped his hand back to the sheets, kneading the silky fabric between his fingers. “All right,” he murmured. “You’ve got me curious.”

“Good.” I lifted myself to lean forward and reward him with a kiss to the cheek, reaching over to brush a few stray strands of dark hair out of his face. My breasts brushed against his skin, and my nipples pebbled; a zing of excitement ripped through my veins as the touch excited me. I had to pull away, forcing myself to take a calming inhale. I had an idea in mind now, and I didn’t want to ruin it.

Once I’d gone through a breathing cycle, the fire of lust in my belly had dimmed back to a warm ember and I sank back down, resuming my slow



exploration of Remus' skin. By the time I made it to the alpha's cock, he was fully hard, a bead of precum pearling at the tip of his flushed cockhead. The sight made my mouth water. I shifted lower, and Remus made a low noise deep in his chest.

One hand left the mattress and I paused – Remus seemed to remember my earlier instruction and made another strangled noise, replacing his hand on the sheets. I murmured my appreciation and tipped my head, kissing the soft skin where thigh met torso. My fingers dragged down his side, drifting over his sparsely haired thigh before cupping his balls, rolling them gently in my palm. Remus made the same noise, and the heat in my belly curled a little tighter.

Smiling against his skin, I layered tender kisses everywhere but his cock as I massaged his testicles, pleased to see I could make the man feel as good as he'd left me feeling the night before. My cheek brushed against his dick and he jerked. "Touch me, Luna," he murmured, his voice rough and hoarse. "Please." I loved the sound of it, and so did my pussy. I felt myself clench, growing wetter as I began to rearrange myself.

Finally, I wrapped my fingers around his base and wet my lips, swallowing as much of him as I could in a single motion. Remus groaned out loud, and I echoed the sound around my mouthful, causing the man to buck and roll his hips. I squeezed his cock once before dragging my tongue slowly from the underside to the tip, tracing the slit as the salty bitterness hit me. Remus finally moved his hand from the bed, tangling his fingers in my hair. He pushed my head down, my stretched lips slowly enveloping the girth of his thick cock. I shifted slightly, bracing one of my hands against the alpha's firm thigh at the pressure of his hand, at the feel of his nails prickling against my scalp. Remus' cock hit the back of my throat, and I moaned again, enjoying the full feeling as I slackened my jaw to accommodate him.

"Shit, Luna," he groaned. Somehow, his voice sounded even rougher. That thought went straight to my core, and I groaned in response.

I dragged myself back up slowly, my tongue flat against his skin, milking groans and muttered curses from him. I would have smiled if my mouth wasn't so full. Instead, I sucked on the tip of his erection gently once I reached it, running my tongue over the slit again and lapping up the precum that had collected there. Remus' hand disappeared from my hair, dropping back to the bed; immediately, I set my own pace. Faster. More urgent. I still had one hand on his cock, stroking the bottom of his shaft while I bobbed my

head and moved my tongue, my other hand kneading at the meat of his thigh.

My jaw began to ache, and I pulled off just once, sucking in a frantic breath. “Fuck,” Remus groaned, lifting his head off the pillow to look at me. I flashed him a grin.

“After,” I said, still feeling cheeky. I didn’t give him a chance to argue, licking a wet stripe up the length of his thick erection before opening my lips to swallow him back down. I swirled my tongue around the head, teasing the sensitive skin before bobbing my head back down and swallowing around him. Each swallow pulled more of his cock into my mouth until the tip was brushing against the back of my throat again. Remus was jerking and twitching beneath me; he was finally losing some of that well-manicured control. I wanted to make him let go entirely.

The thought made me moan as I swallowed Remus down again. He went rigid unexpectedly, releasing into my mouth with a final jerk of his hips. I whimpered and groaned as he filled my mouth and emptied down my throat, milking him through his orgasm. Finally, I let his softening cock slip from my lips and I pulled away, arranging myself carefully by his side as he panted. I smiled, pleased to see him so winded.

After a moment, he rolled onto his side, grabbing my hip roughly. “Come here,” he growled, pulling me into a possessive kiss. His hand slipped between my legs, fingers gathering some of the moisture he found there.

I moaned into his mouth, spreading my thighs eagerly. “Think you have it in you to fuck me?” I asked breathlessly, pushing myself into his hands. Two fingers slipped inside me easily, I was already that wet.

“After I pay you back for that?” he replied, already kissing my neck and chest. “Absolutely. You’ll want for nothing by the time I’m done with you, Luna.”



# REMUS

## Remus' Penthouse Suite

### Austin, Texas

I woke to sunlight starting to filter in through my curtains and Luna resting gently against my chest. My wolf thrummed his pleasure, content to simply bask in the company and the warmth in our nest of covers and sheets. Gently, I wrapped one arm around her shoulders, enjoying her weight against my torso. I closed my eyes and sank back into my pillow, focusing on the steady rhythm of my breathing. Of her heartbeat.

*I could get used to this.*

Luna made a sleepy noise and I opened my eyes again, trailing my fingertips over her skin gently. Not so long ago, I was telling my mother I didn't want anything that lasted longer than a weekend. This might not be the "all-powerful fated bond" my mother had gone on and on about...but it felt nice. No, it felt more than nice. It felt different than anything else, and I wanted to see where it would go. With each day, I felt a little more strongly than I had before. I didn't want anything to happen to her — no, I wouldn't *let* anything happen to her. I would keep her safe as long as she would let me.

*Marnet wouldn't know what to do with a woman like this.* It had been obvious to me for quite some time that he didn't know a good thing when he saw it; after all, Noah Claw hadn't been a particularly poor alpha. I didn't agree with all his choices, but he hadn't left the Lupus Claw pack to Marnet in true dysfunction. It was hurting a bit, because of Noah's business sense, but it wasn't in shambles. Marnet had done that through neglect and disinterest. He'd done exactly the same to Luna.

I was going to erase those years of pain and hurt. Neglect and mistreatment. I leaned forward to kiss her crown. The movement was enough to make her stir and shift her head, blinking those sleepy silver eyes open at me. She murmured a wordless noise, brushing her fingers against my chest. "Hello," she said, her voice still rough with sleep.

"Hello," I murmured back, leaning to kiss her gently. Her wolf must have stirred because mine seemed to have been woken, rousing with a gentle rumble. I could imagine the pair of them curled up together, perhaps in the sunshine — or if it were later in the day, under the shade of an evergreen.

*Perhaps I should ask if she'd like to go for a run soon.* My wolf gave another rumble, clearly supporting the idea. I tucked the thought away to ask over breakfast.

"I'll need to go into Silverstreak Motors' headquarters today," I informed her, running my fingers up and down her spine idly. "I have the board meeting this afternoon." And I was *not* looking forward to it, but it had to be done. Putting it off wouldn't make it any better.

Luna hummed quietly. "Could I come with you? My mother told me I could stop by any time and she'd show me around — plus, I'd like to see the vintage car she's working on right now."

I nodded. "Sure. You can get a feel for it while I deal with the board." I paused for a moment, frowning. "Admittedly, I have no idea how long this meeting will take, but if you want to come back, I'll leave you with a key. My driver will be able to take you."

Luna made a low noise. "Or my mother."

I smiled. "If that's what you'd prefer, sure." I glanced over at the clock on my nightstand and sighed as I read the time. "We have an hour to get ready. I suppose we ought to get out of bed." Despite knowing the day I had ahead of me, I wanted little more than to stay tucked in the sheets. I leaned forward to kiss Luna one last time before pushing the covers away, forcing myself to move. "I'll carve out some time for you somewhere."

A strange look crossed her face as she chuckled and shook her head. "I've heard that line before." She shook her head again as she sat up, stretching her arms over her head. "You're a busy man, Remus. I understand."

I scowled, knowing exactly from whom she'd heard that before. *Marnet*. I leaned forward, meeting her eyes. "I mean that. Unless you tell me you want the time to yourself, I'll do exactly as I said," I told her. *I am not Marnet, and I won't treat you anything like that oaf did.* But there was no use in saying it. As she'd just said herself, she'd heard lots of empty words before. I'd show her. My wolf growled, reinforcing the sentiment.

"Okay," Luna said simply, clearly not wanting to cause conflict. Part of me wanted to drag her close and say it over and over until she believed me, but that was a fool's thought. Another part of me wanted to invite her to shower with me again — but we both had to get ready, and the last thing I wanted was for her to think this was physical only. The remaining rational part of my mind insisted I just let it lie and prove my words with my actions. That was how my father had raised me, and it hadn't steered me wrong yet.

I finally hauled myself out of bed, heading towards the bathroom. “I’ll meet you in the kitchen.”

I GOT READY SO QUICKLY, it had to be a record. There was no basking in the shower, no dallying in front of the mirror. I was crisp and clean as quickly as possible, but Luna was still in the kitchen when I got down the hall, poking at my espresso machine. “Do you need a hand?” I asked, walking over.

“I got it,” she chirped, offering me a mug. “I watched you yesterday.” She winked; the cheeky expression was gone so quickly, I wasn’t sure I hadn’t imagined it. “I wasn’t sure if you took sugar, though, so I left it out.”

I smiled, accepting the mug and taking a sip. “I don’t,” I admitted. “This is perfect.”

Her smile brightened some more. “Oh, good. It’s really not that complicated, as it turns out.”

“It’s not.” My secret to excellent coffee had been revealed. I wouldn’t call the machine foolproof (there was an accident in the first few days of ownership I will continue to refuse to describe until my dying day), but it was fairly intuitive once you gave it a few moments. “Bagels for breakfast sound all right?”

“Fine with me,” Luna said, turning back to the machine as she brewed her coffee. I set my mug down to investigate the bagels Elena had dropped off the other day.

“It looks like we have plain, cinnamon raisin, blueberry, and poppyseed,” I remarked, selecting the latter for myself. “There’s both butter and cream cheese in the fridge.”

“I don’t suppose it’s strawberry cream cheese?” Luna asked. When I shook my head, she shrugged. “Oh, well. I’ll have a blueberry bagel anyways, please.”

I made a mental note to ask Elena to pick up strawberry cream cheese the next time she stopped at the market before popping the pair of bagels in the toaster oven. Luna leaned against the countertop once she’d finished her coffee; I realized she was dressed in some of the clothing we’d purchased yesterday. She had her new jumpsuit on, a crisp olive green. The arms were rolled up to her elbows, and her hair was done up with a cute pewter bandana. I hadn’t seen Luna grab any accessories, but then again, I hadn’t exactly investigated the pile of clothing she’d put on the counter, either. If she needed

a bandana to keep the hair out of her face while she worked, I saw no reason she couldn't have every color of the rainbow if that's what she wanted.

She even had the new work boots on. I nodded down at them. "How do they fit?"

Luna rocked back and forth on the balls of her feet. "A little stiff, but I think they'll break in well. They offer really good support, too. I wanted to make sure before I was actually on the job, but I'm already pretty sure I'll love them."

I smiled. "Good to hear." The toaster oven pinged in seconds and I turned, fishing the bagels out and onto our plates. Luna appeared beside me with the cream cheese and a knife, silently smearing each with a little smile on her face. The quiet sense of domesticity warmed me as she slid the poppyseed bagel back to me, reaching for her own breakfast.

We ate in silence, leaving the dishes in the sink. I briefly retreated to get my leather satchel. Luna was reading in the hallway when I returned, just her phone and wallet on her person. "No toolbox?" I asked, raising a brow.

Luna shook her head. "I don't want to look presumptuous," she said. "My mother might not want me to work on her project, and I don't want her to feel like she has to. After all, she has no idea what my skills are." Her smile grew a little more. "I'd rather her see exactly how much I have learned."

That seemed fair enough to me, so I fished my wallet out to offer Luna one of the key cards for the apartment. When she gave me a questioning look, I insisted. "In case you want to come back to the apartment before I do. As I said, I'm not sure how long this meeting will take, and I don't want you stuck at Silverstreak headquarters if you don't want to be."

"I don't know why you think I'm not going to like it, but okay," she replied, mirroring the look I gave her a moment before. She took the card anyway, tucking it safely in her wallet.

I led her over to the elevator; Luna laughed suddenly on our way down. "We make quite the pair, don't we?" she asked, motioning to the polished chrome wall.

Following her gaze, I realized she was looking at our well-manicured reflections. "We complement each other," I said, standing up straighter.

She laughed again. "If you say so. You in your designer suit, and me in a mechanic's get-up. Stranger things have happened, I guess."

"What do people always say? Opposites attract, or something like that?" It wasn't something I had put any stock into before meeting Luna. "I love the



difference between us,” I replied, shrugging my shoulder. “You’re unlike anyone I’ve ever met.”

“I— Thank you,” Luna said, her voice a bit far away. She seemed to be struggling for words, but the ping of the elevator rescued her as the door slid open.

“This way,” I told her, leading her over to the garage. The apartment building had private parking for its residents, but the penthouse came with a particular area of its own. It had only come with two spots, but I had purchased several more — different cars for different occasions.

Deciding on one of Silverstreak’s newest models, I opened the passenger side for Luna. She gawked at me for a moment. “I know you said you had a collection of vintage cars, but hell, Remus,” she whispered fiercely, looking around. There was no one else in this section of the parking garage — as I said, it was private and secure. “You have a collection of luxury cars, too!”

I shrugged one shoulder. “I’m the CEO of Silverstreak Motors. What would people think of I didn’t love driving the cars my company made?”

“I...” She narrowed her eyes at me, even as she slipped into the seat. “I don’t think that requires you to have five different models.”

I grinned. “Nothing said I can’t, either,” I said before closing the door, striding around to the other side.

We didn’t hit much traffic on our drive to Silverstreak Motors’ headquarters, so we were only in the car for twenty minutes. Luna asked to put on music, and our hands brushed together as we both reached at the same time. When we arrived, I pulled into my spot and turned off the car.

“Where’s the garage?” she asked, unbuckling and peering out the window. I opened my mouth, about to describe how to get there when she shook her head and laughed, leaning in to press a firm kiss to my lips. “You know what, I’ll find it. I don’t mind a bit of exploring,” she said, the smile reaching her eyes. “Thanks for the ride, Remus.” She kissed me again, softer and sweeter, the taste of her lips lingering on mine even as she let herself out of the car and all but skipped towards the building.

I watched her go, trying to keep myself from outright grinning. *I could get used to mornings like this.*

I SPENT the rest of my morning in the office, only surfacing from pages of reports and notes to make sure Luna wasn’t left high and dry for lunch. Her

response to my text was that her mother was taking her to the employee canteen; Josie wanted to show her more than just the automotive shop. That was perfect, I thought. At least Luna would have an interesting day, even if I would be stuck in bureaucratic hell. My assistant brought me something to eat, but I couldn't even tell you what it was. I barely took two bites, too busy compiling all the facts before meeting with the rest of the board.

I'd lost track of time when someone knocked. "Come in," I rumbled, assuming my assistant was here to tell me I'd best be off to the boardroom. When I looked up, I realized it wasn't Katherine but my mother instead. I fought not to frown, setting the pen down on my page. "Mom," I said carefully. "Good afternoon." I expected to see her at the board meeting — I'd personally invited her even though she wasn't a member of the board — but not before. She was supposed to be there as a voice of reason, especially for members who'd been with the company since my father's time. Many of them trusted her, and if I ran into trouble, I knew she wouldn't have any reservations about telling me 'the way things were after the meeting was over. "Did you need something?"

After how frosty she was with me on the plane, I didn't want to brush her off, but I still wanted to go over my notes once more before the meeting. My mother didn't seem to catch that vibe and took a seat on the opposite side of my desk, folding her legs primly. "Would you like to tell me about the blood oath, Remus?" she asked, using the exact same voice she did when I was a seven-year-old boy after I'd colored on the wall and then tried to hide it with glue. (In my second-grader mind, I absolutely thought white paste would totally blend in with the wall. It didn't.)

I blinked, caught off guard by the question. I had expected her to perhaps drill me on the company's stocks or ask me questions about board members, but the blood oath? "What?" *How is this even relevant right now?*

My mother gave me a frown. "How long were you going to go without telling me?" she asked, clucking her tongue against her cheek. "Honestly, Remus. A *blood oath*. You realize those are permanent, don't you?"

The urge to sigh was strong. "I know, Fiona," I replied. *I guess I'm practicing my patience for the meeting right now.* "I was not tricked into it and knew exactly what I was doing." It felt strange that I had to defend Seff; my mother had sent my father and me off every summer to visit with Seff and the Blazepaw patriarch on Red Paw pack lands. She'd obviously trusted them once.

My mother scowled openly, shaking her head. “You should have consulted me — I realize the rest of the elders were back here in Oklahoma like we should have been, but honestly, Remus. That isn’t something you can just jump into.”

My patience was quickly being whittled away. “Time was of the essence,” I rumbled, brows knitting together. “This was the stipulation Seff offered to put his resources to work to deal with Marnet. The Red Paw pack and its territory will never be under any threat from the Silverstreak pack, and vice versa.”

“Seff offered it? I should have known.” If possible, my mother’s expression only darkened further.

I couldn’t help it. I scowled. “And what, exactly, is that supposed to mean?”

“Well, it clearly benefits him more than you. He’s trapped you in a bond you’ll never get out of.”

I fought the urge to bare my teeth, feeling my wolf bristle and prickle at her insinuation. “First of all, Seff didn’t *force* me into anything. I could have said no, and I’d have to figure out what I wanted to know on my own — which would be annoying but not impossible. Second of all, I’m not an *idiot*, so I’d appreciate it if you stopped treating me like a teenager who’s never dealt with a wolf from another pack.” It was hard to force it out carefully. Without the anger I could feel starting to simmer beneath my skin. “I have never had any interest in taking over the Red Paw pack or their land, so it’s no skin off my nose. Seff has that peace of mind, and I have his word that I’ll never have to worry about Red Paw, either.” Frankly, it hadn’t been something I was particularly worried about, but having it in a bond was good. Even if Marnet did have someone hoarding money for him in Arkansas, I could be confident now that Seff wasn’t involved. “He is actively working with me and against Marnet. That’s more than either Gith or York are doing.”

My mother scoffed and shook her head. “No one should be working against anyone,” she grumbled sourly, looking at her fingernails. She shook her head and clicked her tongue against her teeth. “I hear you’ve been taking that girl out around Austin. And she’s living with you?”

Any relief I might have had that she’d changed topics was extremely short-lived. “Both those things are true,” I grunted, wondering how many spies this woman had on me. *It’s also none of your damn business.* I kept that last thought to myself. I was already on thin ice with my mother, and I didn’t

want to make it worse.

Fiona raised a brow and looked at me as if she'd sensed my unspoken thoughts all the same. "Are you sure that's a good idea, Remus? If you're serious about looking for your mate, having another woman living with you isn't going to sit well, even if you're just helping her get on her feet. I hope a self-sufficient woman like her is looking for her own place to live."

"She's already applying for jobs," I ground out between gritted teeth. *What has Luna done that has my mother so up in arms? Does she think I need to be looking for my 'one true mate' right now? She needs to get her priorities in line.*

At least that got a small nod from her. "Good. That's good. Now, about the apartment thing."

*Enough.* I flashed my mother a wolf's smile. "You'll need to excuse me, Mother, but I need a few minutes to myself before this meeting starts. It's essential to the company, and I want to be in the right headspace." I didn't care that I had cut her off. Fiona was clearly smarting that I wasn't consulting her on things she deemed important and had come here to pick a fight, regardless of what that might mean for the board meeting later. I couldn't let her shake my focus.

Fiona's expression went ice cold and she stood. "Of course, of course. I imagine some of the board members have already arrived. I'll go greet them." She began heading towards the door and then paused, giving me a glacial look over her shoulder. "Don't be late."

I didn't say anything else, forcing myself to breathe evenly as she let herself out. It was clear she wasn't off the mateship thing, and she wanted to talk about Luna — but *I* wasn't. While it was true that she had had a significant impact on me — an impact I'd even hazard to call positive — I still wasn't sure I was ready to commit to anything. Certainly not anything named. Luna hadn't even been away from Marnet that long; was *she* ready to commit to anything, either? There were too many unknowns.

*Am I stretching myself too thin? Dad always said a good leader knew when to delegate — but you can't delegate dealing with your mother. Or your feelings, though I hesitated to call it that.*

There was another knock at the door, and this time it was Katherine's voice. "All the board members have arrived, Mr. Silverstreak. I've had the coffee and refreshments sent over. Are you heading over, or shall I let them know you'll be along shortly?"

I shook off any remaining irritation my mother had left me with and got to my feet. “Thank you, Katherine. I’ll head over,” I said, straightening my suit. She smiled and held the door open for me. The boardroom wasn’t far, but it was far enough that I had quieted the majority of my ruminations by the time I pushed open the doors. Several of the nearest members murmured their greetings, and I did the same, helping myself to a cup of coffee before I sat at the head of the table. One problem at the time — and today, Silverstreak needed to come first.

*Hopefully, we’ll get to the bottom of this stock issue soon.*

Another piece of my father’s advice filtered through my brain. I could hear his voice in my memory as if it were yesterday. *Hope is a fool’s crutch, Remus.* He wasn’t wrong. I needed to work through this or risk losing everything my family had worked so hard for.



**LUNA**

## Silverstreak Motors' Headquarters

### Austin, Texas

The morning hours flew by. It hadn't been difficult to find the garage; the woman at the front desk had been very pleasant, and as she noted, the hallways were well marked. My mother had already arrived, just setting up her station when I opened the door. She motioned me over right away, already chatting about her tools and the projects she had on the docket, and, well — we hadn't lifted our heads from the engine once we got started.

"All right. I think that'll do the trick, but we can test her out after lunch," my mother said, standing up. She wiped her hands off before realizing I hadn't come equipped with my own rag and retreated to her workstation to grab one for me.

I smiled. "Thanks. I could have sworn we were only working for an hour." However, now that we'd stopped, I could feel how hungry I was. As if on cue, my stomach gurgled, punctuating its emptiness. I turned a little pink. "I've been told I get really focused on work."

My mother laughed and shook her head. "The apple doesn't fall far from the tree, I guess. Before you were born, I would work until sundown — or until my hands started shaking from low blood sugar." She shook her head at the memory. "When you have another person to feed, your priorities shift slightly. Even when you got old enough to tell me when you were hungry, I still kept that internal clock. For the best, probably."

I could easily imagine a younger version of my mother buried in the guts of a machine until it was pitch black outside. To her — no, to us — it wasn't a waste of a day; it was quite the opposite. There were few things I liked more than getting my hands on a broken vehicle and bringing it back to life. "Maybe I'll learn to manage someday," I laughed. Kids weren't something I had really considered for myself; I guess I'd always known that they'd be part of my future in some abject way. After all, my fated mate was the alpha of a pack. An alpha needed to have someone to pass his pack on to. It just wasn't a part of my future I had ever thought about, given how... unpleasant my home life had been. What did I know about raising nice, kind, well-behaved children? Nothing Arden or Lynn had shown me applied to that.



I shook the thought off. I had a choice now. Marnet had rejected me, and in reality, I could do... anything. It was a strange sort of freedom, one I hadn't really ever looked for. One I didn't really know what to think of, either. I left it to simmer in the back of my mind.

Fortunately, my mother had turned back to tidying her workstation, putting away the tools we'd used. If I had looked wistful at all, she hadn't seen any of it; that was for the best. If someone asked how I felt about it, I wouldn't know how to answer. "I'm impressed with how much you already know," Mom said, and I glanced over. "You said you didn't go to trade school?"

I shook my head. "No. There were a few classes in high school. Welding, metalworking. A course called 'garage.'" I snorted. The curriculum was laughable, in retrospect. "I just started working as soon as I was old enough someone could legally hire me. Practice, I guess." I shrugged.

My mom turned around to look at me, leaning against her workbench. She folded her arms over her chest, and I thought she might be sizing me up for a moment. Regardless of if that was true, she smiled at me after. "There's no better educator than just getting your hands dirty," she said, her expression warm. "Besides, you've got the internet now. Why pay tuition when there are at least a dozen videos you can watch with step-by-step instructions?"

That wasn't what I expected my mother to say, but she wasn't wrong. A startled laugh escaped. "I guess that's true." I shook my head, unable to wipe the grin off my face. "So... how do you like working here? The garage looks way nicer than the one I was working in, but there's a lot you can't see when you just visit for a day."

Josie hummed thoughtfully, rubbing her hand over her chin. "Well, I'm doing what I love, and a lot of people don't get to say that. It'll always be different from when I owned my own garage, and I got to call the shots." She shrugged. "I'm grateful I've got the opportunity at all."

I frowned a little. "What do you mean? Can't you open your own garage?"

She shook her head. "No. Although my finances were completely wrecked when I was exiled from Lupus Claw — because no way were they giving me the money when Arden sold off my business, working for Silverstreak Motors was part of the arrangement my father and Remington worked out when I rejoined. I'll work here until I retire."

The idea made me balk. "What? That doesn't seem fair at all. That's like

— indentured servitude or something.”

It was my mother’s turn to scowl. “Luna,” she said, shaking her head. “I’m a full-time employee. I’m paid a salary, have benefits, and even have a retirement fund. Even though working for the company was part of the agreement, neither Remington nor Remus took advantage. Remington didn’t *have* to take me back, especially after—” She shook her head, frowning slightly. “They didn’t have to accept me back into the Silverstreak pack, and they did.”

I opened my mouth to ask, but — something told me this was not a topic my mother was that eager to discuss. Considering this was her place of work, I closed my mouth and cleared my throat. I could ask her later. “I wonder if I could work here,” I said instead. “I loved working at Robby’s Garage, but that place was — tiny. I think we had two cars in at a time at most.” I laughed. “And most cars were *not* in the luxury category.”

An older man walked by then, wiping off his hands as he headed towards the exit. “You Josie’s kid?” he asked, pausing briefly as he glanced between us. “Any kin of Josie is welcome here.” He didn’t wait for my answer, simply tucking his rag back in his belt and heading back towards the door.

I furrowed my brow and glanced over at my mother. ‘Who was that?’ I mouthed, not wanting to speak in case he could overhear us.

‘My boss,’ my mother mouthed back, smirking. “His name is Zack Quickfoot. We went to high school together — he graduated a year before I did.”

“Wolf?” I asked once the door closed behind him.

“Mhm. Silverstreak Motors hires about fifty-fifty in terms of the entire company, but most of the mechanics and shop employees are shifters.”

“Huh.” I liked the sound of that. Robby was a shifter, but my former boss didn’t like hiring too many other werewolves. Looking back, I suspect it had to do with dominance, which is why he never minded me. No matter how competent I was, I never dreamed of challenging him on anything.

My mom grinned over at me. “I know that look,” she said, wagging a finger. “Seems like you’ve already got one foot in the door.”

“We’ll see,” I said, chewing on my lower lip as I shrugged. “I just... want to be hired somewhere because I’m good at my job, not because my mother is good at hers or because Remus told someone to.” My mother made a bit of a face at the last bit, and I swallowed hard. *Oh, no. Is she going to think something is going on between us? Do I care if she does?* Before I could say

anything else, my stomach gurgled again, loud and insistent. “Oh, god,” I groaned, covering my face with my hands as I giggled; my brain couldn’t come up with a better reaction. “I guess I needed a little more than a bagel for breakfast.”

“Didn’t think I’d put you to work when you came for a visit, huh?” my mother teased. She stood up, patting my shoulder gently. “Come on, I’ll show you the employee canteen. Do you mind if we take a quick detour first, though?”

“Not at all!” I said, happy to follow wherever she led. I was sure it would be interesting.

OUR WALK WASN’T FAR. At first, I thought my mother was leading me out to the parking lot, but I realized it wasn’t where Remus had parked earlier. We were on a different side of the building, and there was a tall fence around the lot, palm trees waving gently on the inside.

“What’s this?” I asked, glancing around at the handful of cars. Most of them were parked under shady structures.

“This is where our long-term residents stay,” Mom said. At my confused look, she laughed. “Oh, sorry. That’s just what we call them. Some of our clients will drop their vehicles off before they head off on a trip out of the country or something; they want the works. Everything looked over and tuned up. Even when we do, it doesn’t take more than a week, in most cases — people tend to keep their expensive cars in pretty good shape.”

“I’ll bet,” I said, taking a moment to admire a brand new Silverstreak convertible. “I assume the clients are away longer than a week?”

“Bingo!” Mom said. “The administration worked something out where they pay a fee, and their car gets to stay here until they’re back. Isn’t taking up space in the regular lot, and the clients are happy their car is safe — win-win all around.”

“So why are we over here?” I asked. “Unless you’ve secretly been hiding a sweet car from me?”

“Well... sort of.” My mom winked as we rounded an SUV, and she motioned an arm at the small vehicle hidden behind it. My jaw could have hit the floor. “I’ll be working here until I retire, but I still get some perks. I’ve worked out an arrangement to work on my own projects some weekends using the lift and the tools. I don’t have space back at my place.”

I was speechless. Even when I tried to make my mouth move, my jaw only managed to fall open. I covered my gasp with my palm, eyes prickling as I took in the sight before me. It was *nothing* like I remembered it, but it was exactly as it should have been.

“Well?” Mom prompted when I’d been quiet a little too long. The sideways look she gave me bordered on something nervous. “What do you think?”

I cleared my throat, willing my voice to work again. “That’s my *Beetle*,” I squeaked, moving my hand to rub my eyes. *I am not going to cry. This is amazing. Damn it, Luna, this is not something to cry over!* But my eyes prickled, and I wiped at them before any tears could spill free over my cheeks. “Mom, that’s my Beetle. We were going to work on that before you —” My throat thickened and I choked up, unable to continue. *Before you died.*

My mom made a low noise, wrapping her arms around me and hugging me closely against her chest. “It’s all right, Lunaloo. It’s okay. I didn’t mean to make you cry.”

“No, no,” I said, smiling despite my watery eyes. I wrapped my arms around her anyway, burying my face against her shoulder. “It’s just— I knew they sold your house and your garage. I begged Dad to go to the estate sale once the property was sold to look for my Volkswagen. He told me I was too young, but he went. He said he looked, but someone had already purchased all cars on the lot.” I sniffled. “He probably lied about that, too.”

My mother shifted slightly and kissed the side of my head. “No... no, that was me. Well, actually, it was Zack.”

“Your boss?”

“Yeah. I told him about the sale and promised he could have all the other vehicles as long as I got the Beetle. He was happy to make that trade and went to the sale in my stead. There was no way anyone from Lupus Claw was going to sell me back my things — even if they were *mine* to begin with.” She stroked the back of my head. “I just... well, it was going to be *our* project. I hated the idea of someone else restoring it, or worse, scrapping it.”

I sniffled again, nodding. I pulled back and finally walked over to the vehicle, tracing my fingers over the hood. It looked pristine; it was hard to believe this was the poor, rusting heap of metal my mother had introduced me to all those years ago. “Mom, it looks amazing,” I said, circling the vehicle slowly. “I mean — it looks like an original. Vintage parts?”

“You bet,” she said, nodding proudly. “You’ve got quite an eye.”

I shrugged, feeling a little sheepish. “I always wanted one, even if I thought I couldn’t have *this* one,” I admitted. “I generally didn’t have much time to spend on the internet, but what I did spend was mostly looking at collectors’ and vintage forums. I did a lot of research, too. Daydreamed I might be able to afford one and restore it one day.”

Josie smiled at me when I looked up. “That’s sweet, Loo. You know she’s still yours, if you want her. We can go to the title office this weekend, even.”

“You’re sure? You’re the one who did all the work, mom, and I’m sure it cost a lot of money to get all the parts. I wouldn’t want to take it...”

My mother snorted and rolled her eyes, hands gravitating towards her hips. “Luna. I told you when you were twelve that it was yours, and I didn’t mean ‘it’s yours in name, but you have to buy it off me,’ nor did I expect my preteen daughter to pay for all the parts. I just wanted you to have a project to learn on. And you clearly learned despite the lack of this project, all on your own.” Her scowl softened back into a smile. “I’m really proud you did that, Luna.”

I had never considered it something worth being proud of — getting an apprenticeship was just something that needed to get done. She was right, however. No one had helped me with that, not even my father. I had convinced Robby to take me on all on my own, and I had convinced him to take me on as a proper employee once the apprenticeship was over. “Well... thank you,” I said quietly, giving the car one last look. “We can text about a time?”

“Sure,” my mom said, nodding. “Now c’mon. You were hungry before. I’m sure you’re starving now. I’ll show you to the actual canteen this time.”

I WAS SURPRISED to realize there were a few different options at the canteen instead of just one standard meal. There was a salad bar and at least three different hot options. Josie had gone for the chicken wrap, so I did the same, slightly overwhelmed by the sheer choices. “There’s also a coffee shop on the first floor. It’s near the reception desk,” she said between bites of her lunch.

I paused, a fry halfway to my mouth. “Are you serious?” I asked, my mind boggling a bit when she nodded. “I was imagining... I don’t know, a fancy high school cafeteria at best.”

Josie gave me a small smile and shook her head. “Darling. This is a multi-billion-dollar company, and this is the headquarters. There are thousands of people who work here daily. There’s another canteen specifically for the manufacturing area.”

The thought was hard to get my mind around, but I supposed it made sense. Silverstreak Motors wasn’t wildly dispersed, and as far as I knew, their vehicles were only manufactured in the United States. I gave a little nod. “Maybe, you can show me some of that on a different day?”

“Sure,” Josie said. “I work strictly in the shop for the clients’ cars, but I’m sure we could have a quick peek. No touching.”

Loud laughter sounded from the entrance, and I glanced over my shoulder. Several well-dressed individuals had entered, all talking animatedly with one another. I raised my brows at my mother, but they had reached our table before she could explain. One of the men smiled at my mother.

“Afternoon, Josie,” he said, nodding. “Who’s this?” He tipped his head in my direction.

“Pff, Ken! How do you not know who she is?” a woman in the group said. Her voice sounded like a cackle. Intrinsically, I wanted to cringe. My instincts were proven correct just moments later. “She’s the girl from the video.” When he looked a little confused, she gave an exaggerated roll of her eyes and pulled her phone out, opening an app. She held the screen out; I could hear the sound of my voice and turned bright red in an instant. I didn’t need to see the video to know what they were watching.

*It was the night of the Moonmate ceremony.*

Suddenly, the chicken wrap felt like lead in my stomach. I stared down at my hands, willing them not to shake.

Across from me, my mother growled softly. “If you don’t mind,” she hissed, voice dangerously low. “We were trying to have a quiet lunch. Turn the video off.”

“Oh, whatever,” the woman sniffed, but she must have complied because the sound cut off a moment later, followed by the sound of heels and shoes against the floor as the group headed towards the lines.

“Ignore them,” my mother huffed. I glanced up to see her glaring daggers at the back of the woman’s head. “They think they can walk around like they own the place just because they’re on the corporate team.” She rolled her eyes. “They’re fucking middle management. Honestly.”

Her disdain brought a little feeling back to me, and I peeked back up, a

hint of a smile trying to lift my lips. “Thanks,” I said.

“Don’t thank me,” Josie replied fiercely. “You’re my daughter. I’ll tell them off a hundred times more if I need to.”

WHEN WE GOT BACK to the shop, it was much busier than when we had left. People that weren’t there this morning were now passing through, stopping to look at random things. They didn’t look like they had any idea what they were looking at, and I could have sworn one or two of them had stopped to look at me. *Don’t be paranoid, Luna. One woman thought the video was funny. No one in here looks like her or any of the people she was with.*

Though we’d fixed the first issue with the vehicle we were working on, the air conditioning still wasn’t kicking on. “Back to work,” my mom said, pulling out some tools to hand to me. “Can’t have a car without air in Austin!”

“No kidding,” I said, relieved to do something with my hands again. “I was thinking we could—”

“Hey, Josie!” a voice called over the general ruckus of the shop. We both looked up to see Zack waving at her from his office. “I’ve got a few numbers I need to send to the corporate office. Can you double-check yours?”

“Sure thing!” she called back. My mom glanced over at me. “This should only take a few minutes unless he really messed something up.” She winked. “He’s usually on top of it, though. I’m sure whatever your plan is is a good place to start, so go ahead and start working on the unit, and I’ll be back to see how it’s going, yeah?”

“Sounds good,” I said, giving her a little wave as she headed towards the manager’s office.

After tinkering a bit, I decided the best angle of attack was under the car. I was arms deep when I saw boots approach. I briefly assumed it was my mother until someone spoke overhead. The voice was distinctly male, not a voice I recognized from earlier today. “Why are you here?”

I swallowed and set my tools down, rolling out from beneath the car. “I’m working on the vehicle with Josie,” I said softly. “She’ll be right back. She’s just in the office.” I nodded in the direction she went.

The man scowled fiercely and tsked his tongue against his teeth. “I meant in Texas,” he drawled, the venom dripping from his tone. “You don’t belong here. I heard you betrayed your folk in Oklahoma. You here spying for your

weakling alpha?” He leaned in a little closer, baring his teeth. “You better not be, whelp.”

I shrunk, a bit taken aback by the man’s bluntness. “I don’t have anything to do with him,” I said quietly, shaking my head. “I’m just here to see my family.”

“That better be it,” he growled. His beady eyes gleamed. “Marnet and his lackeys will get what’s coming to them. And any spies? Them too. You wouldn’t like to see what we do to traitors and sneaks.”

I swallowed hard.

“Mr. Smythe!” My mother’s voice was clear even across the floor. “Good to see you. Your car is already done; it’s out front.”

He gave me one last glower before turning, giving my mother a once-over. “I was wondering,” he said, sniffing. After a moment, he tucked his hands into his pockets. “Well, thank you, ma’am. I’ll go get the keys from Zack.”

Mr. Smythe ambled away, but not without giving me one last look over his shoulder. I sighed, still sitting with tools in my hands. *What do people think it is I’m doing here? Spying? Seriously?*

I must have let some of my confusion onto my face. “Did he say something to you?”

I shook my head. “Just didn’t recognize me. He was looking for his car,” I lied, tipping my head. “Who is he?”

My mother’s expression tightened. “He used to be on the high council when Remington was alpha,” she grumbled. She looked like she’d just bitten into a lemon, rind and all. “You sure he wasn’t bothering you?”

“I’m sure,” I said, lying back down to roll under the car and resume working. I stared up at the metal and grime, sighing.

*Why can’t I catch a break? This doesn’t feel any different than Lupus Claw — this doesn’t feel like a fresh start at all.*





# REMUS

## Silverstreak Motors' Headquarters

### Austin, Texas

**E**ven though we started the stakeholder meeting earlier than initially planned, it still seemed to drag on for hours. While some of the members had legitimate concerns about the sudden change in investor confidence, others seemed to want to air their grievances. Complaints ranged from 'the red paint Silverstreak Motors isn't exotic enough' to 'we should have an older, more distinguished CEO.' Inane comments about 'how things ought to be' really weren't new, and neither were the implications that someone else ought to head the company, but today, they were starting to sneak under my skin. The company had always belonged to a Silverstreak — my father wasn't much older than I was when his father passed away, and he took the helm. Doubtless he'd run into similar complaints, but the thought didn't comfort me.

*Age doesn't always come with wisdom.* It was all I could do not to glare daggers across the table as Bob Baggert took control of the conversation for at least the seventh time this afternoon. "I really do think we need more experience before the new models are released," he huffed, his cheeks billowing with each agitated sigh. *At what point does age become just age? This man was probably harassing my father when he was a young man. Give someone else a seat at the table!*

I finished writing a quick text under the table and stood. "We've had a thoughtful few hours," I said, cutting off Bob as the withered old man huffed unhappily in my direction. "Coffee and refreshments will be delivered so everyone can have a bit of a breath before we continue. Please feel free to step out of the room if you'd like."

Frankly, I'd like to dip out, go get Luna in the shop, and ditch the building altogether, but I was fairly certain even Luna wouldn't be down for that plan. *At least she's probably having a good day with her mother* — a silver lining on this hellscape.

Katherine worked quickly, even though I'd texted her only minutes before, and appeared at the boardroom door with a cart of coffee, hot water for tea, and iced lemon water for those who didn't take caffeine in the late

afternoon. Clever woman that she was, she also brought light snacks, both fruit and pastries. It was like she was ready and waiting for me to text her for assistance.

*Actually, she probably was. Once this is said and done, I should see if she's up for her yearly review soon.*

As several board members stepped out to stretch their legs, I took my coffee over to the massive windows, sipping at it idly as I stared out at the skyline. The sun was sinking lower, and if the meeting kept on at this pace, we'd be having dinner at this table, too. As much as I wanted to cut it short, we did need to solve these problems.

*Sales are lower than we'd forecasted. There's a sudden issue with the supply line for the computer chips we use. Now, there are rumors that the cars we provide for the celebrity concierge services in Austin, Houston, and Los Angeles are breaking down. I have no idea if that's true, but it might as well be if investors believe it.* I scowled at my reflection in the glass, shaking my head. So much happened at once; any one of these things could happen to a business, but all of this? All of it is coming to a head within one to two months? *It almost feels like someone or something is actively working against me.*

Someone approached, a cup of tea in her hands, and I was forced to turn away from my reflections. "Katy. Thank you for coming," I greeted her, my voice soft.

The small brunette woman frowned up at me. "Of course I did, Remus. This is disturbing news. Very disturbing. It paints a grim picture for Silverstreak Motors that I don't think any of us could have imagined at the start of the year."

"I understand," I said, nodding. "I'm also troubled by how many issues converged at once, but Silverstreak Motors is a well-established brand with a loyal customer base. We will not only get through this, but we will come out stronger and wiser."

Katy took a sip of her tea and frowned, tapping one of her red nails against the white cup. "Maybe. Maybe," she said, a bit distracted. "I've heard you've recently spent time in Oklahoma — quite a few weeks, in fact. Are you thinking of breaking ground there? I know land is cheap, but I don't think now is the right time, given what we've just discussed."

I stifled a sigh. Not all of my board members were werewolves; when this company was founded, there weren't enough shifters in the American South

to invest in such a project. Humans had to be brought on board. All these decades later, humans were still on board, and while I generally didn't mind... it did make moments like these much harder to explain. "I — No. I won't be breaking ground in Oklahoma," I replied, deciding that answering her question would be simpler than trying to explain anything else.

"Well, that's good," she said, her shoulders relaxing by a few centimeters. After a moment, her keen eyes found my face again. "In that case, maybe you should stick to Texas for the time being? The company needs you, especially since the CFO isn't here. I heard she's taken a new position elsewhere?"

I grimaced, not impressed with how quickly gossip had appeared to travel through the board. If one person knew, it was likely they all knew. Before I could answer, my mother stepped up next to me, offering the board woman a warm smile. "Katy. It's good to see you," she murmured, gently touching the brunette's elbow. "I can assure you, Remus and I are both fully focused on Silverstreak Motors — aren't we?"

I nodded and said nothing, letting my mother work her magic. It was why I'd asked Fiona to come. She simply had a better touch with the board members than I did. She leaned a little closer, speaking in hushed tones as she tried to convince Katy that this really was just a blip, and everything would soon be back to normal. By the time the company holiday party rolled around, this would be another distant memory.

Katy thanked my mother and walked away, approaching one of the other board members to start a different conversation. I glanced sideways at Fiona, and she stood stiffly beside me. *Nothing has changed, then.* The frostiness was starting to become exhausting. I opened my mouth, raking my mind for something to say, but my mother turned without saying anything, moving to take her seat. I sighed. *Great. Just great.*

THE REST of the meeting dragged on, but eventually, it came to some sort of conclusion, and most of the board members seemed calmer, if not convinced that we were all under control. I watched them go, even my mother, opting to remain in the conference room as it fell silent. The sun was sinking behind the buildings now, and dusk would be upon us soon. I didn't even want to look at my watch.

*How do meetings always leave me more exhausted than an all-night hunt with the pack?* I wasn't even doing anything physical, just playing mind

games. *I wish I could have Tala by my side right now.*

I pulled my phone out of my pocket and opened my cousin's contact, pressing the phone to my ear. She picked up on the second ring.

"Hi, Remus. Is everything all right?"

I frowned into the darkening room. "Am I not allowed to just call my cousin? Does something have to be wrong?"

She snorted against the speaker. "Well, I know that board meeting was scheduled for today, and usually, you and I would head down to a bar to unwind afterward, so..."

She trailed off and I knew she had me. I sighed and leaned back into my chair. "You know too much," I complained.

"No, I pay attention. How was the meeting, Remus? Did they give you a hard time?"

"No more than usual," I growled, more annoyed than I should be. "Everyone has been settled down, but we haven't gotten to the bottom of what's going on. It's just — it's so fucking *weird*, Tala. Too many unfortunate coincidences for my liking."

Tala made a low, thoughtful noise. "Well, given what you sent to me — it does seem strange. I couldn't find anything in our books, though, so I don't think it's coming from the inside. No embezzlement."

I snorted and she laughed. "Fuck, that shouldn't be such a relief. Do I sound fucking paranoid if I say it feels like a coordinated attack on the company? Do I sound paranoid if I say I'm starting to wonder if it's Marnet behind this?"

My cousin was quiet for several moments, and I was just starting to wonder if she actually *did* think I was being paranoid when she sighed into the phone. "I wish I could come up with a different conclusion, but I've started wondering the same thing," she admitted. "I mean, I suppose we cannot rule out a very poor streak of luck, but..." I could hear her sigh again. "He does have friends in high places, Remus. *Human* friends in high places."

I scoffed. The fact that Marnet had managed to ensnare the Oklahoma chief of patrol was a real thorn in my side; it was making him practically impossible to get to. It was like he wore a cloak of invincibility. We knew exactly where he was, and there was nothing we could do about it.

Tala had a good point, though. What was to say he hadn't made human allies here in Texas? The thought made me bristle. "I'll take another look at these reports. See if any names come up more than once."

“Good idea.” Tala paused for a moment. “Do you want me to come back, Remus? Because I will. Silverstreak Motors was my first love and you’re my family, and I will pick up and come tonight if that’s what it takes to keep the company going.”

“No.” I shook my head, even if she couldn’t see me on the other side of the line. “No, I need you there. Claw & Co. Construction needs a firm hand and a steady head for its restructuring, and I still need eyes in Oklahoma. You’re the best person for that job, Tala. Besides, I’m not about to let Silverstreak Motors crumble over one bad quarter.”

“If you say so.”

“I do,” I growled. “Speaking of Oklahoma — how’s the partnership with Seff going? Have you been able to flush out Marnet?”

“No,” she squeaked, her voice jumping up a few octaves. “No. I think he’s convinced the chief of patrol he’s in danger — the number of eyes on the man’s house has increased since we started monitoring it.”

I swore softly and shook my head. “And what about Seff’s intelligence unit? Did he get any results about the Arkansas fund yet?”

“No...” Tala said. “He has kept me informed every day. I think they’ve made more progress with the encryptions than our hacker did.”

I pulled my phone away from my ear, squinting at the screen before returning it. “All right. Well. Keep me informed,” I said. “Keep an eye on Seff, would you?”

“I am — I mean, I will,” Tala replied entirely too quickly.

I couldn’t help but crack a smile. “Uh huh,” I teased. “Sure you are.”

“Remus!” she sputtered.

“I’m going to get dinner. Take care, Tala — and seriously, if you find anything out, call me ASAP.”

“Of course. Have a good night, Remus.”

“You too.”

IT WAS AFTER FIVE, but when I texted Luna, she said she was still in the shop. *That was why I gave you a key.* She didn’t have to hang around and wait for me. But there she was, bent over a machine anyways, her new coveralls now christened with grease and a dirty rag hanging from a tool belt. Something about the idea that she opted to wait even though she didn’t have to made me feel a bit warmer; it made some of the day’s bitterness slowly wash away

from my mind.

The rest of the shop was largely empty now. All the lights were still on, but the lifts were low. Cars that still needed attention were parked, but most bays were empty. The floor had been swept. All of the stations were tidy, except the one I assumed Luna was working out of. I walked a bit closer; I could hear the sound of metal on metal as she tinkered with something. She leaned a bit further down, propped up on her tiptoes.

*That jumpsuit makes her ass look fantastic.* My cock stirred in my slacks and I had to pause, willing myself to think of other things. The board meeting. Bob Baggert's jowls, as he explained for the umpteenth time in the most see-through way that I wasn't fit to be CEO of Silverstreak Motors, but he was. *He* was the man we all needed.

The thought made me snort. *Yep, that'll kill any boner.*

And a good thing, too, because when Luna pulled herself out of the engine and dropped the hood down, in the front seat sat Josie Ulfric.

"Go ahead and give it a try!" Luna called to her mother, taking a few steps back with her hands on her hips. Josie flashed her a thumbs-up and then turned the key in the ignition. The car purred to life, rumbling like a kitten. No, it rumbled like a panther. King of the jungle. Yeah, that was right, for a Silverstreak car. I had no idea why it had been brought in, but it sounded brand new.

Josie revved the engine a few times before turning it back off. She opened the door and stepped out, giving Luna an approving look. "Sounds perfect. We'll take it out in the lot tomorrow just to check, but I'd bet she's all set now," she said. Her chin tipped up; her eyes brightened as she noticed me. "Ah, Mr. Silverstreak. I was wondering if I'd see you today." Something mischievous twinkled in those eyes.

Luna spun around and beamed, a smear of grease on one of her cheekbones. "I was starting to wonder if they'd ever let you free or if I'd run out of vehicles to work on first," she laughed, shaking her head.

"Sounds like you had a better day than I did," I noted fondly. "If you don't mind, I cannot wait to get out of this building."

Luna nodded and grabbed her rag, wiping her hands down. She glanced over at her mother. "What do you need me to do to close up?"

Josie gave her daughter a fond look. "Nothing."

"Are you sure? You didn't even have to stay here with me."

The older Ulfric woman shook her head. "Seriously, Luna. Simon has



poker night with his friends on Thursday, so I usually work late. Besides, as the last employee here, I need to make sure everything is locked up. I love you, but I can't leave that in your hands."

Luna looked like she might protest for a moment, but then she shrugged. "Okay. I'm not sure what I'm doing tomorrow, but I'll text you about Saturday?"

"Sounds perfect," Josie said. She flashed me a smile. "Have a good evening, Mr. Silverstreak."

"You too, Josie," I replied, raising a brow. I turned to leave, and Luna barely stifled a giggle as she trotted after me, only a breath away from me as we hurried out of the building and towards the parking lot. By the time we got to my car, it was as if we were in a walking race to see who could get there first — who could get out of the lot fast enough.

Luna slid into her seat moments before I did, quickly pulling her seatbelt down and turning to me. I leaned in, and she paused, suddenly self-conscious of her joy. "You're radiant," I told her, stroking her cheek with my thumb before I closed the space between us, sealing my declaration with a kiss. "Ready?"

"Yes," she whispered, breathless.

I grinned back at her as my car roared to life; the sound was almost as sweet as Luna's laughter as we raced out of the parking lot towards the streets of Austin.



**LUNA**

## Streets of Austin

### Austin, Texas

I felt something wild come to life as Remus really let those horses sing, the normally quiet engine roaring like a predator. A thrill raced up my spine as I leaned back into the plush seat, grinning over at him before glancing out the window. I was nervous this morning, wondering what my mother would think of my visit, if I'd like Silverstreak Motors, if I'd be good enough of a mechanic even to stand a chance — I hadn't really taken in my surroundings. But now? Now I watched brightly colored businesses speed by, the hint of the river in the background.

"I'm going to pull the top down," Remus murmured, glancing over at me. "What?"

He grinned wider and hit a button; the top folded down neatly, tucking itself away. *Wow. I must have been really nervous this morning if I didn't even realize Remus had picked a convertible. I probably wouldn't have noticed if he had asked me to get into a dump truck.*

I laughed as the breeze played with my dark hair, throwing it in different directions as the warm evening air kissed my cheeks. "Silly me, thinking one of your cars was normal." Another bubble of laughter escaped as he finished rolling the windows down — I stuck out one hand to flutter through the breeze.

"Why have ordinary when I can have extraordinary?" Remus countered, flashing me another brilliant grin. His eyes lingered on me a moment too long and I flushed, looking back out the window. He was talking about cars. *What else would he be talking about?*

When we stopped for the rail passing through, Remus leaned back and finished peeling off his jacket, stashing it behind us in the back seat. He rolled up the sleeves of his button-down, revealing some of the dark ink I knew hid on his arms. *I wonder if he has to hide those for board meetings.*

I looked back up at him. "Hey. Your tattoos. Do your clients give you a hard time about them?" I asked, genuinely curious.

Remus glanced at me out of the corner of his eye and shrugged a shoulder. "Depends on the client. We don't have a single type of person that

purchases Silverstreak Motors. Some are... a bit more uptight than your average citizen,” he said carefully. It made me smile; even though I’d never rat him out to a client, he was still protective of them (even if he didn’t agree with some of their more conservative views).

“And the others?” I prompted.

His expression softened a little. “Well, you probably wouldn’t be surprised to know that some of the others are actors, musicians, and singers.” He paused. “And some younger businesspeople, too. They seem to care less. The artists tend to have their own — but all the same, I generally wear a suit, so I doubt most of them have any idea.”

“I suppose that makes sense,” I agreed. I could imagine it was hard to make older pack members take you seriously if you were a young alpha, so it made sense that the same might be true in the business world. Humans said they didn’t have a social hierarchy, but they were only fooling themselves. “And at the office? Do they give you a hard time?”

Remus exhaled, the warmth disappearing from his face. “Yes,” he muttered, jaw clenching before forcing himself to continue breathing. “So, I just don’t give them a reason to complain.”

I nodded and let the topic go; it was different in a workshop. No one really cared if you had tattoos, piercings or colored hair. As long as enough of your body was covered to do your job properly, and you actually *did* your job properly, the aesthetics weren’t important.

I found myself drawn to those arms again, though, trying to study the definition and the curves of the designs still hidden under the rest of his sleeves. As if they had a mind of their own, my fingers reached out, brushing gently against his skin. One of the designs stuck out from the others, looking a bit crooked. Almost amateur — maybe it made more sense if I could see the whole thing. “What’s this one?” I asked, tapping my finger against it.

Remus ducked his head, the side of his mouth slanting upwards. There was a crinkle around the corner of his eyes. “You found the one I got on a dare,” he said, not taking his eyes away from a road. “If I’m honest, I can’t really remember how the conversation started, but it ended in several drinks and a dare. Seff gave me the option to back out when we saw the light of day with sober eyes, but I was eighteen. There was no way I could let my friend think I was a coward.” He paused for a moment. “He’s the one who drew it.”

I smiled, trying to imagine a younger version of Remus, wilder and less restrained. Of course, I’d seen him without a suit — I’d seen him without any

clothing at all, a thought that made me flush despite myself — but it was still hard for me to imagine him hanging out casually with a friend, dressed like a normal teenager. I shook my head; maybe I'd be able to find a picture. *Too bad Fiona seems determined to dislike me.*

Flushing the unhelpful thought, I glanced back at Remus instead. "I think I've heard that name before. Seff." I hummed thoughtfully. "Was he one of the alphas at the Moonmate ceremony?" I couldn't remember anything else about him — which of the alphas he was, where he'd come from, or which pack he was in charge of, but the name rang a bell.

Remus nodded. "Yes. Seff Blazepaw, alpha of the Red Paw pack," he confirmed. I didn't know where that territory was, but I didn't feel like it was important enough to interrupt him. "Our fathers were friends, so I saw him at least once a year growing up. We'd sort of grown apart when we each took over our packs, but..." He trailed off with a shrug. "That's recently changed."

He didn't elaborate beyond that, and it wasn't my place to pry. After all, he seemed relatively happy with what he said; any relationship on the mend was probably a good thing. I allowed a comfortable silence to fall back over us, tracing a finger up over different lines and then further up his bicep, mapping the clothing where I'd mapped his skin the night before.

The silence didn't seem to bother Remus; neither did my wandering hand. He kept his eyes on the road, the wind tugging at his dark hair without sending it flying. He was so calm and collected — what was he thinking? *How can he keep it so together? And why do I want to mess him up right now?*

I didn't dwell on the thought. It was a bit foreign; I'd never felt that way about anyone, even Marnet. Even the boys I crushed on in high school, or my celebrity crushes. *Don't think too hard about it*, I instructed myself and slid my hand over the curve of his shoulder. He was muscular in a pleasant way, firm to touch without much bulk. My fingertips brushed the collar of his shirt. Remus didn't so much as blink. Curious, I leaned closer, gently raking my fingernails over his nape. I toyed with a few strands of hair, but he didn't move — he didn't flinch, blink, or move closer.

*Challenge accepted.* I bit the inside of my cheek, trying to keep my smile from breaking free as I slipped my hand lower instead. I worked my fingers over his nape, finding a little knot in his neck. A tiny noise escaped him, and if I hadn't been watching his face so carefully, I might have missed it. Might have mistaken it for the sound of wind in my ears as we kept driving through

the streets. I had no idea how long we'd been driving or where we were going, but honestly, I didn't care. Remus could have driven us anywhere right now, as long as it was me and him and this blissful summer night.

I paused, pulling my hand back to his shoulder, smoothing my fingers over the texture of his shirt. *I wonder if that's the only noise I can get out of him.* I had no idea what had come over me; curiosity had bloomed into something wild and exploratory. This time, I slid my hand over the front of his shirt, tracing the line of his collarbone. I allowed the motion of the car and my curiosity to pull my hand lower, pausing once I'd found his breastbone. His heart. At this point, I was practically leaning across the seat; I hadn't even realized it.

"Am I distracting you?" I asked, my cheeks getting hotter when I realized how strangled my voice sounded. This little exercise was having more effect on me than I had initially realized.

Remus' eyes never left the road, but he growled softly. "If I need you to stop, I'll tell you to stop," he replied, not exactly sounding carefree. It felt like a tiny victory.

I took a steadying breath and continued. The game wouldn't be worth playing if I rushed it, so I was careful to keep the drift of my fingers slow, really feeling the shift of muscle beneath Remus' shirt each time he moved his arm or took a breath. Each movement sent a little spark of excitement shivering through me, and each one of those sparks threatened to light the ember in my belly, sparking a forest fire instead of a gentle burn.

I reached his diaphragm, and then his belly, and then his belt. Remus never told me to stop, even as his breathing changed and pulse quickened. A human might not have noticed, but I could sense the slight changes; that meant he could probably smell my adrenaline, too. Finally, I allowed my hand to drift away, setting my hands in my lap.

Remus made a frustrated noise, shooting me a sideways look as he flicked the blinker and turned. It took me longer than I'd like to admit before I realized where we were. "Why are we back at Silverstreak Motors?" I asked. Remus' frustration grew more evident as he whipped the car into a parking spot and turned the engine off.

"I was in such a hurry to come to get you and get out of here, I left my bag," he admitted, looking supremely unhappy.

I was stunned by the admission. Remus was in a hurry. To see *me*. To leave with *me*. A fool's smile spread over my lips, and I couldn't help myself.

I didn't care. "Do you want me to go get it for you?" I offered. With the energy zinging through me right now, I felt like I could run a mile. No, I felt like I could run ten. "I don't mind."

The offer was enough to break Remus out of his glower and look back over at me, offering a small grin. "No, that's okay. I appreciate the offer, but my office door has a thumbprint sensor when it's locked."

I whistled. "Damn. That's fancy."

He shrugged one shoulder. "There's a lot of important information in there." Remus unclicked his seatbelt and took a moment to adjust himself. I dipped my head, trying to hide my grin. My pleasure knowing *I* had done that. "I won't be long. Wait here?"

"Of course," I said, leaning back in the seat.

Remus gave one more nod and let himself out of the car, striding towards the building's entrance. I leaned sideways, tipping my head out the window as I watched him go. *Damn, but that man does cut a handsome figure.* He wasn't the only one affected by my playful little game. The look he'd given me when I withdrew my hand suggested he might have pulled me onto his lap and had me anyway if we weren't in public. And honestly? I didn't think I'd want to stop him.

I gave a pleasant little shiver and leaned back, eyeing the room in the car. I was in the middle of trying to figure out the practicality of the idea when my phone buzzed, startling me right out of my fantasy. Scrambling for my phone, I fished it out of my pocket, assuming it was Remus needing something from the car. When I opened the screen, I realized it was a text from my mom.

Hi, Luna! I had a great time working with you today. If you want to work here, I really think you should apply. You made a great impression on Zack.

Anyway, just wanted to remind you of the family gathering coming up. I haven't told anyone you're here in Texas yet, but I really think you should come. Let me know!

I STARED at the phone for a moment, fingers hovering over the keyboard. *What if I'm not ready to meet them yet? What if they don't like me?* After all,



I hadn't met any of these people. What if they'd seen that Moonmate video that woman was showing at lunch and thought that was the kind of person I was?

The train of thought made my stomach roll, so I closed the screen and shoved my phone back in my pocket. I could answer my mother after dinner, at least. She was probably eating by now, anyway.

Remus arrived shortly thereafter, rescuing me from any more introspection. I grinned as he held up his bag, safely tucking it behind the seat. He slipped into his seat and eyed me for a moment. "Would you be interested in going for a run with me, Luna?"

I raised a brow, unable to help my little smirk. "Not going to just draw my wolf forward this time, are you?"

To my surprise, he looked a bit abashed. "No." He shook his head. "And if you had the strength to pull your wolf forward yourself, I wouldn't have done it then. You needed to heal, and I was worried you wouldn't be able to shift."

Though he wasn't wrong, I had been rather irritated with him at the time. Then again, I hadn't been ready to accept that Marnet had washed his hands of me, either. Neither of us was at our best. "I'd like to run with you, Remus," I said. There was nothing else to hash out about last time.

Remus exhaled, and I swore I saw the alpha's shoulders relax a few centimeters. "So, do we run here?" I asked, glancing around the empty lot. There were only a few cars left, and the overhead lights were starting to flick on; the palm trees cast long shadows in those bright spots. Even if it was empty, it seemed like a strange place to run.

He glanced over me, the smile returning to his features. "No. There's a nice park not far from here, though. Lots of foliage. Most of the runners and the dog walkers are gone once the sun is entirely down; after dusk is much safer for a run than before dawn around here."

"Good to know." I tucked that information away for later, in case my wolf and I needed a moment to ourselves. Strangely, I hoped not. "Well, lead the way."

Remus' smile returned in full, and he gave a nod, finally turning the key and bringing his car back to life. "Won't be five minutes. Hang on."

TRUE TO HIS WORD, we arrived in less than five minutes. There was one other

car in the parking lot at the city park, but it smelled much more like earth and greenery than the rest of the city. I inhaled deeply as I stepped out of the car, glancing around for anyone else. There were a few lights along the running trail, but the wooded area seemed private enough.

I glanced over at Remus. “Is it safe to leave your car here?”

He flashed me a grin. “This is the most convenient place for the majority of Silverstreak wolves to have a shift when they need to. Some of them don’t have the means to travel often, so I make sure it’s safe.”

I raised a brow. “So what you’re saying is that you have eyes on the place.”

He shrugged and walked further into the park, but I could still see the hint of a smile on his face. “Something like that,” he replied. I had several other questions, but he had already disappeared completely into the shadow. When I followed after him, I was greeted by his wolf instead, shaking out his gray pelt as he looked up at me expectantly.

*Well, I did want a damn run.* I could ask more about the park later. I took a breath and closed my eyes, allowing my wolf to return to the surface. When I opened my eyes back up, Remus’ nose was only inches from my muzzle. I almost gave him a pleased bark before remembering where we were. Instead, I leaned in, tongue flashing out to lick the alpha’s chin in a mild show of submission.

He gave a pleased rumble, standing still for a few moments before pulling away, turning to trot further into the wooded area. I could already tell it wasn’t nearly as expansive as the woods behind Marnet’s former mansion, but it was still far better than anything else I’d seen since I’d arrived in Austin.

Happy to follow his lead, I broke into a casual jog as he trotted through the brush and undergrowth, his paws near silent on the forest floor. I inhaled deeply as we moved, the scent of pine, bark, and fresh soil underfoot doing wonders for my mood. The worries plaguing me earlier this evening melted away entirely, replaced with only a calm. A wolf only needed a few things, and currently, we were satisfied.

Eventually, Remus came to a halt, and I stopped behind him, my ears pricking forward. I lifted my snout, nose twitching as I inhaled deeply. It only took a second to realize what had caught the wolf’s attention – I could smell it too. *Rabbit.* My tail began to wave behind me. I strained my neck, lifting my muzzle a little higher — *Cottontail rabbit. Probably three to four*

*hundred yards away.* I paused. *Maybe more than one.* It was a bit hard to tell at this distance.

Dropping my head back to a normal level, I stepped forward until I was parallel to Remus and I nudged him gently with my nose. He looked over, pressing his ears forward. His tail was still arched lazily over his spine, a casual show of his dominance – but everything in his body said alert and interested.

Excitement was starting to well up inside me, my heart rate starting to increase. I danced on my front paws and chuffed softly, blowing a breath out through my lips. Remus didn't need any more enthusiasm than that. He gave me a single nudge, and he broke off into a steady lope. His hips and shoulders sank lower as he disappeared into the shadow. I followed his lead eagerly; I hadn't been on a hunt in months. This was exactly what I needed.



# REMUS

## Remus' Penthouse Suite

### Austin, Texas

Luna had been in Texas for almost a week, and we'd settled into a nice rhythm. Even though I'd had my spare bedroom arranged to be her bedroom, she spent every night in my bed, and I woke up tangled in her arms every morning. I used to find something uncomfortable about spooning, like someone was trying to trap me. Strangle me. It was a silly fear, but it had remained until... until Luna.

And it wasn't just the sleeping arrangements that seemed to fall nicely into place. We had found a morning routine, organizing showers and breakfast. Now that I was back to a regular working schedule, Elena was present for most breakfasts and dinners, unless I specifically told the chef not to prepare a certain meal. On Monday, which had ended up being a rather late night for me, she had cooked everything in such a way that it was perfectly cooked once we had reheated it in the oven. If Luna had reservations about having a professional chef in the house, Elena's talent seemed to win her over rather quickly.

I imagined it was rather nice to have the burden of planning and cooking meals lifted from her shoulders, too, even if she hadn't quite realized that it was. It felt nice to have someone else in my home, to my surprise. In my space. It felt right. It *smelled* right too, and my wolf felt less on edge than I expected.

Despite all of that, something seemed to have shifted over the last day or two. Yesterday, I'd managed to clear my lunch schedule to surprise Luna, but when I went to get her down in the cafeteria, she was sitting by herself. Even Josie wasn't there. She looked more like the Luna I'd met in Oklahoma, withdrawn and isolated, than the Luna I was growing used to. When I asked her what was wrong, she'd told me 'nothing, everything is fine' — even a blind man could have seen it was a lie. It was in her voice. In the space around her.

Even now, it was nearing two in the morning, and I found her on the terrace, leaning against the railing as she stared out at the city skyline — the glint of a whiskey glass in her hand. I padded across the kitchen, slipping

through the doorway quietly to join her.

She glanced over her shoulder and made a slight noise, acknowledging my presence, but she didn't say anything. I wrapped an arm around her waist, tucking her closer. Luna shifted easily, resting her cheek against my shoulder as she continued to stare out at the starless sky.

The stars were one of the things I liked the most about Oklahoma; I loved the city of Austin, but it was rare to see more than a few stars. On a night with a full moon like this, they practically vanished altogether, drowned out between the lunar glow and the light radiating upwards from Austin's nightlife. *I wonder what she's looking at.* I followed Luna's gaze, but it only traced the skyline. *I suppose it's still beautiful in its own right,* especially if it wasn't something you were used to.

“REMUS?”

Luna's voice broke the silence after a few minutes — or maybe longer. I wasn't keeping count. There was something strangely Zen about it. I watched her from my peripheral, but she wasn't looking at me. She was still staring straight out at the Austin cityscape.

“Yes?” I prompted, turning just enough to drop a gentle kiss against the top of her head.

Luna paused for a moment, gaze dropping down to her glass. “I know you're really busy, especially with all the board members and all,” she began. She sounded like she was apologizing, even though she hadn't done anything. “But...”

I waited for a moment, but nothing else came. My brow dipped, and I had to fight the expression lest she abandon the thought entirely. “...but?”

The she-wolf sighed, shoulders dropping. “We just... we haven't had much time alone together. And I don't mean, like, we have to be having sex constantly or something.” The second part came out in a rush. She cleared her throat. “I just mean, the first few days were great. I felt like I got to learn some things about you, but not since then.” She paused. “Well. Except for that you'll eat bagels dry.”

Her smile was weak as she attempted to crack a joke, but I smiled anyway. “I was hungry,” I said, a weak attempt at self-defense. “Besides, can't work on an empty stomach.” But that wasn't the point. How I took my bagels or my coffee wasn't the point. “Anyway, I—”

Luna flinched, almost like she was expected to be scolded for her feelings. “Anyway. Sorry. That’s probably really selfish of me. I know you’re busy. And you were gone so long in Oklahoma, too.”

Frowning, I didn’t even try to stop myself as I twisted, grabbing the woman by her chin before she could look away. “Luna,” I murmured quietly, trying to catch her eyes. “That’s how you feel. You don’t have to apologize for it.” I leaned in, kissing her forehead. “Is this why you’ve been a bit distant the past few days?”

She flinched again, looking everywhere but at me. “I— No. I’m sorry. I didn’t mean to be distant with you,” she all but whispered. I could practically hear her swallow; her throat worked so hard.

Her answer only made me frown more; I wasn’t entirely sure what to make of that. I was relieved it wasn’t me — if that were true, anyway, and she was being so evasive, I couldn’t tell if she was being entirely honest about it — but if it didn’t have to do with us, what the hell was bothering her so much? Maybe a weekend away would be helpful for more than one reason. “You don’t have to keep apologizing,” I said, tipping my head to one side. I dropped my hand to Luna’s hip, but she didn’t move away.

Instead, she leaned in, resting her forehead against my chest. I made a low noise and ran my fingers over her back. “Normally, I’d go for a run when I feel like this,” she admitted. “And the brief jog we went on the other night was pretty nice, — no offense, Remus, but a park is pretty sad once a wolf is used to fields and forests.”

I bit back a sigh. “Yes, it is,” I agreed, even as my pride wanted to bristle. It was my territory, after all. “But all of Texas isn’t like this. This is just the price I pay in order to provide for the pack. At least it isn’t New York City.”

“I guess,” Luna replied, not moving from where she’d planted herself. “I’ve never been.”

“We’ll fix that one day,” I replied absently, gently petting her hair. “I have a cabin in the Guadalupe Mountains. Would you like to visit? We could take the helicopter tomorrow.”

Luna finally stirred, staring up at me with wide eyes. “Where?”

I hummed softly and pulled out my phone, searching my photo album for a few pictures of the property. It was small, but it was supposed to be private. Secluded. Better yet, it was all mine — it wasn’t a Silverstreak property. It was a *Remus* property. I never had to schedule time there to make sure I wasn’t overlapping with someone; it was the perfect place to retreat when I



needed a quiet space to think and solve a problem.

“It’s in Texas,” I said as Luna flipped through the photos. “It’s an hour by helicopter at most.”

Luna’s expression didn’t get any less awed. “By helicopter? Wow.” She offered my phone back to me. “But tomorrow’s Friday. You need to work. So do I.”

I raised a brow. “I am quite certain your paperwork is still going through the bureaucracy,” I replied, trying not to smile. “You aren’t technically even an employee yet.”

Luna ducked her head, slipping a little closer. Finally, she wrapped one arm around my back, pulling me closer. “Fine. You have me there,” she admitted. “But what about you? You’re an employee.”

“I’m the employer,” I replied, feeling a bit smug. Some might argue that I still answered to the board, but we had no meetings scheduled. There had been a meeting since the meeting, and most members had returned to their homes — they had lives to get back to. Things to do. And so did I. “Besides, we’re staying in Texas. It would hardly take me more time to get to headquarters from the cabin as it does from here if they called me when there was traffic.”

Luna hummed for a moment before she leaned back in, nodding her head. “Well, as long as you’re sure...”

“I am. One hundred percent.”

“That sounds perfect, then.” When she looked back up at me, she was smiling. “Thank you. Not just for the offer — but for taking me seriously.”

“Of course,” I replied. “Why—”

Still in my hand, my phone began to ring, the sound startling us both. I cursed under my breath. “Who the hell is calling me this late at— Oh, shit. It’s Tala.”

Luna’s expression went grim as she took a step back, allowing me to answer the phone. “Tala?”

“We got the name, Remus!” My cousin all but shouted into the phone. I held the phone away from my ear, wincing as she whooped and howled with glee. “Seff’s team just got through the encryption. We got the contact in Arkansas, we did it!”

“Yes, we’ve found the person holding the account Marnet’s company was funneling money to,” a man’s voice confirmed. I realized a moment later it was Seff. Tala hadn’t wasted a second in informing me of their finding.

I grinned despite myself, Tala's enthusiasm infectious even over the phone line. "Well?" I asked, having switched my phone to speaker. "Who is it?"

"Pam Whitewater."

Luna's face went ashen, and I tipped my head. "What is it?" I mouthed.

"I know that name," she replied quietly, looking between me and the phone. Her eyes were flat and gray, not the usual quicksilver. "Pam Whitewater was on Marnet's list of... of other women."

My wolf rumbled protectively at the way Luna still quieted at the memory; even now, miles and miles away, the man was still managing to hurt her. *Bastard.*

"What was that?" Tala said from the other end. "I couldn't quite catch what you said."

"Luna knows the name," I replied, not making her repeat something that bothered her to say. "It was on a list of women Marnet was seeing when he was seeing Luna and courting Skye." I wondered if York knew — or if he'd care that he'd given his beta's daughter to such a two-faced schemer. "I know of her. The Whitewaters own several hotels on the Gulf Coast and various lakes in the southern states. My understanding was that Pam was in line to inherit the company and the fortune, though — why would an heiress be receiving money?" I suspected she was worth more than Marnet, in truth.

Something else occurred to me a moment later. "She's human. The Whitewater family is all human," I growled. It was quickly becoming a pattern with Marnet, but if the chief of patrol provided the man with protection, what was Pam Whitewater offering Marnet, if not money or cover? We'd solved one mystery, and in doing so, uncovered at least twelve more.

"We're already sweeping her communications and accounts," Seff interrupted. "We haven't turned up anything too interesting yet, but she's still in Arkansas as far as I can tell. The family has a hotel on Lookout Point. Real fancy, last I heard."

I huffed impatiently. "We need answers now, Seff. What if she catches on to your hackers? Send some men to question her."

"How? They're not in contact with her," he replied. "Besides, her father is extremely wealthy. Even if she doesn't have guards or security at the hotel, I'm sure he has at least ten high-powered lawyers on call. She isn't going to answer questions willingly. Unless we kidnap her, I don't think we're getting

near her.”

I scowled at my phone. *Is this why Marnet chose her? Harder to get to than a werewolf? We'd be able to broker with another alpha.*

Luna cleared her throat, gently catching my attention. “I... think I can help,” she said, stepping closer. She spoke a little louder, and I tipped the phone so it would catch her voice better. “Seff, Tala, can you hear me?”

“I can hear you.”

She gave a little nod. “What if I confront Pam? I’ve already confronted Skye...”

I shook my head as my wolf bristled, rumbling his displeasure with the idea. “What if you get hurt?”

Luna laughed, raising an eyebrow at me. “Marnet was going to have me killed, and his sister and her bratty friends kicked the shit out of me while I was tied up. What is one lonely socialite going to do to me? She’s probably never fought anyone in her entire life. I can handle a slap or something. Besides, who knows? Maybe if she hears the truth about how Marnet treats women, she’d be willing to help — no coercion required.”

Even if that were true, I still didn’t like the idea. Luna kept talking.

“Seff, can your people access Marnet’s iCloud? He...” Luna took a deep breath and stood up a little straighter as she steeled herself. “He kept a list of the women he was seeing. I assume it was to help him keep everyone’s name straight, the bastard. I’d confront Pam with Marnet’s computer, but I, uh... might have smashed it.” She trailed off with a sheepish look.

Tala laughed on the other end of the line, a sound not entirely happy. “He deserves it, the cheating bastard.”

“We can certainly do that,” Seff added. “I doubt his personal files are as well-encrypted as the finances. It’s late now, and even my computer nerds need to sleep, but I’ll get one or two of them on it first thing tomorrow morning.”

I nodded — Seff was right. It was late. “All right. Update me if anything changes. Tala, thank you for the info. Seff — I appreciate the help.”

“Of course,” Seff and Tala said in unison. Tala laughed again — or maybe it was more of a giggle.

“Good night, Remus. Don’t let the bedbugs bite!”

I rolled my eyes fondly; my cousin was still clearly riding the adrenaline high that came with a job well done. “Good night, Tala. Seff.” I clicked to turn off the phone and pocketed it, turning back to Luna. My smile was

already fading. “Are you sure this is something you want to do?” I asked, reaching for her arm. She came willingly, melting right back into her spot against my chest.

“Yes, I’m sure.” She replied with more conviction than I’d heard from her all night. She drew shapeless lines over my chest with one finger. “Part of me loved that man, and I might not be able to just shed parts of me so easily, but... I don’t want to be with him. I’m not the same woman who was in love with him, and I don’t want to protect him, either. What he did was wrong. Besides, I know that as long as he’s out there, you can’t secure the Oklahoma territory, and those wolves deserve security, too.” She paused for a moment. “It’s not their fault their alpha ended up the way he did.”

I opened my mouth to respond, but she wasn’t done. Not just yet. She glanced up, brushing her fingers over my jaw and effectively stopping me. “I want to do my part, Remus. For Silverstreak and you. And if we can get this behind us, well...” She trailed off with a smile. “Then it’s just you and me. We can start our lives together — no interruptions.”

Her eyes went wide, as if she wasn’t expecting those words to come out of her mouth. My breath caught; I hadn’t expected the confession either. Before she could take it back — before I could say something and ruin the moment — I leaned in and sealed it with a gentle kiss.



**LUNA**

## One Eleven

### Little Rock, Arkansas

I would have rather gone to the Guadalupe Mountains for a secluded weekend alone with Remus, but... but I knew this needed to be done. If Remus never apprehended Marnet, this whole cat and mouse game would never end. Things might be *okay*, but they'd never be *good*. He didn't strike me as a paranoid person, but I could imagine how constantly being thwarted might lead a man to be. The way his mother treated him on the plane a few weeks ago likely didn't help, either.

Admittedly, I had no idea what their relationship was like before they came to Oklahoma, but from where I sat, it didn't exactly seem warm and fuzzy. Even the thought of disappointing Josie made my insides squirm; honestly, I didn't know how Remus shouldered Fiona's icy behavior with so little outward discomfort.

I squirmed in my seat, moving my hands from my lap to the table again as I looked around the restaurant for what felt like the fiftieth time. We'd gotten to Arkansas earlier in the morning — thankfully, I'd been tired enough to nap on the plane. Nerves had crept in while I lay next to Remus, and if I slept at all, it had been fitfully at best. The two or so hours in the plush jet hadn't been enough to erase all of my weariness, but it had certainly made my eyelids feel less heavy when we'd disembarked the plane to get in the car Remus had ordered.

It wasn't enough, but the nerves and adrenaline had done away with the rest of my tiredness. I reached for my phone, flipping it over and scrolling through the files Tala had sent me. True to his word, Seff must have gotten an entire team to crack open Marnet's iCloud first thing this morning. Tala had transferred me the files before lunch. I had looked at them at least a dozen times. There were the files I'd seen on his computer, but there was more. Maybe they'd been there, maybe not. Who knew? My temper had gotten the best of me after the first video; I at least spared myself the pain of watching any more of those (and there was an entire file of videos Tala had labeled as NSFW, so I could only imagine what Marnet had been getting up to).

After a moment, I sighed and closed the folder without really looking at

any of the files or subfolders. The first time I opened these, I'd been shocked. The pain had been so intense that it immediately transmuted into a blinding rage. First, Marnet had rejected me, but it turned out that wasn't first at all. It would have been hard to believe if the videos and photos hadn't been right in front of me. All of it was so overwhelming. It wasn't just one other woman, and it wasn't just the past few months. He'd been a playboy since before we'd ever gotten involved, and clearly, finding his mate hadn't given him any desire to change his ways. If the dates and timestamps indicated anything, Marnet hadn't even slowed down. The only blip in his pattern was when his father died, and if anything, that was because he simply couldn't leave the pack in that transition period.

The corners of my lips felt heavy and I set my phone down. Most of the anger was gone now — what remained was a gentle simmer instead of a rolling boil. Instead, I simply felt... sad. Disappointed, maybe. It wasn't an overwhelming emotion, though. Not anymore. I also felt... grateful. Grateful that I had finally stood my ground at the Moonmate ceremony. I was grateful that I could see the depth and breadth of Marnet's deception. His rejection had been final, but that didn't make it easier for me to swallow. It didn't make it easier for my wolf to let go of what she thought would be her lifeline.

Knowing who the man really was, though? That mattered. Whoever I was in love with, it wasn't Marnet. Not really. It was the idea of Marnet. What I thought he could be; what I *hoped* he could be.

A hand on my thigh broke me out of the rabbit hole of reflection I was quickly falling down. Remus leaned in close, his voice low. "Are you all right? You look far away," he murmured, his brows pinched together as he studied my face.

I managed a small smile, resting one of my hands on his. "I'm okay," I replied; it was the truth. The thought made me feel warmer. I might not be great right now, but I was doing okay, and I didn't have to lie about it. I was sure I was on the right path to getting better.

Leaning forward, I swapped from the files to Instagram, quickly pulling up Pam's page. The photos were glamorous and well curated; Pam was always in the proper lighting, and it looked like her page even had a color theme to it. It was no wonder she had thousands of followers — I wasn't sure if 'hotel heiress' counted as the type of fame people followed, but I was sure her photos were plenty nice to do that even if she wasn't wealthy. I tapped her tagged photos and tipped the phone in Remus' direction.



“It looks like she should be here right now. One of her friends tagged her less than an hour ago.” I assumed they were friends, anyways. Lifting my chin, I looked around again, trying to spot the woman who stared in most of these photos.

Remus hummed and nodded, quietly fishing out his phone and opening his Instagram account. After a moment, he pulled up the woman’s profile who tagged her. “She’s friends with one of the people I went to college with,” he murmured softly, motioning to the account. “They should be here. I assume they’ll come in from the other room soon.”

“Okay,” I said, resolving to set my phone down. I closed the screen and glanced over at Remus. “So, what’s our story? How do we know each other? What’s the relationship between us?” I asked. It was better to hash that out now; what if Pam asked and suddenly we couldn’t answer?

The hand on my thigh stilled, and Remus simply stared at me for a moment, his brows dipping closer together. At first, I thought he was merely thinking of a convincing answer, but the silence stretched too long. My gut twisted. *Oh, no. I’ve messed this up already.*

“To tell Pam,” I blurted out in a loud whisper, leaning closer as I tried to keep this from getting any worse. “We have to make sure we say the same things, or she might get suspicious of us.” I searched Remus’ face, but his features didn’t shift a degree.

Before I could say anything else, Remus suddenly pulled away, standing up. My heart lurched as I turned, about to reach over and stop him from leaving, when I realized another man had approached us. Remus shook his hand; the tall honey-blond stranger pulled him into one of those one-armed man hugs.

“Remus Silverstreak! It’s been a minute since I’ve seen you,” he said, patting the man on the back. “You should come visit more often!”

“Oh, like you’re always just loitering around Arkansas, are you?” Remus replied his expression calm. He clearly knew this man.

“This time of year, I am.” His gaze shifted to me, and I was momentarily stunned by his very blue eyes. “And who is your lovely companion?” he asked, flashing me a charming grin. My heart stuttered. *I swear I’ve seen this man before.*

Remus rumbled and motioned to me. “Wyatt, this is Luna. Luna, this is Wyatt Wolfe.”

I sucked in a sharp breath. *Wyatt Wolfe! Remus never told me he was*

*friends with actors*. Famous actors, no less. I'd been watching Wyatt since season one of *Blood Rites* — it was probably cheesy of me to like shows about vampires and other supernatural entities, but I loved that show. I never missed an episode. Wyatt played my favorite character — a vampire with a mysterious past on the run from his coven.

“It’s so nice to meet you!” I gushed, happily shaking the hand he offered. I took another breath, trying not to look like a teenage girl meeting her first celebrity. “Do you work in Arkansas?”

“The pleasure is all mine, Luna,” Wyatt replied, his smooth smile making my cheeks heat up. The shake lasted just a moment too long, and I swore I heard Remus rumble quietly as Wyatt finally slipped his hand back to his pocket. “And yes, I do. Once the filming is done, I enjoy spending time at the lakes in this part.”

“Are they nice? I’ve never had the chance to see them?”

“Oh, yeah.” Wyatt nodded enthusiastically. It was like he’d forgotten Remus was there at all. “They aren’t known as the Diamond Lakes for nothing. If you ever have a free weekend, you’re welcome to visit my lakeside home while you’re in the area!” I didn’t imagine Remus’ growl this time and Wyatt laughed, turning to clap a hand over his friend’s shoulder. “You too, of course! I know you’ve seen the lakes, though.”

Remus’ eyes were dark in a way I hadn’t seen before, and I would be lying if I said they didn’t send a thrill through me. When the pair of men sat down, Remus sat next to me and Wyatt on the other side of him. *So he does have a possessive streak*. I’d tuck that away for later.

Wyatt ordered a drink and continued to tease Remus before he leaned forward to see us both. “So what brings you two out this way?” he asked, sipping at his cocktail.

“I had a client who needed a bit of extra care,” Remus lied smoothly. “Luna’s grandmother just moved into a retirement community about an hour away, so we thought we’d take some time to check in and make sure she was doing all right.”

Wyatt hummed and raised a brow. “Your grandmother lives in Arkansas, and you’ve never been to the lakes?” he questioned.

I smiled even though my mind was racing. “She’s not from Arkansas originally,” I replied, almost impressing myself with how smooth my answer was. “But the community had everything she wanted, including much milder winters. She was a snowbird when she was more able to travel, but she didn’t

want to live right on the Gulf Coast, either. More of a woods-and-lakes person than a beach person. It was my grandfather who loved the seashore.”

“Ah,” Wyatt said, nodding thoughtfully. “Well, she’s come to the right place, that’s for sure. How far away is she?”

“Pine Bluff,” Remus cut in smoothly. “The community is right on the river, but with all the amenities she needs.”

“Wouldn’t want her tripping over a stump!” I added, grateful when Wyatt simply laughed. He seemed content to leave it at that, changing the topic to a local music venue and who was playing. It quickly snowballed into a tale of a spring break escapade. Remus, Wyatt, and some other folks all snuck into some show they could afford, but had forgotten to purchase tickets. Wyatt was just detailing how effectively dear old Remus here had charmed the woman in one of the VIP tents, convincing her they absolutely belonged to her, and I could feel my wolf stir. She growled. *Am I— Am I jealous?* The thought almost made me laugh. I was rescued as the waitress stopped by, asking us if we needed any additional snacks. Did Wyatt need to see the lunch menu?

While the two boys looked over the menu, I spotted a gaggle of well-dressed women walking into the bar from the other room. Pam was among them, and she wasn’t just with Remus’ friend-of-a-friend, though. I recognized the blonde as a model I’d seen on some fashion spreads from my new magazines, and the redhead was definitely a music artist. *Is this entire place full of famous people?*

One Eleven looked upscale, but maybe it was more exclusive than I’d realized. A few of my nerves came fluttering back, making a home for themselves in my belly. I kept watching the group out of the corner of my eye when Pam broke away, briefly speaking with a waitress before disappearing down a hall towards the ladies’ room. *Okay, Luna. It might be now or never.*

I quickly got to my feet, tapping Remus’ shoulder. He was deep in conversation with Wyatt now, the reminiscing having given way to proper business talk. Wyatt wasn’t just an actor, but also some sort of real estate guru. I couldn’t focus on that right now. “I need to freshen up,” I murmured to Remus. “If the waitress comes back, you know what I like.”

“Of course,” he said, offering me a bright smile.

It was almost enough to make me feel a little better. I picked up my phone, my clutch, and headed to the restroom.

THERE WAS another woman already in there. I almost froze but kept walking, offering the stranger a small smile as I walked over to the expansive bench. There were sinks and an empty bench; it was meant for ladies who needed to touch up their makeup. I set my clutch down and pulled out a tube of lipstick, glad I had thought to bring some. I dotted and dabbed at my lips, hoping I looked like I was just freshening up and not waiting for someone to leave the stall.

*What am I doing?*

The butterflies in my stomach had morphed into bats, flapping around wildly. My heart felt like it was mere centimeters away from launching itself right out of my chest. *This isn't me. I don't sneak around and try to do — whatever this is. I feel like a freaking spy or something, except spies probably don't get nervous and almost get lipstick on their teeth.*

I paused for a moment, giving my reflection a stern look. *But I want to help.* If not for Remus, Marnet likely would have killed me for embarrassing him at the Moonmate ceremony. Even if he wasn't the bloodthirsty type of alpha, he hadn't needed to make sure I got back on my feet. He could have just made sure I didn't die and sent me on my way. Tala didn't need to be nice to me, either. She could have gotten what little I knew and gone on her merry way.

And neither of them ended up like that. I liked them. I genuinely enjoyed them both. *I want to help.*

The third woman walked out, and moments later, Pam emerged, washing her hands before she began to fix her lipstick, checking the bounce of her gentle waves as she did. I eyed her for a moment; this woman could have been a supermodel if she wanted to. Her light brown hair was glossy with just the right number of waves, and she did her makeup like an expert. I glanced at my reflection again and bit the inside of my mouth. *No wonder Marnet liked her.*

I took in a breath. Now was not the time for this. I could compare myself to the pinnacle of human beauty standards later.

Finally, Pam realized I was watching her. I was a bit surprised it took that long, but... she was just a human. Her senses weren't as sharp. She arched a brow at me before turning back to her reflection, putting the finishing touches on her lips. "Can I help you?" she asked, giving a pop with her lips.

I took a deep breath and forced a smile. "Sorry, you're just even more stunning in real life than in your Instagram pics," I said, trying not to seem

too threatening. “It’s usually the other way around.” A small smile returned to Pam’s lips, so I continued. “You know Marnet Claw, right?”

Pam paused suddenly, a hand still in her hair. She turned to face me, her expression tight.

“How do you know my boyfriend?”

*Boyfriend? Uh-oh. This goes deeper than I thought.* There was no beating around the bush with this. I was just going to have to rip off the bandage. Thinking quickly, I fished out my phone and pulled the files up, hitting play before I all but shoved the screen in Pam’s face. I needed her to see it before she decided I was some whacko and left the bathroom. “He’s been lying to me. He’s been lying to you, too.”

Pam’s eyes dropped to the video — her confused expression quickly became one of horror. “How did you get this video?” she asked, her voice going quiet. She couldn’t take her eyes off the moving images. “I don’t remember taking this. Who took this? What do you mean, lying? Who *are* you?”

I grimaced; this felt worse by the moment. I closed the video and opened the file full of photos, quickly flicking through them. There were several of Pam and Marnet together, but many more with other women in other places. There was even a picture of me and Marnet in that stupid love nest I used to treasure.

Pam’s eyes looked wet, and her voice trembled. “I can’t —” She shook her head and cut herself off, pushing my phone away. There was no real force behind it when I watched her face; I could see a flickering of emotions running back and forth as she tried to decide how she felt. “I need to call Marnet.”

I paused and shook my head, even as she reached for her phone. “Do you really think he’s going to tell the truth? I had to find this information myself — I wasn’t even looking for it. He asked me to print off a few papers for him, and when I opened his laptop, that video was open...” I trailed off, giving her a look I hoped was sympathetic. Pam’s expression only got more drawn, and she started to dial a number. It wasn’t one I recognized, so I swiveled, snapping a quick photo with my phone.

Mind racing, I grabbed her arm and gave her a quick squeeze. “Seriously, do you think he’s going to be honest after all of this?”

She frowned but didn’t hit send. “What do you want from me?”

*Oh, crap.* I was going to have to push her. “What was the money for?” I

asked softly. Pam's entire body stiffened as she stepped backward, her lips pursing together. *This is going downhill. I need to rescue this.* "It's okay. You can tell me," I said. "We've both been wronged by him. It'll be easier this way. What was the money for?"

Pam finally pulled her arm away. I didn't hang on, lest she thought I was trying to hold her hostage or something. "Are you a cop or something?"

The question was so out of left field, it stunned me for a moment. "What? N —"

"I'm not saying anything without my lawyer present."

I blinked and took a step back, totally boggled by how quickly Pam had shifted from betrayed to defensive. Maybe if I just gave her a little bit of space... "Look, I —"

Pam glared at me and let out an ear-piercing scream.



# REMUS



## One Eleven

### Little Rock, Arkansas

I had once enjoyed running into Wyatt. I used to come to Arkansas to see Seff, or for other business purposes, but we had several mutual friends.

At some point, I got in the habit of dropping the man a text when I was in the area. Nothing was boring when Wyatt Wolfe was around, though listening to him tell tales of our exploits now... I wouldn't say I was embarrassed, but I wasn't getting the same enjoyment out of them that Wyatt was. I definitely wasn't experiencing the same sense of nostalgia he had.

My days as a bachelor had been fun, but... I was younger then. My responsibilities were much different. For one thing, my father was still around, and for another, the only thing my mother expected out of me was to make good connections and keep learning. No one had expected my dad to be ripped away from us suddenly in an accident. Even the hint of the memory made my skin feel cold that I quickly shut down, turning my attention back to Wyatt. *Maybe I can get him back on the topic of business.* Even if he was rather full of himself, it was at least a conversation I could tolerate. I might even be able to get a partnership if I played it right.

Wyatt was in the middle of detailing the exploit that led him to own his first high-end club — an exploit that had nothing to do with me, mind you — when a woman screamed at the back of the restaurant. My bored agitation exploded into adrenaline; the restrooms were towards the back. Luna was in the restroom. The scream hadn't sounded like her, but I couldn't be too sure. It wasn't as if I heard her *scream* that often — not like that.

I shoved myself away from the bar, abandoning the rest of my drink and Wyatt as I hurried towards the back. One waitress seemed to have the same train of thought, but the rest of the room went back to the low level of murmuring when nothing happened immediately after. I reached the washroom, ready to rip the door open and let myself inside, women only be damned, when the door whipped open towards me and a body hurtled into my chest.

A soft noise escaped me as I stepped backward, muscles tensing. "Luna!?" I gasped a second later, recognizing the woman's shape —

recognizing her scent. My wolf's agitation morphed from high alert to the desire to protect her, and I couldn't argue.

Luna's head jerked up as she struggled briefly; the look in her eyes shifted, and she stopped trying to wrench herself away from me. *What the hell happened in the bathroom?* Whatever it was, the she-wolf didn't seem keen on waiting around. "We should go," she whispered urgently.

That was all she needed to say. I grabbed her hand and all but dragged her out of the restaurant, absently glad I'd paid for our drinks when we got them instead of opening a tab. *At least I won't be marked as a thief, even if a bit rude.* As for Wyatt? He could deal. He'd probably already found someone else to regale with his tall tales.

It only took the driver thirty seconds to zoom around the front and pick us up as soon as we exited. Seff had arranged the car for us, and I wasn't sure what the man had said to the driver, but he was undoubtedly a good listener. I opened the door and Luna slid right in; I followed a moment later. The driver only paused long enough to ask where I'd like to go, and then the car was in motion again, thrumming along towards the private airport.

Finally, I looked over, studying Luna. "Are you okay?" I asked, eyes searching her up and down. There didn't seem to be anything physically wrong — no cuts or bruises, not even a welt as if another girl had tried to slap her. "Was that you?"

"No," Luna said, still slightly breathless. "I mean, yes. I'm okay. That wasn't me screaming, though. Good grief. She scared the heck out of me." She giggled and pressed a hand to her heart, her chest still rising and falling rapidly. The giggles turned into laughter, and Luna leaned back, shaking her head as chuckles continued to tumble free.

Relieved that she was unharmed, I couldn't help but join her, shaking my head. "You ran out of that room like you'd seen a ghost."

Luna snorted softly. "Did you hear her? That woman screamed like a banshee," she replied, twisting. She grabbed her clutch and fished out her phone. "That was Pam in the bathroom, by the way. She wouldn't give me an answer about the accounts, but..." She trailed off, holding the screen out to me. The image was a little blurry, but I could make out another phone and a phone number. "She started trying to call someone before she screeched at me. She said she had to talk to Marnet... so it might be his new number?"

"Well, that's certainly more than we had before," I said, impressed with her quick thinking. "Would you send it to Tala? She'll be able to check on it

even if it's registered to a fake name.”

“Already done,” Luna said with a link, swiping her finger over the screen before leaning back in the seat.

I couldn't take my eyes off of her. Even slightly frazzled, Luna looked radiant. She looked... invigorated. The adrenaline hadn't driven her to a wild mess but rather a controlled chaos. It was all unscripted, and even in the thick of it, she had the presence of mind to get a photo of the number instead of trying to memorize it.

Luna glanced back over at me, holding her phone between her hands. “I know it's not much, but I hope it helps. That it gives Tala a lead, at the very least.”

I reached over, grabbing Luna's wrist and squeezing gently. “A number is a lot,” I replied. “Anyone Pam wanted to call when she was upset will be important for us. If it's not Marnet, it might be the money holder. Whatever it is, it will help.” Besides, Tala and Seff had been producing a lot from very little. I was sure that between both of those items, it would work out.

Luna glanced up at me with a small smile. “You're just being nice.”

“I am being nice,” I agreed, “but that doesn't mean I'm not telling the truth. I know that was hard for you, especially when Pam started screaming. I appreciate that you were willing to help at all.” It made me see what kind of woman Marnet saw, and then I dismissed the thought almost immediately. Those weren't thoughts worth pursuing.

Luna's smile warmed, and she leaned forward, laying a gentle kiss on my lips. “I want to help,” she insisted. “Whatever you need, you only need to ask.”

I tipped my head, unable to keep the smile off my face. “I'm pretty sure that's what I said to you.”

“I'm pretty sure you're right.”

WE WERE BACK in Texas three hours later, and it wasn't even dinnertime yet. Seff had called after my jet had landed, and we were on our way back to my penthouse. They were still working on the pile of fake names behind the account, but he was fairly confident that it was Marnet's new number based on the other lines it had been in contact with. “We'll continue tracking it and have confirmation in less than an hour. I suspect he'll keep using it; it's a new number. There's no reason for him to know it's been compromised.”

“One step closer,” I said, keeping myself from grinning. It was one step, but only one step. We couldn’t start counting our chickens before they hatched.

“Definitely,” Seff agreed. “We might need to grease a few palms, but I think we’re closing in.”

“Whatever you need to do. I trust your judgment.” Seff was a savvy businessman outside of being a strong alpha. I knew he wouldn’t just throw money around he didn’t have.

I hung up as the driver turned into my private section of the garage; though we needed a pick up from the airport, I decided I would drive Luna to the mountains. It would be the weekend, and no one should be expecting me to be on hand. He pulled up next to my SUV and turned the car off, getting out to start moving our bags from the trunk to my other vehicle.

“Ready for some fresh air?” I asked Luna, offering her a hand as we let ourselves out.

“Definitely,” she agreed, brushing the wrinkles out of her outfit. “If we aren’t too tired when we get there, maybe we could go for a run — you could show me the lay of the land?”

“That sounds perfect,” I replied, but my words were drowned out as a car came rushing up beside us, practically screeching to a halt. Only one other person was allowed in my private lot, and only because she occasionally needed to borrow a car — my *mother*.

She stepped out of the back seat a moment later, leveling me with a dark look. My spine stiffened immediately, and I fought the urge to put up a defensive front, even as my wolf stirred and laid his ears back. Her shows of disrespect weren’t even being masked anymore.

“Remus,” she huffed, marching over to me. “Your secretary told me you were taking care of business in Arkansas this morning. Where the hell were you?”

I frowned softly, wondering exactly how long she interrogated poor Katherine before the woman gave in. “I *was* in Arkansas this morning. I had lunch with an old friend who owns several clubs and luxury cabins and was interested in adding high-end cars and SUVs to his top service line.” Which, technically, was true, even if Wyatt had been too distracted talking about himself to seal any deal.

My mother tutted at me. “You need to be here, Remus. People need to see you. They need to know you’re doing your best for the company.”

I bristled. “How is getting new clients for Silverstreak Motors *not* good for the company?” I retorted, wondering what *exactly* my mother was trying to get at.

Her gaze flicked to Luna a moment later, and then flicked back to me. “Remus, my boy. You have to understand that some shareholders are getting nervous amidst all the strange happenings. You flying all over the place looks like you’re just having a good time, especially when you take... other people with you.” She paused. “Why is she here?”

I gritted my teeth. *I bet you wouldn’t have the same complaint if I’d taken you to One Eleven instead of Luna.* I kept the thought to myself.

Luna stepped forward, clearing her voice gently. “Oh, I was just along to help with...”

“I was speaking to Remus,” my mother snapped, not letting Luna finish.

That was enough. I growled softly, folding my arms over my chest. “There is no reason for you to speak like that, Mom,” I said sternly. I felt like my face was stuck in a frown whenever I was around my mother these days, but I couldn’t help it when she acted like this. I turned to Luna and took her hand. “C’mon.”

I wasn’t in the mood to deal with my mother’s bad behavior, and honestly? I didn’t have to. I led Luna around to the passenger side of my SUV and let her in. Once she was buckled, I shut the door and walked around the vehicle, only to find my mother standing by the driver’s door.

“Where do you think you’re going?” she demanded.

I checked my watch. “It’s 4:30 on a Friday,” I grumbled. “I am going away for the weekend, like thousands of other people. I’ll be in the Guadalupe Mountains at my cabin,” I informed her, trying to reach for my door. She still didn’t move.

“Remus, are you listening to a thing I’ve been saying?” she snapped, hands on her hips. “Now is not the time for a fucking vacation!”

My mother never swore. Never. If I wasn’t so fed up with how she’d been acting lately, I might have considered it more alarming, but right now? It seemed as if she’d been in a sour mood since I’d stopped taking her advice for every move I made. Apparently, it didn’t matter to her that I was nearing thirty and had been rather successful with the company. “I’m sorry,” I snapped back, having no patience left. “I didn’t realize having two nights away to think in peace and try to solve this fucking problem before it becomes worse is considered as a vacation!”

“You’re the alpha, Remus — do your thinking here!”

“You’re right,” I snarled. “I *am* the alpha. I do not need to ask my mother’s permission to go away *in my own territory*. If I can’t trust you to keep an eye on things for the forty-eight goddamn hours I won’t be in my damn penthouse, I’ll call Bane and ask him to do it.” At least I could trust my beta to get something done, and he wouldn’t give me a twenty-minute lecture on it first.

Fiona studied me for a moment longer, her eyes still meeting mine. My wolf was on his feet now, ears laid against his skull as he rumbled, deep and brassy. What my mother was displaying was outright defiance. The longer she kept it up, the closer my wolf pushed to the surface, and the last thing I wanted was to cast my Alpha over her again. She still hadn’t forgiven me for the last time, and I didn’t expect her to. While I hadn’t regretted anything else I’d done in Oklahoma, I *did* regret that I had allowed that to happen.

My mother made a low noise, and she finally took a step back. “Fine,” she ground out, knowing I’d cornered her argument. She said nothing else. Instead, she brushed past me, taking long strides back to her car. She slipped back inside and didn’t so much as give me a sideways look as the car turned around, speeding back out of the lot.

*Ugh.*

I took a deep breath, willing some of the tension to leave my shoulders. Whatever was going on between my mother and me, it wasn’t good for us, and it couldn’t be good for the pack or the business, either. I needed to figure out how I could solve this because doing everything exactly as she wanted wouldn’t happen. *Maybe we can find peace, but I’m not going to go looking for my ‘true mate’*. I didn’t need to, not with Luna. She was everything I needed and more.



**LUNA**



## Guadalupe Mountains

### Texas—New Mexico Border

It was our second morning in the mountains, and I regretted that we'd have to pack up tonight and head back to reality in Austin. The past thirty-six hours had felt like much more than that; they'd almost been magical in how *different* things felt here. Remus had promised I would like it, that it would feel relaxing and quiet in a way that soothed the soul. I had honestly thought he was upselling it a bit (even though he didn't have to, I would have happily gone to a rustic cabin anywhere if it meant some time away with Remus, no amenities required), but he hadn't been wrong.

I still didn't have the words to describe the area. We were still in Texas, but it felt like we had entered a different world. The cabin was technically right outside the national park, but it looked like it belonged on a movie set. When I thought of a cabin, I thought of a small, two-room building built out of logs. If you were lucky, you had indoor plumbing. If you weren't, you had an outhouse.

But this? This was more like a lodge for the rich and the famous, just shrunk down to house a pair of people instead of a weekend party. It was still wood, yes, but there were large windows around the entire building. The peaked roof was almost entire windows, so it was light no matter what time of day it was inside. It didn't feel dark or cramped like I imagined a cabin would; instead, it felt airy and roomy. The spaces were large, defined by furniture rather than walls.

It felt more like a resort, but I wouldn't tell Remus that. This was the place he came to when he needed to reset and clear his mind. Until he tried to tell me it was rustic living (and thus far, he hadn't), I wasn't going to argue.

As it were, he was already outside in the early morning warmth, chopping more firewood than we'd need in a week. I didn't know much about harvesting firewood, but the axe he was using didn't look particularly sharp. All the same, it only took one powerful downswing, and one log quickly became two. I admired the ripple of muscle in his back every time he lifted the axe and brought it back down, sliding through the wood like he was slicing a hot knife through butter. An ordinary man wouldn't be able to do

that, but an alpha werewolf? *Woof.*

My wolf watched with interest just as keen as mine, her tail swishing casually behind her hocks as she studied the specimen in front of us. As I watched, cradling my mug of coffee, I could see the tension built into his shoulders. His face was tight — I could see it even from my limited view. There was a lot of weight resting on him right now: hunting down Marnet, whatever was happening with Silverstreak Motors, and now, his relationship with his mother. If I had thought the interaction on the jet was frosty, her confrontation on Friday afternoon was... well... it was antagonistic.

I had tried to broach the topic once yesterday, but it was clear that Remus didn't want to talk about it. I still felt a bit bad I had asked him to get away; I probably would have thought twice about it if I'd realized Fiona would be so nasty to him. My smile wavered, and I shook my head. He was a grown man — and more than that, an alpha wolf. If Remus didn't want to leave Austin, I was pretty certain he'd have said so. He'd never been afraid of speaking his mind, at least as far as I'd seen. I liked that about him. He was truthful but straightforward. It wasn't said intending to cause harm. It was simply the truth.

All the same, I hoped he thought the two days were worth it. If nothing else, I felt closer to him than I had when we arrived, and I could only hope he felt the same.

I hummed and finally stepped out of the doorway, letting the screen door swing shut behind me. I approached Remus slowly, not wanting to startle him as I reached out to touch his elbow. "Good morning," I murmured. This close, his scent almost overpowered me. I couldn't even smell my coffee for the earthy musk I'd come to associate with the man. He was raw wolf; earth, pine and salt. My wolf shivered with delight and I crept a little closer as he set his axe down.

"You're thinking too hard," I told him gently, tipping my head towards his shoulder. "I could hear you from the cabin." It still felt silly calling it a cabin. I turned slightly, glancing up at him as he studied me, the expression on his face still unreadable. "Things will get better. Pam knows the truth now, and she's seen there are several other women. Even if she didn't want to work with us, things will get a lot harder for Marnet now."

Hell hath no fury like a woman scorned, or something like that. Revenge was never something I had been particularly keen on, but Pam? She struck me as the type of woman who was not going to stand for being humiliated,

and she was going to make her displeasure known in no small way. It was nothing less than Marnet deserved. He shouldn't have told Pam they were dating. *He shouldn't have told me we would be together forever, either.*

I refused to let those thoughts drag me down. "Even if she doesn't believe me — and that would be hard, given what I showed her — we've planted a seed of doubt. It will be a lot harder for Marnet to get ahold of that money he sent her."

Remus inclined his head, but he didn't say anything. Instead, he reached for the axe again. I took the silent cue and stepped away, making sure I wasn't within the range of his swing. He picked up another log and set it on the stump, bringing it down in a beautiful arc. It barely looked like work for him. It barely looked like effort. He went on like that for several more logs until I finally voiced another question.

"Remus?" I asked in between logs. "What will happen if we can't catch Marnet? Can he still challenge you?"

The alpha finally paused, his stormy eyes shifting back to me. He frowned. "Technically? Yes, he could, but he'd need to be in a position of power to do that."

I pursed my lips. "And what does that mean? I don't think I've ever actually heard of one alpha challenging another. Not around here, anyway."

His frown only deepened. "If he were to have the position to actually challenge me, it would be a fight to the death. It's a very old tradition," he said, wrinkling his nose. "Werewolves killing werewolves isn't something anyone wants." Remus paused for a moment, looking past me rather than at me.

I paused in sipping my coffee. "What is it?" I prompted. "What aren't you telling me?"

He sighed. "The longer Marnet is out there, the more opportunity he has to gather resources. Gather allies. And with that money he's stashed away..." Remus trailed off and shook his head. "It's hard to say exactly what he's doing, but I'm growing concerned a challenge is the exact thing on his mind."

I didn't know what to say to that. Remus' logic was sound; I think most displaced alphas would attempt to get their territory and their pack back, not just Marnet. His tactics might be different, but the result would likely be the same... I shuddered and shook my head, willing the thoughts away. "I hate that idea," I admitted, staring down into my coffee cup. "Not just him, I mean. Something happening to you."

*A fight to the death.*

That wasn't banishment. I could go with Remus if he were banished. But death? I couldn't follow him there, no matter how badly I wanted to.

Remus finally set his axe back down and turned to face me again. He reached forward, cupping his hand around my chin. "Luna. It is a concern, but a good alpha has to be prepared. You would need to be concerned if I were just ignoring it." He offered me a small smile. "I am not going to let him get the best of me. Once this is over, we can finally put all bullshit behind us and move forward."

He leaned in to seal his words with a kiss, and I couldn't help but smile against his lips. As he stepped back, some of the tension slithered from my shoulders, and my chest felt lighter. "For now," Remus said, "we still have a day. You wanted it to be about you and me, so let's make sure it stays that way."

Before I could say anything else, he took another step back and allowed himself to shift. I was a bit surprised, but it quickly gave way to delight. Even as my wolf pranced and waved her tail back and forth, I set my cup down on the splitting log and knelt in front of Remus. He was a massive wolf; he could easily bowl me right over like this, but he was gentle even if he was confused that I was running my hands over his face, stroking his ears. His silver ruff was so thick and luscious; I wanted to bury my face in it. "You would make the best cuddle buddy," I teased gently, leaning forward to kiss the wolf's skull.

His tail wagged behind him slowly as he gave a soft chuff, leaning forward to nuzzle against my hand. After a moment, he gave me a firm nudge. I couldn't help but laugh. "All right, all right," I agreed, standing up and stepping away. "I get the hint."

My wolf was already right at the surface, and all it took was the relaxation of control before she pushed forward, taking over our form. When I opened my eyes again, I was on four paws, almost eye level with Remus again. My ears pricked forward as I gave him a wolfish smile before wheeling around on my hind legs, taking off towards the mountainside.

IT FELT SO good to have the sandy soil beneath my feet. We'd shifted more times this weekend than I had in the past two months. Remus had taken me out to shift that one time in the woods outside of the Oklahoma mansion, but

even before the Moonmate ceremony, I hadn't shifted much at all. My family members weren't particularly good at keeping any sort of schedule when it came to shifts. Noah Claw had held more regular hunts, but Marnet was sporadic about it. Marnet and I would run together when we were younger, but he'd gotten less and less interested in it the past year or two. I had just assumed it was the stress of leadership, but in retrospect, it should have been a big old red flag.

But this? This felt divine.

The run in the park had been nice, but we had to be careful about joggers or people walking dogs. A city park was natural because it wasn't pavement beneath our paws, but it was still carefully manicured. A national park, though? I hadn't felt this free in ages. Years, possibly. The grasses rustled around us as we dashed over the flats before hitting inclines again. There weren't many trees in these mountains; the landscape was dominated by scrub and shrubs. Farther on the horizon were the plateaus, sheer cliffs and stark rock faces. I imagine it would be an excellent place for an adventure if I were the rock-climbing sort of person.

Wolf as I was, I was still a bit of a city girl.

For a place like this? Maybe I would change.

A happy bark escaped me as I surged ahead of Remus again, charging towards a steep hill. I powered up it in leaps and bounds even though the loose soil and gravel shifted beneath my paws; my claws gripped the earth as I surged upwards. I could hear the sound of Remus' footfalls right behind me, and it only pushed me faster, tongue hanging out the side of my mouth as I galloped onwards. I was having the time of my life.

We came upon another flat, and this one had a tall spiky plant at the far side. I made this the finish line in my head and sprinted towards it. Remus might be larger and stronger, but strength often came with a lack of speed. My lithe form granted me the ability to sprint, even if I wouldn't be running any marathons any time soon. I could hear him trying his best, but there was no way he was catching me. Not today.

Once I reached my finish line, I slowed to a stop, sides heaving even as I wagged my tail. Remus was only a few strides behind me before he stopped and leaned to brush his muzzle over mine. My ears flicked forward, and I made a low noise deep in my chest, my tail swishing lazily behind my hocks. His arched high over his back in a casual display of his dominance, but I didn't mind. He wasn't trying to exert any power over me.

He leaned forward as our breathing started to regulate, his pink tongue flashing across my muzzle. If I could have laughed, I would have. Instead, I danced on my front feet, my muzzle darting forward as I gave him a gentle nip on the ear. He chuffed and arched his neck, lifting one paw to try to place it on my withers.

Feeling mischievous, I bowed low, slipping his paw off my dark coat. My tail waved in a playful invitation as I yipped, slapping my front paws against the ground again. A rough growl escaped the alpha as he leaned in, this time trying to grab my muzzle with open jaws. I mirror the motion, clashing teeth against teeth as we jaw sparred, my ears flickering back and forth as we exchanged playful snarls and growls. Feet stamped over the grasses as tails wagged. The morning was filled with the sound of happy wolves, and I wasn't sure I'd ever had such a wonderful time in this form. It might have even been better than my first shift; my heart felt so full and warm.

I broke away suddenly, scampering a few lengths across the flat. Remus quickly followed as I pricked my ears, tail high and waving in invitation. He brushed his bulk against the length of my side, combing our scents as he grabbed my scruff in a playful gesture. It was only a quick thing, and he circled me, sniffing my jaws, ear, and shoulders — it was like his wolf wanted to know each inch of me. He kept moving down my side, ensuring my scent and his were entirely mixed. My side, hip, even the base of my tail. The brush of his nose left me warm all over, making me shiver, a whine escaping from my throat. Instinct took over as I backed closer and lifted my tail slightly higher, but Remus' warmth was suddenly gone.

I whirled around, but instead of a silver wolf stood a human.

“Luna,” he growled, already lowering himself to the blanket of grass. “Come here.”

My wolf released control as I surged forward, suddenly on two feet as I reached forward to grab him by his arms. I immediately covered his mouth with my own, dragging him into a hungry kiss as he grabbed a handful of my ass. I whimpered, arching up into him. He was already half-hard; I could feel myself getting wetter with each squeeze of his hand and swipe of his tongue.

I pulled back, breathing sharply. “Should we go back?” I asked, even as Remus was already sinking into the sweet-smelling grass.

“Why?” Remus asked gruffly, pulling me down with him.

I couldn't think of a good argument, so I twisted to kiss him instead, even if the angle made my neck ache. I didn't care. Remus was warm and

responsive, making soft noises as his hands trailed over my shirt and slipped beneath the hem, splaying over my belly before squeezing one of my breasts. I hadn't put a bra on when I'd gotten up this morning, not when my only plans had been drinking coffee and spending time with Remus. As he tweaked a nipple, I was rather glad I hadn't.

He shifted his grip, teasing my other nipple, making me gasp. I tried to stifle the noise, pressing my mouth against his skin – Remus hadn't bothered putting a shirt on when he was chopping wood, and if I'd been glad for the view then, I was even more pleased now.

“I want to hear you,” the alpha rumbled, moving to start mouthing at the side of my neck.

I squirmed, trying to find my way into his lap. Remus grabbed me by both hips and dragged me closer; I rolled my hips down, shuddering at the press of his cock through my pajama bottoms. I felt like I'd already soaked through the thin fabric and my cheeks grew warm. “What if someone hears us?” I murmured back, glancing over my shoulder even as I rubbed against him again. The pressure felt divine against my clit, already swollen with arousal. Maybe, if I asked him nicely, he'd finger me here — hold me over until we got back.

Remus growled, the kisses turning to teeth as he raked them over my skin. I shuddered at the delicious sting. “Right,” he muttered, shifting to lavish attention to the other side of my neck. “Because we've got such an audience here.” He rolled his hips up as I stifled another groan, shuddering.

Even if I wanted to pull away right now, I didn't think I could. I could barely form coherent thoughts outside of how close Remus was – how good he smelled, fresh off a run – how good he'd feel inside me right now. “You never know,” I protested weakly, shivering again when his hands found the hem of my bottoms, slipping beneath to grope my ass. I lifted up on my knees, allowing him more access. He slid his palms further south at once, kneading my bottom before massaging my thighs. “I thought I saw hikers on the trail a little while ago. Some people go out for early morning hikes before the heat.”

Or something like that. I wasn't a hiker. What did I know?

*I know that it isn't private property, and there is a trail, and... and...*

Remus was making it harder and harder to keep a coherent line of thought. One hand shifted, and two fingers dipped into my folds. He grinned. “You're soaked, Luna,” he growled, nipping at my jawline. “You're so wet I

could smell it even if I didn't have a wolf's senses."

It should have been embarrassing but I simply whimpered, trying to angle my hips further back and invite him further in. *Finger me*, I willed him, curling my fingertips into his shoulders as I needed him to anchor me in place. Remus seemed to read my mind and pushed his digits in; I bit back a shuddering moan as he thrust his fingers back and forth, adding the third as I rocked back and forth as best I could from my angle. "Remus," I sighed, trying to twist or arch. I wanted more. I needed more.

"Hush," he chided me playfully. I could hear the smile dancing across his voice. "Someone might hear us. Keep your voice down unless you *want* someone to catch us."

His words lit a spark in me, heat traveling through my body like wildfire. My pussy clenched around his fingers as I shivered, the idea somehow both tantalizing and terrifying – it was almost like being bitten, both pleasure and pain. My chest tightened with anticipation and I shivered, rocking back into his hand again.

Remus made an intrigued noise and withdrew his hand. I could have cried for the loss, but he was already hushing me, pressing kisses to my lips and cheeks as he grabbed me by the hips, lifting me out of his lap. "Turn around," he murmured, trying to guide me.

It took my lust-addled brain a moment to process his request. "Why?" I mumbled, even as I did exactly as he asked. I landed on my hands and knees before folding my arms, cushioning my head as Remus draped over me like a blanket.

"Because I want to fuck you," he murmured, already sliding my bottoms over my bottom and halfway down my thighs. He slid his fingers back between my legs as I spread my knees further, whimpering quietly. "And this is the best angle without getting entirely naked – or grass everywhere."

"Oh. Right," I murmured, glad someone still had some sense knocking around. I heard the shuffle of fabric behind me, and then I felt the heat of flesh, Remus palming at my thigh with one hand while he pressed the tip of his cock to my entrance. I shuddered again, biting into my arm to prevent another groan from ripping free as I rocked back. I'd never done something like this before – not out in the open. There were always four walls and a locked door between my partner and me and the rest of the world.

There was something particularly thrilling about it.

It didn't take Remus long to join me fully, groaning as he fully seated



himself inside my warmth. He seemed to want to take a moment to savor our joining, but I didn't have the patience, no matter how luscious the fullness felt. I needed more. "Move." I had meant to say it simply, but it came out far more like a plea.

I could feel Remus smile as he tipped his head, kissing my neck as he dug his fingers into my hips. There was no slow build up this time; he set a brutal pace, the sound of skin slapping against skin almost deafening in the otherwise quiet outcrop. I whined and tipped my hips further up, urging him deeper. The angle was amazing, the head of his cock brushing against me in such a way that it sent little sparks up my spine with every thrust.

"Oh. Oh, fuck," I whimpered, rocking back.

"That's it," Remus murmured, nuzzling into my skin. "Good girl, Luna. You're so fucking good. You take me so perfect – fuck."

He seemed to run out of words, nipping at my exposed shoulder instead. The string of my tank had slid down my arm, exposing far more skin than it should have, but I didn't care. My orgasm was tantalizingly close but just out of reach; I could see the cliff's edge but I couldn't get there, like a moving horizon. "Remus, please."

He groaned softly and shifted his angle slightly. "You're so good, baby," he murmured, nipping at the shell of my ear. "It makes you wet, doesn't it? That we're out in the middle of nowhere, fucking like wild animals – fucking like *wolves* – and anyone could hear us. Find us. That's it, isn't it?" he crooned, slipping one hand from my thigh to between my legs, two fingers finding my clit. He pinched and squeezed.

My face felt like it was on fire as I moaned, nodding my head frantically. "Remus," I cried, grinding my hip against the offered friction. "Remus, yes, yes, please, I want— I *need*—"

Remus bit at my shoulder again, growling possessively. "You hear that, Luna? I think I can hear something. They'll see—"

I had no idea what he said after that. A hoarse noise tore through me as my orgasm hit like a freight train, my entire body trembling as I cried the man's name, clenching around his cock as I shook. It must have taken Remus off guard, because he followed me moments later, my name a chant on his lips as he ground his hips against mine, releasing his seed in hot, thick ropes inside me as we lay in the grass. It was only the sound of our panting and the gentle rustle of the grass after that; I stared outward into the ocean of green, a dazed smile on my face as I tried to get even two brain cells to work again.

*Damn, but I think Remus just gave me the best orgasm of my whole freaking life.*



# REMUS

## Guadalupe Mountains

### Texas - New Mexico Border

A ray of sunshine drifted gently across my face as I rolled over in the sheets, reaching over to pull Luna closer against my torso. Instead of finding her soft curves, my palm landed on empty sheets. Cool sheets. Perplexed, I peeled my eyes open, blinking slowly at the other side of the bed. Luna was nowhere to be seen. It was only me in the bedroom; a single sheet draped over my lower half and sunlight streaming in from the western wall. I paused, holding my breath still as I listened. Elsewhere in the cabin, I could hear the quiet sound of rustling — Luna was in the kitchen or the living room.

I relaxed back into the mattress, taking my time before I sat up and stretched my arms over my head. Perhaps I should have showered before getting in the sheets... after all, I had started my day not with a cup of coffee but with a regimen of chopping wood. After a moment, I shrugged it off. This bed had seen way worse than a bit of sweat. The thought made me smirk and wonder idly what Luna was up to. After our run and other *morning activities*, I felt much more relaxed than I had when I'd woken up. Dreams of Silverstreak Motors had roused me in a tense mood. Luna had soothed me, though, not the physical exercise (even if the 'exercise' with Luna had certainly helped, it was the fact that it was *Luna* that did the trick).

Curious what time it was, I reached for my phone. Fortunately, it was only midmorning; I'd gotten up quite early, and even with the workout and the run, I must not have slept that long. My relief was short-lived. That little red bubble indicated I'd missed several calls, and when I tapped on the phone icon, I saw they were from Fiona and Bane both. My mother was likely calling me to see if I'd answer, but my beta generally didn't call me unless there was information he needed to share. My stomach tightened as I debated if I ought to respond. He hadn't left any messages, nor had he texted — if it was urgent, I don't think he'd have just given a few calls and given up when I didn't answer.

I'd be back to reality and my alpha duties in just a few short hours, anyway. I didn't want to ruin the rest of my weekend with Luna, but... Bane

wouldn't waste my time. If he was calling me, there was a reason.

I had unlocked the screen, calling up Bane's contact, when the door creaked open. Luna's head poked through the gap, and she grinned as she spotted me sitting in the bed. "You're up!" she chirped, nudging the door open the rest of the way. "I have a surprise."

"Oh, do you?" I asked, forgetting all about the internal debate I was having. My phone was discarded on the bedside stand. I leaned back against the pillow as I stretched, not so subtly displaying the length of my body — or the fact that it was already growing interested in her presence again. A nap was all the time I needed to recharge. I could totally go again.

Luna giggled as she nudged the door open further and shook her head. "You, Remus Silverstreak, are an impossible tease." She walked into the room with a tray, carefully carrying it over to the bed. It was set gently in the middle; she didn't have to lean over me to put it down, but she did. That was the only brush of skin I got, though, because Luna carefully made her way to the other side of the bed, perching on the side of the mattress, so she didn't disrupt her breakfast offerings.

"You're not the only one who can make breakfast," she teased, popping a strawberry slice into her mouth. "Pancakes, bacon, eggs, and fruit. I thought you might be hungry." Luna winked and reached for a piece of bacon while I chuckled.

"And you aren't?" I teased back. The pancakes looked perfect, like something you'd see on the cover of a magazine or a cookbook. I couldn't resist getting a fork and knife to have a bite.

She shrugged one shoulder. "I am, but I wasn't the one chopping wood at the crack of dawn." She had me there, and more importantly, the pancakes tasted just as good as they looked — golden brown buttery perfection. I wanted to eat, not argue.

"I really like it up here," Luna murmured after a few bites. "It feels like an entirely different world. How did you find it?"

I offered her a small smile. "It was a company retreat my father held when I was a teenager. I wasn't involved when I was eighteen, but my mother still insisted I accompany her to these events so I got a feeling for how they should be run once my dad was gone." The memory made me pause. "Honestly, I'm glad she did. He wasn't around much longer after that, so if I'd waited, I'd might not have had the opportunity."

That I discovered this place was only a bonus. I took another bite. "If I

didn't have a business to run, I'd seriously consider moving here," I said, hoping I hadn't made the conversation too heavy.

Luna laughed and fixed me with an amused look. "I'm not sure I buy that. You couldn't have any of your fancy cars on these slopes," she teased. "What would you do without a spa just two minutes away?"

I huffed, trying not to smile. "You're lucky we're in bed, or I'd throw a blueberry at you."

She laughed again and shook her head. "Lucky me," she agreed. We ate for a few more moments in silence before she changed the topic. "I've been texting my mother a lot lately. It's nice to be able to talk to her, but... it kind of feels like time hasn't passed. It's... it's hard to explain. I still... I guess I still feel hurt, and I don't really want to. I know she's trying her best."

I put my silverware back on the tray, watching Luna carefully. "You're allowed to feel your feelings," I said. It sounded silly coming out of my mouth, but I got the feeling that Luna was often discouraged from feeling anything at all. That having any negative feelings wasn't allowed. "That's hardly your fault. A lot happened in the past, what... twelve years? You'd probably feel strange if you felt back to normal, too."

She paused and nodded, mulling that over. "I guess I'd also feel strange if she kept apologizing. That might feel even worse, come to think of it." She took a sip of her coffee and glanced back at me. "Dealing with family is a mystery, huh? Too bad no one ever provides you with a map." Luna's mouth tipped into a sideways smile as she shook her head. "I'm sure you could use one for your mother right about now."

I paused, my coffee cup halfway to my lips. "What's that supposed to mean?" I asked, feeling the hair on the back of my neck prickle.

Luna shrugged one shoulder. "She was pretty cold to you on the jet, but she seemed outright... mean to you on Friday. She didn't seem that antagonistic when I met her in Oklahoma."

I took a sip and sighed, placing the mug back down. It must have been worse than I thought if it was so obvious that everyone around me could see it. I could only hope the board members hadn't picked up too much on the tension. We'd been relatively well behaved at that meeting.

"She's upset I'm not following her counsel as closely as I used to," I admitted.

Luna made a sympathetic noise. "Surely she understands you're a grown man. Even if you were young when you inherited the Silverstreak pack,

you've been doing it for a while. The pack looks good from the outside, anyway."

I offered a smile, but I knew it was forced. "Not just that. Pack things, I mean." I shook my head. "I'm not sure if maybe it's *because* I'm getting older, but she's gotten stuck on the idea I need to find my true mate over the past year." Even saying it aloud made my nose wrinkle and I shook my head. "I have no intention of doing that," I said quickly, lest Luna get the wrong idea. "But no matter what I say to her, she's convinced that things will just magically get better for me and the pack if I find this person."

Luna made a face before she glanced back down at her hands. "She was at the Moonmate ceremony," she muttered softly. "She must realize that just because you find someone is no guarantee. Or what if they're very young? Or very old? Or... I don't know, they live in Mongolia, and you can't find them. And even when you do, you can't communicate because you can't speak the same language."

Admittedly, I had no idea if shifters lived in Mongolia, but I appreciated Luna's point. I often wondered the same thing myself — what were the real odds of finding your fated mate? Not only that, but they would be someone you could actually bond with. "What if they had already fallen in love with someone else and taken a mate years ago?" I countered with a shrug. "It's an old-fashioned convention. And I appreciate that my mother and father were true mates, and I know she still misses him terribly, but..." I shook my head. "It's not for me. She just can't see that."

After a moment, Luna looked back up from her hands and offered me a small smile. "I used to think it would solve all my woes," she admitted softly. "But in retrospect, even if Marnet hadn't turned out to be a shitty person, that would have made me dependent on him instead of ever dealing with the rest. It's... not a great way to think about a partner." She twisted her lips. "I'm not entirely sure what I'm trying to say, but I think it's along the lines of 'true mates don't magically fix things,' and I agree with you." She paused. "Oh, and I'm sorry your mom's trying to force you into a lifestyle you don't want. That's not fair."

We were silent for a moment, the conversation having gotten much heavier than I had meant for it to. When I glanced back over at Luna, she was studying her hands again, no longer looking at me. "You know, Remus... I know you said you don't want that, but if you feel like looking would make your mother treat you better and make your life easier—"



“No,” I said, not letting her finish the sentence. I sat up straight and reached for her hands across the tray, holding on to her tightly. “I don’t care if looking would make her lay off for a while. She won’t be happy until I find that person, even if they don’t exist. There’s no promise of that,” I growled softly. “I don’t want to chase some what-if. I don’t care if it means she’d leave me be. I want *you*, Luna, and no one else.”

Luna’s head whipped up, lips slightly parted. “Remus,” she said, her soft voice almost breathless. “What are you saying?”

“I don’t need a fated mate,” I said. I’d say it a hundred times if she needed me to. “I have you. You’re my chosen mate. I know it. My wolf knows it. That’s all I need.”

Luna sucked in a sharp breath, and for a moment, I thought I’d said the wrong thing. Moved too fast.

She moved all at once, curling her legs close as she slid across the bed to get closer, trying to drag me in for a kiss without knocking elbows or knees into the breakfast tray. I smiled into the affection, my hands already finding her hips, when my phone began to buzz again. I snarled.

“I swear,” I hissed, certain it was my mother. “It’s like she has a sixth sense for when I’m enjoying myself and wants to ruin it.”

Luna offered a sympathetic smile and started trying to kiss the grimace off my face, but her phone pinged a moment later. Surprised, she leaned back, looking where she’d left it on the dresser. “Probably just *my* mom,” she giggled, shrugging a shoulder. “I did say we’d been texting a lot. I told her I was busy this weekend, but not with what...”

Amused, I leaned in for another kiss, but her phone pinged again. And then again. And then again.

When Luna pulled back a second time, her amusement was replaced by open worry. “Okay,” she said quietly, “that’s weird. I should see who’s texting me.”

I frowned but let her go, folding my hands over my thighs as she carefully extracted herself from the bed and padded over to the dresser. When she opened the screen, her face went pale. “Holy shit,” she whispered, eyes scanning the screen. “Holy shit.”

I sat up, skirting around the tray to get to my feet. All those feelings of peace and relaxation seemed to drain right out of me, quickly replaced by a rising sense of adrenaline. “What’s wrong? Did something happen to Josie?”

Luna shook her head, silver eyes as huge as dinner platters. “No,” she

whispered. A moment later, she cleared her throat and tried again. “No. No, it’s not my mom. I set my Instagram account to alert me when Pam posts.”

“So?” I frowned. “I’m sure she posts all the time.” She was wealthy, well-dressed, and well-traveled. She was the kind of person that a social media platform was made for.

“Remus, look,” she said, handing her phone over to me. I squinted at the screen, trying to determine what I was looking at. It was a series of photos, most featuring both Pam and Marnet in some fancy restaurant. There was champagne and some expensive looking dishes, but none of it seemed all that important until I got to the last photo. It was Pam’s hand with a truly *massive* diamond. My train of thought screeched to a halt.

“Wait. Seriously?” I hissed, handing Luna’s phone back.

She gave a helpless shrug. “I thought he claimed that Skye girl as his mate? What do you think he did to her?” she murmured, staring back at the phone. More and more comments appeared on the post, wishing the best to the happy couple.

I shook my head. “That’s York’s problem.” It was probably a little callous of me, but the rest of us had avoided partnering with Marnet for a reason. Admittedly, that reason was that I thought he made poor choices, not because he’d dispose of representative pack members, but York had to realize he was putting the woman at risk. “Marnet just became much more problematic.”

Luna swallowed hard. “Because she’s a human?”

“That’s fucking part of it,” I bit out. “Maybe one or two wolves have married humans, but they weren’t alphas. This could be... fuck. Hugely problematic.” I had no idea if he planned to expose shifters or thought he could continue to hide his secret, but he was certainly playing a dangerous game. I ran my hand over my face. “Shit. Luna, if he proposed to her, that means he won’t just have access to the funds he sent her. He’ll have access to her inheritance, too.”

Marnet was making big moves.

*Marnet is preparing for war.*



**LUNA**

## Ulfric Family Home

### Outside of Austin, Texas

The workweek seemed to go by in a blur. A new job was always nerve-wrecking, but I was excited, too. Monday was full of paperwork, but by Tuesday, Zack was already showing me around the Silverstreak Motors' shop, explaining the order of operations, different machinery, things like that. I was supposed to spend the rest of the week shadowing him or my mom; I had plenty of garage experience, but the folks who frequented Robby's Garage were an entirely different sort of clientele than the people who brought their cars to be serviced directly here.

Things must have been going well, because today, I was given my first assignment. I didn't get to do much outside of diagnostics before the workday was done, but I was still grateful to have something to do with my hands, knowing Josie had taken a half-day to go home and prepare. The Ulfric family gathering was still a buzzing source of anxiety in my head. Originally, I had wished it was on Saturday instead of Friday evening, but now I was glad I didn't have to spend all of Saturday morning and afternoon angsty over it.

*How many people are going to be there?*

*Do they even know Josie has a daughter?*

*What if they don't like me? What if they think I'm still some kind of Lupus Claw loyalist, too?*

I couldn't chase any of the questions, or a hundred more would burst up like daisies from the earth in springtime. Giving myself a small shake, I glanced over my shoulder as we stood on the sidewalk in front of the small ranch home. It wasn't that different from my mother's place when I was a kid, except for the lack of a garage attached.

"You don't have to come with me," I told Remus, offering him a small smile. "I know there's a lot going on with Marnet right now, and this is family, so I'm sure I can handle it."

*I'm not sure I can handle it at all, but it's my mother's house and party, so it has to be a pretty safe bet, right? I don't **think** anyone is going to razz me, even if they might think—*

I stopped the thought before I could go down another anxious rabbit hole. I'm not sure if Remus could sense my thoughts or not, but he reached over and squeezed my shoulder, shaking his head. "Unless you kick me out, I'm not leaving," he replied, mouth slanted in a sideways grin. He was dressed casually — for Remus, anyways — in a pair of dark jeans and a button-down shirt with the sleeves rolled up, though he had opened the top two buttons. I tried not to let my gaze linger, but he caught me anyway and leaned in to kiss my cheek. "I'm exactly where I want to be. If I let Marnet dictate every moment and movement I make, he's already won."

After rolling the thought over in my head for a minute, I gave a nod. "Okay." There was nothing left to do but walk up onto the porch and open the door. The exterior seemed oddly calm, and for a moment, I wondered if I had blown up the size of the get-together in my head. Maybe Josie had only invited a few people over. *Maybe we're early? I thought she said people would start showing up at five.*

I glanced at my phone, but the screen read 5:37. It was my first week of work, so I didn't want to cut out early. I'd brought a change of clothing instead, so Remus and I could drive right to the house as soon as we left.

A gaggle of children whizzed around the side of the house, streaking through the front yard as they laughed. "Tag!" one squealed, and the flock burst apart as a new tagger was dubbed, quickly reforming into two groups to dash back around the other side of the house as they yelled and laughed. The group changed direction, hurtling the front stairs like track stars and whipping open the front door, barreling inside even as someone scolded them not to run in the house.

The sound of voices and laughter echoed out. *At least I have the right time*, I thought grimly, even though my hopes of a small event had been dashed. Another couple arrived as I stood in front of the house, and the pair both bowed their heads to Remus, murmuring a greeting. I didn't recognize either of them, but the woman greeted me with a bright smile. "You must be Luna!" she exclaimed, pulling me into a hug before I could confirm or deny it. "My name is Brooke! Josie is my favorite auntie."

When she pulled back, I realized she was probably the same age, give or take a few years. We could even be sisters — though cut in a cute pixie, her hair was dark and straight, and her eyes sparkled with silver, like mine and my mother's. *Must be a family trait.* The thought stunned me a little, but that didn't deter my cousin. She grabbed me by the hand, lacing our fingers

together. “C’mon! I’ll introduce you.” She paused only to call over her shoulder. “I’ll see you out back, Joe! I’m sure the boys are already at the grill.”

Her partner only waved, smiling as we made our way inside. It must be fairly usual for Brooke, because he didn’t seem alarmed at all, instead struck up a casual conversation with Remus as they ambled after us. I wasn’t able to watch for long, because suddenly we were in the hall, and I was being pulled down another. “This is my mother, Jackie, so she’d be your auntie. My dad, Bill, is probably out back,” Brooke hummed as Jackie — my aunt! — squeezed me tight and murmured something about how much I looked like Josie when she was younger.

It went on like that. There were more aunties and uncles and, of course, their children. Some of my older cousins even had children. As a family get-together, my mother had also invited her cousins, who also had children, and I quickly lost track of who was who and how we were all related.

“Don’t worry,” Brooke said with a sunny smile, handing me a biscuit. “I still forget some of the great-aunties, too, even though I’ve known them practically forever. Here, you need to try Hazel’s biscuits. They’re the best, and they’re all going to disappear before dinner is ready.”

“Thanks,” I said, smiling. Despite being entirely overwhelmed, it felt... It felt really nice. I’d been hugged by more people in the last hour than I probably even *knew* back in town. If my father had siblings or cousins, he never introduced them to any of us. He rarely hugged *me*, even right after I thought my mother died. It had started to feel normal, at some point, like hugging was something only a mother did, and once she was gone, that was a luxury I didn’t get. I took a deep breath, feeling something loosen in my chest. “I’m going to just step outside for some air, if that’s okay?”

“Of course!” Brooke chirped, squeezing my elbow. “This is probably a lot if you aren’t used to the Ulfric clan. I’m going to go get Joe and see if I can cream him at cornhole before Sam and Ellen take over, but feel free to come on over if you want.” She gave me one last squeeze and turned to work her way through the crowded kitchen towards the sliding doors out into the backyard.

I tried to file away the names, but I still had no idea who half these people were. Maybe more. I retreated to the corner of the kitchen to eat my biscuit in peace. Even without butter or honey, it was truly *divine*, just like Brooke had said.

IT DIDN'T TAKE my mother long to find me after that. She and several other women of various ages walked in, chatting and laughing as one of the other women told a story. Her eyes fell on me at once, and she motioned with one hand. "Luna! Luna, come here," she called.

I took my empty plate over, feeling a bit shy even though my mother was right there. She had a colorful mixed drink in one hand but wrapped the other around my shoulders in a quick hug, pulling me tight. "Luna, this is your Great-Aunt Annie; she used to babysit *me* when I was little," she said, laughing a little. The small, gray-haired woman gave me a warm smile, reaching both hands to wrap around one of mine.

"A pleasure to meet you, dear," she said, voice barely audible over the general hubbub in the kitchen. "Are you good with your hands like Josie here?"

I smiled, some of my nerves dissipating. "I certainly try to be," I replied, giving my mom a wink. "I am a mechanic too, though. She inspired me to be one."

Great-Aunt Annie gave my hand another squeeze, nodding. "Well, isn't that something. Most folks your age think they know everything, and there's nothing to learn from previous generations; it seems you have a good head on your shoulders, Luna."

Despite barely knowing this woman, I felt warm, and when I looked at Josie, the proud look in her eye only made me feel warmer. She went around the rest of the circle introducing her aunt and two cousins, when the front door all but slammed open. I couldn't help but jump, but my mother already had a wry look, clearly knowing who was arriving just by the heavy footfalls as they grew closer.

A large, lumberjack-looking man entered the kitchen, his piercing gray eyes scanning the crowd. No one looked alarmed by his presence, not at all. "I heard my granddaughter would be here," the man boomed as a few of the independent groups quieted. It took him all of five seconds to spot me next to my mother and came striding over, people moving out of his way like blades of grass. Even my mother stepped to the side, and the next thing I knew, the man was wrapping his thick arms around me in a bear hug, going so far as to lift me off my feet.

*This must be my grandfather.* It felt like a strange corner of my brain, like



I wasn't entirely there or watching two people embrace from across the room. Another thought occurred to me moments later. *I don't think my own father ever hugged me like this.*

It could have been a very sad thought, but instead, I only gave a little wiggle, almost overwhelmed by the warmth and love this man offered even though we'd only just met. Maybe my mother had told him about me, but stories were just that — stories. He didn't even seem to care he'd trapped my arms against my sides, disabling me from hugging back or that several other family members were watching. He held me back at arm's length when he set me down, a bright grin lighting up his weathered features.

I could feel my eyes prickle even as I beamed back at him; I couldn't help it. No matter how overwhelmed I felt, his smile was infectious. For the first time in twelve years, I didn't feel just *liked* or *tolerated*. I felt *wanted*. It was all I could do not to tear up entirely as the man looked me up and down.

"You look just like your grandmother," he finally said, voice gone a bit gravelly. His storm-gray eyes looked a bit misty, and I suddenly didn't feel so bad. "She'd have loved to meet you. I'm sure she's proud, all the same."

Even my mother had to clear her throat. "Well, Luna, I don't think I need to introduce you to your grandfather, James," she said. Her voice sounded a bit thick. "I'm going to go help Aunt Hazel at the stove, but if you need anything, just holler."

I looked back over at her. "Oh, do you want help?"

Josie flapped a hand in my direction. "Go meet people, Luna! Oh, there's punch on the back porch if you want some — or non-alcoholic lemonade if you'd prefer." She turned and pointed a finger at James. "Dad, don't hog all her time."

I FOUND THE PUNCH EVENTUALLY, but I think I talked to five more people on the way there. Before I knew it, Josie called everyone to supper, herding the entire clan outside to sit at tables set up on the porch and the lawn. My plate was heaped with home-cooked food, and even if I was starving, I didn't know how I could ever eat it all.

"Sorry I sort of abandoned you," I whispered as I leaned over to Remus, offering him a small smile. I hadn't seen hide nor hair of him since we'd walked into my mother's home. Honestly, between all the introductions, stories, and tastes of food being offered, I'd almost forgotten I'd come with

anyone.

Remus simply smiled back, taking a bit of potato salad. “Don’t apologize. You looked like you were having a good time. Besides, some of the boys out back offered me a beer, so I’ve been having a fine time.”

He smelled a bit like smoke like he’d been standing around the grill. His shoulders weren’t tense, so maybe he *had* been enjoying himself. That was good. I smiled back and dug into my dinner as James talked up front, regaling some of the younger pups around him with stories of the Ulfric clan and the Silverstreak pack. I didn’t mind listening to the lore either, though I suspected a few details were exaggerated for the wide eyes and ‘oohs’ and ‘aahs’ from the youngsters.

At some point, my grandfather’s eyes turned to me, and then they settled on Remus. “Speaking of Silverstreak, perhaps we should offer a toast to our visiting alpha.”

The entire table fell quiet as all attention slowly drifted towards the man. I felt embarrassed on his behalf, though he seemed perfectly calm. He tipped his head with a small smile. “There’s no need for that,” he replied smoothly. “I am more than happy to be welcomed as a guest into your household.”

There was a sparkle in James’ eye as he shook his head. “Well, I see our young alpha is far humbler than our former alpha; rest his soul.” He rumbled. “We’ll toast to the health and well-being of the Silverstreak pack then.”

Remus raised his glass, nodding. “I’ll toast to that.”

A chorus of ‘*cheers!*’ went around the table, and everyone fell back to talking. I felt like I could almost disappear amongst all the chatter, but I wasn’t lonely, far from it.

I EXCUSED myself between dinner and dessert; meeting everyone was good, but it was becoming overwhelming. There were too many names and faces and voices. I needed a bit of quiet. There was a sitting room or living room outside of the kitchen; plenty of chairs, and no one around. I was able to sit and breathe, staring at my feet as I tried to steady my heart rate.

*How many parties like this have I missed? Birthdays? Holidays? And it was only a few hours away. It wasn’t like Josie was in another country, or even in New England or something...*

I gave myself a slight shake, trying not to get too emotional. *I’m happy to be here now.* It didn’t sound as convincing as I wanted it to, but a familiar

female voice broke me from my concentration. I frowned as I glanced up; it wasn't my mother, but it still sounded... familiar. *One of my aunts? A cousin?*

Even though it sounded like a conversation, there was only one voice. It took me a moment to realize she was likely on the phone, the words becoming clearer as they moved through the kitchen. "Honestly, I can't believe that man is here. He should be taking care of this pack, not kicking back at some picnic. He's either a fool or an egomaniac." A pause. "I know! I don't know why she brought him here. I don't know why Josie brought *her* here. She hasn't been here that long. What if she's a spy? She doesn't even have a Silverstreak mark!"

My heart skipped a beat. *Are they talking about me? Are they talking about Remus?* My mind whirled, barely able to process when someone rounded the corner. I flinched, thinking it must be the person on the phone — but it was James.

"There you are!" he said, extending a hand to pull me out of the chair. "I've been looking for you. Do you want to go for a run? I'll show you around these parts. Much more wolf-friendly than Austin." My grandfather grinned.

I paused. "I wouldn't want to impose," I said. My voice sounded weak even to my ears.

James snorted. "You aren't imposing; you're family!" His expression became a little more somber. "Your mother told me what things were like back in Oklahoma, and that just wasn't right. I thought Arden was more honest than that, and I should have known better, Noah's man or not. You should have been brought up in a loving home, Luna. I am deeply sorry for that."

It was all I could do to keep my mouth from dropping open. The look on his face had gone even darker, and I felt the need to comfort him, even if he was the one apologizing. I reached out and took his hand in mine, squeezing gently. "It's okay," I said and then caught myself. "Well. What Arden did wasn't okay, but I'm doing better now. Things are getting a lot better. And this run will only be a step in the right direction."

James gave me a long look before nodding, guiding me back towards the kitchen. "C'mon. Let's get your mother and go for that run."

"And Remus too?" I asked, trying not to sound too hopeful.

"Of course," my grandfather said, totally unconcerned. "Remus too."



# REMUS

## Ulfric Family Home

### Outside of Austin, Texas

I fell back as the Ulfrics loped on ahead of me, darting through shrubs and bushes in the area outside of Josie's home. Several other family members joined when Ulfric announced he and Luna were running; Luna invited me, but it still felt wrong to barge in while she had bonding time with her family. After everything I'd seen in Oklahoma — and I could only imagine what went on that I *couldn't* see — she deserved every minute of this undisturbed.

*How long has it been since the Silverstreak family has had a run like this? Or even a family gathering?* My ears fell flat as I thought over the last few years, racking my brain for even a small get-together. At best, I'd taken my mother out to dinner the year before last, and Tala had come along to celebrate. It was a nice restaurant and we'd surprised her with a nice dessert, but that was it — no other family members. No run afterward, not even in the park. Now that I thought about it, I wasn't sure we'd had a gathering since my father's funeral.

I hadn't run with my mother since shortly after that event, either. *Maybe I should ask her to run with me. Maybe that would help smooth some things over.* It wouldn't fix everything, but perhaps the earth beneath her paws would settle some of her nerves. Maybe it would help her see I was still a wolf, like any other wolf, alpha or not. I was still the same wolf who'd run with her as a pup; I grew, but I was still Remus.

I was contemplating the practicality of organizing something for the Silverstreak family when Luna began drifting backward towards me. She glanced over her shoulder, pale eyes sparkling as she bumped into me, giving me a little check with her hips. Her ears flicked back and forth; she even gave me a little flick with her tail before speeding up again, dashing forward to catch up with family.

*She's flirting with me.* I snorted softly, a little surprised by how brazen she was being — but I certainly didn't mind. If it wasn't the first run with her family, I would have dashed right after her, but this was for her. I stayed where I was, loping easily so I wouldn't be left behind.

DESSERT WAS SERVED after we returned from the run.

Calling it just ‘dessert’ was putting it lightly. There were at least seven different dishes to choose from, each brought by someone and each claiming to be a family recipe. I settled for a chocolate chip cookie as someone finally coerced me into trying some of Josie’s famous punch. Luna and her mother were bent over the stovetop, watching something bubble away.

Not wanting to ruin the moment, I wandered back out into the yard. If I managed to have a few conversations with a few folks earlier, any hope of anonymity was gone now after James’ toast. Most ‘conversations’ I tried to join now turned into unmasked reverence in varying degrees. Even if I asked my packmates not to or insisted I just wanted to talk, everyone seemed vaguely unnerved now. Eventually, I decided I’d rather not make Luna’s family uncomfortable and found an empty lawn chair to fill, content to sip my glass and watch others mingle until Luna was done with whatever she was cooking.

“Remus!”

A gruff voice interrupted my thoughts and I glanced up. James waved a hand, motioning me over. “It’s getting dark. I’m getting wood to start a bonfire for the pups. I could use an extra hand.”

“Of course,” I said, getting to my feet without another thought. I emptied my glass and set it on a nearby table before trailing after the family patriarch. The woodpile wasn’t far from the yard, but it looked like Josie had enough stored away for an entire winter, not just a few summer fires. Most of the logs weren’t yet split, but there was an axe, a splitting maul, and a stump. I grinned and started to gather a few logs to be taken care of.

James watched me keenly for a few moments before speaking back up. “The pack’s been doing well over the past few years, Remus. Feel like I’ve hardly seen you, though.”

There wasn’t much I could say to that. James had retired as beta before my father passed; it wasn’t as if he had to pass on much information to myself or Bane. The man working with him immediately prior had done that. I simply nodded and began to chop pieces of wood.

“I’m going to speak frankly, Remus, like I would my own son.”

I paused for a moment, glancing over. Compared to how the rest of the evening had been going, it came as a surprise. “I’d welcome it,” I said,

turning to return to the task at hand. "Please do."

"Good," he said, still a bit gruff. "You need to spend more time with your pack, lad. I know things are always going on with the company, but fractures are starting to appear. Good finances only go so far." He sighed and shook his head. "Your beta should have picked up on some of that, too, but you've both been busy. Some folks feel rejected. While your elders and older packmates just look at the results, younger packmates still need an alpha's presence." He paused. "I know it was a bit different when your father was alpha. But times change. People don't just assume a man knows what he's doing because he's an alpha, and that's probably for the best."

I paused for a moment, digesting the information he'd just dispensed. "Do you think I should have waited to take the Lupus Claw territory?" I asked. The question surprised me the moment it came out. I'd been absolutely sure of the decision until now, but listening to what James had to say... perhaps *my* pack hadn't been ready for it, and I simply hadn't seen it.

James made a thoughtful noise, staring up at the darkening sky before he looked back at me. "No." He shook his head. "I don't think that's it." He paused for another beat. "Have you talked to your mother about it?"

I scowled before I could stop myself and reached for another piece of wood. "No," I said, splitting another log. "She's been a bit... cool with me since we went to Oklahoma." I paused, about to detail my mother's insistence that I find my one true mate, no matter what it took, but closed my mouth and shook my head. This wasn't the place for that. It fell under 'things are tense' anyway.

James made a knowing sound, nodding his head. "Fiona has always been a spitfire. Nothing could change that," he said. "Stubborn and determined are two sides of the same coin. She can be a bit fiery sometimes, but her heart's always been in the right place. You know she was at your father's side for almost all things pack related. She even spearheaded some of those projects herself. She's an asset to Silverstreak, alpha's mate or not."

I knew that. I did. It would be easier to deal with her if she wasn't so damn good at what she did. "At the heart of things, Remus, your leadership is still one to be respected and revered, even. But sometimes, an alpha has to make his own sacrifices for the good of the pack. That's what being an alpha is." James said, bending down to pick up some of the logs I'd split, hefting them over his shoulder. I set the axe back down and followed his gaze, watching his family in the distance. Several of the children were still dashing



around. Luna and her mother had made it back outside, and she offered us both a cheery wave before turning back to the person she was talking to.

James hummed. "She's a sweet girl," he said fondly. After a moment, he looked back at me. "But a distraction nonetheless." He said nothing else as he began to bring his pile back to the lawn and the family, the children shrieking with joy as they realized what his presence must mean. I watched him go. *That's what Fiona's been saying. Same message, different words.*

I knew a few wolves were a bit unhappy, but was there general unrest in the pack? How had I not noticed? *Maybe I am spreading myself too thin.* Frowning, I bent down to start picking up the rest of the split logs when my phone rang. I fumbled and dropped a few as I fished it out, frowning at the name on the phone. *Seff.*

"Seff?"

"Marnet called me," the other alpha said with no preamble.

I almost couldn't believe what I just heard. "*What?*"

Seff exhaled sharply. "Just a few minutes ago, Remus. He called and asked if I'd be smart and join him alongside Gith and York. He said he had big plans. Indicated I'd be sorry if I didn't join."

"Bastard," I growled, shaking my head. "Shit. Did he tell you anything else?"

"No. The moment he figured I had a bit of hesitation, he hung up. I can keep digging, if you want, but I'm not sure how much I'm going to be able to turn up. I think you need to come back here."

"Do Tala and Bane know?"

"Yes, I've let them know," Seff confirmed. "But seriously, Remus, if he's gathering other alphas on his side..."

"I'll call back within an hour, okay? I'm not in a good location to discuss this."

"Ah." Seff sounded slightly relieved. "That's fine. I'll leave my ringer on loud."

"Make sure Tala and Bane are around so we can all discuss."

"Will do."

I hung up and shoved my phone back in my pocket, quickly gathering the wood in my arms. I brought it over to the fire James was starting, dropping it on the pile he'd started. "Thank you for your hospitality, James," I said, aware of all the children nearby. "Something's come up I need to deal with, but I appreciate it."

“I understand,” said James, nodding slowly. “It was good to see you, Remus.”

I glanced around the party, spotting Luna still by the dessert table. I hurried over, grabbing her by the wrist to tug her away. There was no real privacy on the back deck, and I didn’t want every wolf here overhearing me. “I need to go back to my house to deal with something. There’s been a small emergency,” I told her, not wanting to cause too much worry.

She frowned anyway, searching my face. “Are you okay? Do you need me to come with you?”

“No,” I replied, shaking my head. I gave her hand a little squeeze. “I just need to deal with it now, or it will be even more of a headache when the morning comes. You’ll be all right here?”

“I’ll be fine,” Luna said, offering a small smile. “I’m sure someone can give me a ride.”

“Nonsense. Just give me a call and I’ll send a driver.” I leaned in, kissing her on the lips, perhaps a bit harder than I meant. I didn’t care. I didn’t care several aunts and cousins saw, either. “Thank you for understanding.”

She gave me a little wave as I darted back through the house and out front, already hurrying towards my car. A hundred different scenarios ran through my head as I looked into the rearview mirror, the Ulfric property disappearing into the night. *Damnit. I wonder how long it will take Fiona to hear about this?*



**LUNA**

## Ulfric Family Home

### Outside of Austin, Texas

Remus had left several minutes ago, but I could still feel the tingle of his lips against mine. He'd kissed me like it was second nature. Like, of course he would. I touched my mouth and glanced around; seeing a few curious looks from my cousins, but nothing more than that, except the look on James' face. My grandfather's expression was positively stormy. *Uh-oh.*

My mother appeared out of nowhere, and I had to fight the urge to jump as she wrapped her fingers around my wrist. "Luna! Come help me in the kitchen for a second," she said, nodding back towards the house.

I paused for a moment, looking over at the chocolate pudding we'd just made. Several servings had already been taken, but the bowl was hardly empty. I gave my mother a confused look, but she gave me a little tug. "Please, Luna?"

"Okay," I said quietly, allowing her to lead me back inside. Once inside the kitchen, she began fiddling with the coffee maker.

"I will need to make more than one pot for all these folks," she said.

"I don't think you need me to help you make coffee?" I asked, still a bit perplexed about why she'd brought me inside.

Josie paused, glancing at me over her shoulder. "I wanted to talk to you with as much privacy as we could get in a crowd of shifters," she replied, eyes briefly drifting to the sliding doors. Everyone still seemed to be having a grand old time outside. A small crowd had gathered around the bonfire my grandfather had built.

"Okay..." I said for what felt like the seventeenth time. A few of those butterflies kicked back up in my gut.

Josie set the pot on the percolator and turned to face me. "What's going on between you and Remus, honey?"

"What?" My reaction was automatic. I shrunk back, my shoulders stiffening. "What do you mean?"

My mother sighed, the corner of her mouth twitching. "I'm not asking for details, Luna. You're a grown woman. But I am asking you about the nature

of your relationship. How do you feel about him?”

“I don’t know yet,” I huffed, feeling more and more like a cornered animal. “It’s not something we’ve discussed at length, but I like him, and I like spending time with him, and that’s enough for me right now.”

“Of course,” Josie said, holding her palms up in mock surrender. “I’m not judging you, Luna. However you feel is valid. But I can’t protect you if I don’t know what it is exactly you’re getting yourself into.”

My wolf raised her hackles, and I growled softly before I stopped myself. “I’m a grown-ass woman, mom,” I snapped, the nerves swallowed up by a hot flame of anger. “And I’ve been taking care of myself for the last twelve years. It’s kind of late to step in and start now.”

As soon as I said it, I felt terrible. I wish I could go back a few seconds in time and take those words back, prohibit them from ever leaving my mouth. My mother’s face darkened slightly as she glanced down; I felt worse. My heart lurched, lodging itself somewhere in my throat. “I’m sorry,” I croaked. “That was mean.”

“No,” Josie said, shaking her head and looking back up. “No, you’re right. That was deserved. But this is bigger than you and me. There are clan politics you need to be aware of, Luna.”

*Politics?* I frowned and shook my head. “What’s going on between Remus and me is a personal matter. I have nothing to do with how he runs the pack or Silverstreak Motors, and I don’t intend to change that, either. This has nothing to do with the pack.”

Even as the words came out of my mouth, I realized how silly that was. Remus was the alpha. Single or taken, that wouldn’t change. The pack was always going to be involved because Remus was involved. A mate, or a relationship, or whatever this was — it could influence pack dynamics whether I meant it to or not.

Josie must have seen the realization wash over my face because she offered me a rueful smile. “Do you know what happens when an alpha and his fated mate make their union public?”

I shook my head. I wasn’t alive when Noah and Kate Claw joined (I wasn’t sure if they were fated, either). Marnet *claimed* that Skye was his fated mate at the Moonmate ceremony, but it had been a lie. “I guess I’ve heard the tales,” I said, shrugging one shoulder. “That kind of bond offers strength to a pack. It’s sort of magic, in a way.” I had no idea how true that was. I looked back over at my mother. “What does that have to do with

Remus and me?”

“It has everything to do with you, baby. You and Remus both. His continued leadership of the Silverstreak pack.” She sighed and shook her head, turning back to her coffee as the pot neared completion. “Look, Luna, telling you what to do or how to live your life is the last thing I want to do. All I want is to get to know you again. But this is something that could lead to us getting separated again, and I’d never forgive myself if I let you march into that without the information, at the very least. I’ll respect your decisions, but you need all the information. You do.”

I stared at the back of my mother’s head, unsure what to make of that. I knew Remus’ mother had been bothering him about finding his fated mate, but we had discussed that. First of all, there was no guarantee he’d ever find that person, and second of all, he promised me he had no interest in trying.

“Josie!” Someone opened the sliding door and poked their head into the kitchen. I recognized her as one of my mother’s cousins she’d introduced earlier, though I couldn’t quite recall her name. “Is that coffee done yet, hon?”

“Just about!” my mother called back, flicking the machine off. “Just getting the cream and sugar, I’ll be right out.”

“Don’t take too long! Kat brought everything for Smores!”

The door slid shut and my mother stepped over, wrapping her arms around me in a quick hug. “Luna, I love you, okay? I’ve seen the way Remus looks at you, and I’ve seen the way you watch him — but you have to understand that it’s not going to be easy if you want to pursue this. He’s the alpha, and you’re from a rival clan. Some wolves will never see past that, no matter that your family is all Silverstreak wolves. And with some jerk posting those videos from the Moonmate ceremony...” She trailed off and shook her head.

“Josie!” someone called from outside. My mother grimaced and pulled away, gathering up her coffee pot. “Could you grab the cream and sugar?”

“Sure,” I said, slightly dazed by the information she’d just dropped on me. I grabbed the sugar dish and the creamer in a daze, following after my mother as I replayed everything she’d just said. That was the last thing I expected to hear tonight, much less from *her*. Maybe it came from a place of love. From wanting to protect me... but I wasn’t the same girl my mother had left in Oklahoma twelve years ago. I was starting to get whiplash; one minute she saw me as a grown adult to be proud of, and the next, I was just the same

little girl she needed to protect. I couldn't be both. I set the ceramics down on the table and stared at them blankly.

*I feel like she's judging me. She's judging me, just like everyone else has. She's going to put me in a box just like everyone else back at Lupus Claw. It won't matter if she finds out more later because her mind will be made up. It's going to be like Oklahoma all over again, and nothing will matter. I'll be trapped in this terrible, awful cycle for the rest of my life.*

I sucked in a sharp breath, pain prickling across my neck. I spun back towards the house — I couldn't deal with this right now. I couldn't breathe. The world was starting to go fuzzy around the edges, like my vision was closing down to pinpricks. My heart felt like it was going to leap out of my chest at any moment — it was as if I was about to have a heart attack, be sick to my stomach, or maybe both.

“Luna!” my grandfather called.

I broke into a run, darting into the kitchen and through the hall. *I need to get the hell out of here.*

I RAN AS FAST as I could down the sidewalk, even if I had no idea where I was. The idea of shifting again briefly floated across my mind, but I had no idea how many of my mother's neighbors were also werewolves and how many were humans. The last thing I needed was some frightened old lady calling animal control on me — or worse.

It was well past dark, but the moon was near full, providing me with at least a bit of light. The neighborhood blurred by in a mix of trees, shrubs, and open spaces. They were either fields or golf courses; I couldn't be sure which. I didn't care. I just wanted to get as far away from that house as possible and all the people inside. The moonlight was reflecting off of something up ahead and I slowed slightly, trying to get a good look at it. There was a tree in the way, so I drifted slightly to the left — right over the side of the curb.

My ankle twisted and bent as I felt something snap. I shrieked, crumpling into a ball on the pavement, trying to cradle my throbbing joint. “Ow!” I yelled, whimpering and rocking. “Oh, hell. Crap.” A string of curses followed as I rubbed my leg frantically, but pain didn't stop radiating up my leg.

*I can't sit here in the damn road. Someone might hit me.*



I struggled to my feet and almost fell back over as soon as I put weight on my left foot, tears springing into my eyes. I hobbled back onto the sidewalk, careful to step *over* the curb as I limped to the grass on the other side and lay down. “Ow,” I whimpered again, looking in the direction I’d come from.

I had no idea how far I’d run. I was a bit winded, but that was it. That didn’t tell me anything. I didn’t recognize any landmarks, either. *Even if I could limp my way back to my mother’s house, do I want to be there right now?*

The thought made me snort. The answer was immediately obvious. *No.* Even if it wasn’t that far, I didn’t want to go. Josie would probably give me ice, and someone probably knew how to wrap a bandage, but I didn’t care. I didn’t want to be there.

*Fuck it.* I reached into my pocket for my phone — for one terrifying moment, I thought maybe I’d lost it when I was running, but I’d simply placed it on the opposite side. I tapped the little black icon and opened up a rideshare app. It would take the nearest driver about twenty minutes to get to my location, but that was fine. It was a nice night. I’d rather sit for twenty minutes in the dark than try to make it to my mother’s and contend with the Ulfric clan.

With a ride ordered, I set my phone next to me and sat back, staring up at the moon. My heart was still racing, but I didn’t feel like my vision was about to blackout anymore. “How the hell did everything turn to shit so quick?” I asked the glowing orb, emotions warring in my chest. “I haven’t even been here a month. All I’ve done so far is get a damn *job*. You know, like a responsible adult. What the hell did I *do*?”

I had loved Marnet Claw, once. That was true. But hadn’t I been punished enough for that? He’d betrayed me in the worst way possible, and all I wanted to do was get past that. It felt like the universe was intent on making me remember it. Like there was some lesson to learn that I still hadn’t figured out. A soft growl of frustration escaped me and I flopped backward into the grass.

I had tried *so hard* to fit into Lupus Claw — I really, honestly thought they were my pack. I wanted to get along. I wanted to be useful. I wanted only to work with Marnet and serve the pack. As soon as things got rough, everyone assumed it was *me* who had betrayed them... but as soon as I got to Silverstreak, everyone assumed I must still be loyal to Marnet and Lupus Claw!

“You can’t have it both ways!” I shouted to no one in particular, knowing that wasn’t even true. Two different sets of wolves. Two different outlooks. It still didn’t feel fair — not at all. I was supposed to have family here in Texas, and what did I get? A group of people who looked at me with suspicion. A group of people who were ready to banish me at the drop of a hat for the sake of pack politics.

I sat up and looked at my phone — the driver was turning onto the road. I grimaced and started struggling to my feet, pain lancing through me as I tried to put weight on my ankle again. Opening the app back up, I quickly changed my destination. It had been Remus’ apartment, but something was wrong with my ankle.

The blue Kia slowed and I limped forward, offering a watery smile. The young woman whipped her door open, hurrying over to offer a shoulder. “Run gone wrong, huh?” she said sympathetically, opening the door for me. She held my arm as I gingerly let myself inside, careful not to step on my injured foot again.

“Something like that,” I replied, sounding slightly strangled. “It’s just been one of those days.”

“I’m sorry to hear that,” the woman said, closing the passenger door before getting back into the driver’s seat. “Well, the hospital isn’t far. I’m sure they’ll patch you right up,” she said, pulling into a driveway to turn around and head off in our new direction.

“Thanks,” I said, leaning against the window as I watched the Texas landscape whiz by. I cradled my phone, opening my texts — but I couldn’t think of a single person I wanted to text. Why would I bother telling anyone in my family? I was surrounded by people, but they weren’t people I could rely on.

*What’s new?*

The bitter thought crossed my mind, and after a moment, I opted to let it stay. *I’ll take care of this myself. It’s nothing new.*

After all, I was the only person left who hadn’t let me down.



# REMUS

## Remus' Penthouse Suite

### Austin, Texas

I sat on my couch, my phone on the coffee table. There was a glass of whiskey in my hand, but I hadn't taken a sip. On the other side of the line were Bane, Seff, and Tala in Oklahoma.

"I tried to get as much out of him as I could," Seff said, sounding as tired as I felt. "But you know how he is. Even before all of this, Marnet always had to be in charge of a conversation. If I tried to ask a question, he just pivoted. If I tried to corner him, he just got evasive. Honestly, it's not even like asking for more information is out of character for me." He trailed off with a grumble.

It was almost enough to make me smile, but the corners of my mouth felt too heavy. "Was it the same number Luna shared with Tala earlier?"

"Yes," he confirmed.

"Damn." We couldn't get any new information out of that, then.

There was shuffling in the speaker, and then Seff sighed. "I keep thinking about why he'd suddenly be bold enough to approach Gith and York after everything. The only thing that's changed is that engagement announcement, Remus. I think he's got his claws into Pam Whitewater's inheritance."

I stared at my whiskey glass, watching the ice float lazily in the amber liquid. The thought kept cropping up in my skull, too — to each question and wondering if that was the answer. Marnet had probably just doubled his fortune. I didn't know the exact value of either the Whitewater fortune or Lupus Claw's assets, but given the nature of Pam's family, I had to assume hers was larger.

"Maybe Marnet is paying them off," I speculated morosely. "Marnet did dump one of York's packmates for Pam, and Gith... well, he rarely wants to get involved with anything. But every man has his price, doesn't he?"

*I wonder how much Gith's loyalty costs.*

"Even if he's paid them off, I doubt any sort of loyalty will last." Bane snorted. I could hear him shake his head. "Gith is exactly as you said, and York? York's a damn fool. It's only a matter of time before he gets another wild idea and thinks he can get more money or trick Marnet for more power

or who knows what.”

He wasn't wrong — York's ambitions often exceeded his skill or ability, but the man's attempts had generally been laughable before, not particularly dangerous. But now? James' frank conversation with me had called everything into question. The youngest members of my pack felt insecure and uncared for — and they were the pack's foundation. With no new blood, a pack would die out. If I hadn't seen that... what else had I missed?

“Tala, how have things been proceeding in Oklahoma? How is Claw & Co. Construction doing?” I asked. I couldn't let Marnet dictate this entire conversation.

The phone shuffled as someone pushed it closer to the construction company's new CEO. “Things are going exactly as we discussed,” she answered confidently. “The finances are a mess, as I noted earlier, but I've been untangling them, and everything is quite workable. No issues at the firm, and we've had plenty of new clients. No new issues with the territory, either. One former council member has decided to offer his loyalty to you when you're next in Oklahoma, but the rest are still holding out. No change for better or for worse in that regard.”

I growled softly. “Banish them.”

“What was that?”

I leaned forward on the couch, my lips peeled back in a snarl even though it was not a video chat. “Those high-ranking members? Banish them. They can all go, save the one who's decided to submit, and keep him under surveillance. The rest of them have had more than long enough to make up their minds.” We didn't need to waste resources on shifters that were remaining loyal to Marnet until the man's dying breath. There would be no changing their minds. We'd gotten everyone we could.

I frowned. “Bane?”

The phone shuffled again as it was pushed back. “Yeah?”

“Schedule a flight out here in the morning. I need you back in Texas. It seems like Tala has everything under control where she is.”

“Understood,” Bane replied.

“Is there anything else?” I asked the group. There was a chorus of ‘no,’ and I shook my head. “Fine. Bane, I'll see you tomorrow. Tala, Seff, keep doing research. I'll do the same, and we'll see what we can turn up. I'll be in touch.”

I sat there as the call ended, finally leaning forward to set my whiskey

down. Initially, it had seemed like a good idea to help settle my nerves, but once poured, I wanted nothing to do with it. I stared out across my apartment at the Austin city skyline, lit up by the moon and the twinkling of illuminated windows.

*LUNA STILL HASN'T TEXTED. Maybe she decided to stay over at her mother's for the night?* I didn't know much about the Ulfrics, but it could easily be an all-night affair if they partied anything like the Silverstreaks used to. I glanced over at my phone, debating if I ought to check in when my door swung open.

I was on my feet instantly, every muscle in my body stiffening when my mother let herself in — and she wasn't alone. I'd given her a key ages ago for emergencies only; she'd never showed up unannounced at my apartment before, not even to check in and see how things were, not even after my father died. I bristled further. "What's wrong?" I asked cautiously, eyes flicking from Fiona to the three others she'd brought with her. Each was an elder who'd served on my father's high council.

*This can't be good.*

My mother gave me an apologetic look, though it didn't seem particularly earnest to me. "I am sorry to just burst in on you, Remus, but this was something that couldn't wait. We need to speak to you at once."

I hesitated but motioned with an arm. "Well, come in," I grunted. "No need to stand in my foyer. There is a dining table over here — I can get drinks."

The other three shuffled in as my mother led them to the table. I hadn't made it halfway to the kitchen when one of them cut in. "There's no need for that," he said gruffly. I frowned as I realized it was Mr. Smythe; I'd seen him about a week or two prior. His car was being serviced in the garage; he had been the man concerned that Luna might be working on his car instead of an employee.

*If he had some kind of problem, why didn't he just bring it up then?*

"Fine," I said, forcing some kind of smile. I could still be a gracious host, even if my guests were rude and unannounced. I joined the others at the table, and no sooner had I sat in my chair did Mr. Smythe begin to speak again.

"It is Friday evening and I have better things to do, so I will get straight to the point, Remus. None of us agree with how you went about taking over the

Oklahoma territory — and during a Moonmate ceremony, no less! There are *rules*, boy, and you broke them.” The other three — my mother included — all nodded silently, though none of them would meet my eyes. My wolf stirred and growled, his ears flattening against his skull. Maybe it was the *boy* comment, but my patience for these elders flew right out the window.

“If that’s all you came here to tell me, you’re wasting your time,” I rumbled, taking my time to look at each person directly. “My mother has made her stance on that very clear, but the opportunity presented itself, and I had to take it. Marnet is dangerous in a position of power, as we’ve all seen. The pack is better off for it.”

Getting too close to humans wasn’t just dangerous for the wolves of the Lupus Claw pack. It was dangerous for us all.

Mr. Smythe snorted and shook his head — I wasn’t sure if I imagined it, but I was pretty sure my mother also smirked. “I don’t agree,” he growled back. “We don’t agree.”

“No, we do not,” said Ms. Green, finally speaking up. She flattened her hands against the table. “If he were as dangerous as you said, then more opportunities would come down the road when our pack was stronger and more capable of taking on the challenge.” She clicked her tongue against her cheek and shook her head, one of her gray curls falling loose. “This would have gone much more smoothly if you’d found your fated mate first.”

*What? That’s what this is about?* My gaze flickered from Ms. Green’s drawn cheeks back to my mother’s face; she still wouldn’t look directly at me, but I was certain there was a slight smile on her lips now. My wolf bristled further as my frustration deepened. *Is this all her doing? Did she rile these elders up for this?*

No one noticed that I was barely listening or that my mother wouldn’t meet my gaze. Mr. Cobb cleared his throat. The man had been old when I was a pup, so he could only be called ancient now. Even for a werewolf, he looked quite elderly. “We’ve all thought about this; more time and resources need to be spent on our alpha finding his mate. It’s not just a benefit to him — it’s a benefit to us all,” he said, his voice quivering a little.

Again, all four nodded silently, looking at one another instead of at me. I felt like an intervention was being staged, and no one was willing to tell me as much.

“Yes,” Mr. Smythe said. “Yes, that is what needs to be done. That’s what your grandfather did, even before he became alpha. That’s what your father



did during his first year of alphaship. When it was clear his mate was not here, he traveled; I was along with him as he searched. He had to travel the world. Found Fiona in London.” He sat up a little straighter, his broad shoulders not so stooped; it was a memory he was clearly proud of.

I resisted the urge to snarl. *So my mother’s London story was the true one — and all that bullshit she fed me before the Moonmate ceremony was a total lie. She was just trying to manipulate me into looking for a girl when I didn’t want to.*

Before I could confront her, Fiona looked up, waving Mr. Smythe off with a hand. “This isn’t about me right now, Barry,” she murmured. Despite her words, she was looking terribly pleased. She turned and finally looked at me, but there was no shame or guilt in her eye. “That Moonmate ceremony is in the past now, Remus. We can move forward. We *need* to move forward. We need to look to the future.”

I bristled, flexing my hands against the table. “I do not *need* a partner to take care of this pack,” I insisted, deeply displeased they all found my ability to rule contingent on whether or not I was mated.

“Are you sure about that?” Ms. Green asked, brushing her hair from her eyes. Despite her age, they were as clear as ever. “I mean no disrespect, Remus, but how would you know? You aren’t mated. You have nothing to compare your current state to. We need to be candid.”

I narrowed my eyes, studying her for a moment. So far, I felt like she was the only one who’d made a valid point — who was willing to meet me anywhere between my stance and hers. “Go on,” I said, at least willing to hear what she had to say.

“You are making a mistake, and I don’t think you even realize it, but it will affect the rest of your life, and it would not be responsible of me to see it and say nothing.” *Here we go.* I braced myself. I knew the next words that would come out of her mouth. “I’ve heard a woman is living with you, Remus. It will be impossible to find your mate, no matter how you try to explain it.”

“I met her,” Mr. Smythe butt in, leaning forward on his arms. “She was at Silverstreak Motors, ambling around like she belonged there.”

I scowled, shifting my attention from Ms. Green to Mr. Smythe. “She is part of the pack now,” I argued, arching a brow. “And isn’t that beside the point? Half of my employees at Silverstreak Motors are *human*, and they certainly belong there.” We wouldn’t be able to function at the capacity we

do without them. “I took over Oklahoma. All the wolves from that territory are Silverstreak wolves now.”

“Ah, so she’s paid her respects, then?” my mother asked coolly, lifting a brow.

I paused. She’d offered more than once, but I had brushed it off for later. At some point, Luna had stopped asking. *I didn’t need her to submit to me. I thought I didn’t, anyway. Maybe I shouldn’t have assumed her loyalty to me and the Silverstreak pack.*

“Ah,” said someone. Mr. Cobb grunted while Mr. Smythe snorted, shaking his head as if he knew all along. My mother eyed the other three, both her brows raised.

“My son knows what needs to be done,” she replied, her tone broking no argument. “And I will help him find a mate. We have the resources for it, and it will help quell the rebellions.”

“Rebellions?” I huffed. *What rebellions? Is this that James meant?*

“Fine,” grunted Mr. Smythe, lifting himself out of his chair. “If this is done, I have things to see to.”

“Of course,” Fiona replied, standing to show the others to the door as if I hadn’t even spoken. I was left at the table like a little boy once the adults were done talking. *What the hell just happened? What is my mother trying to pull?*

The door shut behind them, and I was left in the empty apartment — she hadn’t even paused to say goodbye. I scowled. *She’s really ready to use anything to get her way.* Maybe I’d get a word in with her before Bane arrived tomorrow.

I glanced down at my phone, squinting at the time. I was well past eleven. *Where the hell did Mr. Smythe have to go so urgently, except home to his bed?* The thought rankled me. As I opened the screen, I found I had no new texts. No calls. No word from Luna at all.

I decided to give her a call; if she wasn’t coming back, I would head to bed and get a few hours of sleep before I started rolling all these things over again. The phone rang several times, but the woman who said “Hello?” on the other end certainly wasn’t Luna.

I pulled the phone away from my face, but that was Luna’s contact on the screen. “Excuse me,” I huffed, confused. “I’m looking for Luna.”

“She’s here,” the same woman replied, “but she’s a bit out of it right now.”

“Who am I speaking to?”

“Oh, I’m sorry. I’m Nurse Thames at the Riverview Hospital.”

*Hospital? Luna’s at the hospital?*



**LUNA**

## Remus' Penthouse Suite

### Austin, Texas

I sat in the bed, propped up against a few pillows as I stared out at the early morning city. It almost looked peaceful like this. I almost felt peaceful, but then I stretched, and the tightness in my ankle made me cringe. I looked down at the sheets, flexing my foot gingerly. After Remus had brought me home from the emergency room, I'd managed to go on a few runs over the past few days. It got a little better each time, but I still had to call out from work; if I went in and my human coworkers saw how quickly I healed, they'd either think I was a liar or that something else entirely was afoot. Both were bad; bad enough that I was willing to forgo pay. In another day or two, though, it would be healed enough that I could go back. Stiffness wasn't anything unusual in a mechanic's shop.

The bedroom door swung open, and Remus ambled in with a cup of coffee and a plate of bagels, sitting down on the bed. He was still in his sweats, hair looking all a mess as he handed the mug over. I gave him a soft smile, wrapping my fingers around the warm ceramic. "Thank you," I murmured, savoring the taste of the coffee on my tongue. "I appreciate you looking after me like this."

"Of course," Remus replied, taking a bite out of the bagel. He didn't look entirely awake, like his mind had wandered somewhere else. Maybe he hadn't had all his coffee yet.

I took a few bites of my bagel, chewing thoughtfully. "I was hoping to get out of the apartment today. Maybe look around at a few apartments near Silverstreak Motors." It was the third time I'd suggested it. Remus kept staring straight forward, chewing his bagel slowly. I eyed him for a moment and sighed.

*I need to get serious about finding a place. Getting my first paycheck will definitely help... even if it will be short. That's fine.*

Maybe while Remus was working, I could scan apartments for rent. Heck, I could probably even deal with a room for rent in someone's home for a few months to save up money if I needed to. It's not like I had people to invite over. I'd rather live sparsely for a bit and save for security later on.

The trip to Remus' cabin had been nice, but I thought that maybe I needed some space to myself. I wanted to get to know us, but perhaps I needed to get to know myself. Though I hadn't appreciated Josie's intervention at her family party, I couldn't get her words out of my head. I still didn't think she had room to comment on whatever was going on between me and Remus, but... I didn't know what to say about it, either, and that troubled me. I'd just gotten out of a long-term relationship, even if it was much more one-sided than I'd realized. I needed space to breathe.

Remus was watching me quietly. "You don't have to go," he finally said, his expression strangely neutral. "I told you that you were allowed to stay here as long as you wanted, and that hasn't changed." And that much was true. He hadn't done anything to make me feel unwelcome — or even like I'd been putting him out.

I frowned a little, staring down into my cup of coffee. I opened my mouth, trying to find the words to explain it — Remus' hand darted out and he grabbed my other wrist, squeezing gently.

"Seriously, Luna. I won't make you stay anywhere you don't want to be, but you don't have to go. I *like* you being here. I... I *need* you to be here. This apartment feels so much more like a home when you're in it, even if all we're doing is reading quietly on the couch. I'm steadier when you're around. I like the version of Remus that comes to the surface when I'm with you. You bring out the best in me."

I almost fumbled the coffee in my hand as I looked up at him. Remus stared back at me solemnly; there wasn't a hint of mischief anywhere on his face. "Really?" I asked, my voice so quiet even I struggled to hear it.

"Really." Remus leaned closer, pressing a ginger kiss to my cheekbone. "I can't stop thinking about you, Luna. There's so much going on — fucking Marnet, finances at Silverstreak Motors, unrest in the pack — but you're always what comes to mind. What would you think? Where could we be in a year? In five? In ten? I won't pretend to know what that looks like, but I've never even wondered before." He paused, taking a breath. "I don't just wonder, Luna — I want to know. I want to find out."

I was quiet for a moment, clutching my coffee cup like a lifeline. "No one has ever said that to me," I finally murmured. "Not even Marnet, and we— He— We were supposed to be mates. Fated mates. And I don't think he thought about me like that at all."

Remus moved a little closer, leaving only a whisper of space between us.

“Fuck him,” he said, but there was no real heat behind it. He looked at my hands for a moment before continuing. “My mother visited the night you went to the ER. She brought several members of my father’s council with her — unannounced. First, they told me off for taking over Oklahoma when I did, but when I pushed back, they all agreed that it would have been fine *if only I had found my fated mate.*” He grimaced and shook his head, looking back at me.

“I’ve never prescribed to that shit, Luna. I get that it works out for some people, like my parents, but it doesn’t for others.” He paused, watching me for a moment. He didn’t have to say it. “I don’t care about any of that. I know what I feel for you, and I know that it’s real — and that’s *all* I need to know.”

The silence stretched on between us as I struggled to find a reply to that. “Remus...” I sighed and shook my head, leaning back to try to put a little more space between us. “Remus, if your mate is out there... you *should* go look for her.”

My wolf whimpered at the prospect, but I knew, with confidence, that those fated bonds were real. It didn’t work out for *me*, but Remus was right about one thing — it definitely worked out for others. If his mate was out there, I didn’t want to deny him that. It wasn’t the right thing to do.

Remus stiffened, sitting up a bit straighter. “What do you mean?” he said, the softness in his features rapidly disappearing.

My heart ached to see him close off, but I shook my head. “You should look. You said you haven’t even looked — so you don’t know this person isn’t out there, waiting for you somewhere. Maybe they aren’t even that far, just in... I don’t know, California or something.”

The alpha across from me bristled. “Why would they sit around waiting for me? They have no proof I exist, and I have no proof they exist. I’m sure they aren’t waiting around their whole life for me, and I’m not going to waste my time waiting for them, either.”

I sighed. This tactic clearly wasn’t working. “Fine, fine. What if we keep going down this road, Remus? Say we fall in love and become mated, then decide to raise a family — and *then* you meet her? What are you going to do? What am *I* going to do — or our kids?”

Remus snorted, looking at me like I’d asked a stupid question. “I wouldn’t do anything. She wouldn’t mean anything to me.”

I shook my head. “See, that’s the problem. You’re so sure it won’t matter or be no big deal, but you don’t know how it feels when you meet your mate



for the first time. It's overwhelming. It's like someone takes the air out of your lungs and sets you on fire and it is the most beautiful, wonderful thing you've felt your whole life. I'd known Marnet for years and didn't think much of him one way or another, but after I turned eighteen? It was like those romance movies when the heavens part and light beams down and the angels start singing. You don't know until it happens to you."

Remus scoffed, and I scowled, shaking my head. "Seriously! It's like being possessed, or something. You will meet this wolf and forget that all others exist. And I... I don't know that I can handle that. That I can be 'good enough' until that moment comes. It would be even worse than Marnet's rejection because I knew that could happen and went along with it anyway."

"Are you being serious right now?" Remus replied, sitting a little further back.

"Yes, I am! I would appreciate it if you were serious, too. This is important to me."

"It's important to me, too! *You're* important to me, Luna. Why can't you see that? Why are you trying to force this stupid, archaic principle on me, too?"

I growled softly. "I believed in it. Am I stupid and archaic? Is your mother stupid?"

"That's not what I meant!"

"Things don't just happen the way you want them to happen, Remus. There's a reason it has been a tradition for centuries."

Remus rumbled. "Traditions are meant to be broken."

"Damnit, Remus, would you just *listen* to me?" I finally snapped. "I don't want to be strung along for years only to get left behind if your true mate appears. I don't think I could survive that."

Remus said nothing, abandoning the plate of half-eaten bagels on the nightstand as he pushed himself out of bed and stormed over to his window. He stared outwards, arms folded over his chest. I stayed in bed, staring at my hand as I replayed the argument. The silence stretched between us, broken only by a soft ping from Remus' phone. He glanced at the screen and grunted. "You have a visitor." He said nothing else, turning to walk towards the door.

"Remus," I sighed, hating the stony look on his face. "I don't want this. I *want* to be with you, more than anything — but I have to be realistic about what that actually means. It won't last forever. That won't be good for me,

you, or the pack.”

Remus growled softly, a hint of red in his eyes. “People need to stop telling me what to think about this damn pack,” he snapped, shutting the door firmly on his way out.

MY MOTHER WALKED into my room a few moments later, looking more awkward than I’d ever seen her.

“Hi, Lunaloo,” she murmured quietly, sitting in the small armchair near the window.

“Hi, Mom,” I replied, still feeling a bit sullen after my argument. A visitor was the last thing on my mind right now.

My mother glanced around the room, fidgeting like she didn’t know what to do or where to look. “How’s your ankle doing?”

“Still sore. It’s healing up fine, though.”

The silence stretched a little longer. I could hear my mother fidgeting, but I couldn’t bring myself to care. Small talk was the last thing on her mind.

After what felt like an age, she cleared her throat and began to speak. “Look, Luna. I wanted to apologize about Friday night. I got scared for you, but I didn’t have all the information. I should have listened to what you had to say instead of jumping to conclusions — I guess you’ve just been frozen at twelve years old in my mind for a while now, and back then, you really *did* need my guidance... but now you’re just as you said. A grown-ass woman. And I apologize for not respecting that.”

I finally glanced over at her; brows furrowed slightly. Josie looked genuinely concerned, even pained. Despite everything, I was inclined to believe her apology. “It’s okay,” I murmured, shrugging a shoulder.

“It’s not,” Josie replied, shaking her head. “I shouldn’t have done that.”

“No, you shouldn’t have,” I agreed. I thought about it for a moment before speaking again. “But I forgive you.” I’d forgiven my father and my half-siblings for far, far worse. The least I could do was extend my mother the benefit of the doubt, especially when she made an effort to apologize to me.

“Thank you, Luna,” she said quietly, lifting herself from the chair. She walked over, sitting next to me on the bed. “Remus looked like he’d swallowed a bee or twelve when he opened the front door,” she said, expression sympathetic. “Bad morning?”

“You could say that,” I groused, lifting a brow. “We don’t exactly see eye to eye on the whole fated mate thing. He doesn’t believe in it, which is pretty shitty. I get that he isn’t interested, but he can’t see that at one point, I was, you know? He just... doesn’t get it.”

“I’m sorry, honey.” She reached out to squeeze my shoulder. “Wolves who haven’t experienced it just... won’t, I’m afraid. And far fewer understand what it’s like to be rejected.”

I turned, my interest piqued. “Is that what happened between you and Dad? Did he reject you?”

My mother paused, looking down at her lap. I could practically see the gears turning in her head. “Well. Yes and no. It’s complicated.”

“I don’t have anywhere to be. I’m assuming you don’t either, if you’re here instead of work.”

“Guilty,” Josie replied, expression wry. “Fine. I’ll tell you the story. Arden had come along with Noah and some others as part of a pack relationship thing. I wasn’t entirely privy to it, but I was invited to the hunts and the party afterward; being the beta’s daughter certainly had its perks. I felt the connection immediately when we were introduced, and he was just as smitten as I was.”

Her expression grew a bit wistful as she looked out, far past the four walls of the bedroom. “He was such a sweet man when we were young, Luna. Always brought me flowers. He was absolutely useless with tools, but he always offered to help me. When it was time for him to return to Oklahoma, I could barely stand the thought. I begged and pleaded with my father, but he wasn’t interested. So I saved up my own money and started buying bus tickets. One month, I’d meet Arden in Oklahoma City. He’d get a Greyhound to Austin the next. By the time anyone caught on, I was already pregnant with you, and we were planning our move to Oklahoma so I could be with him. I gave up my pack to be with him and our new family.”

I frowned, tipping my head to one side. “That... actually sounds really romantic,” I said, even if I couldn’t imagine my father like that at all. “What happened?”

She sighed and shook her head. “Arden’s mother never liked me. She never gave a reason. But Arden was a momma’s boy, and he never stood up to her. After she planted that seed of doubt, things started to fade between us — it didn’t even take a year for the bond to die altogether. But you were already born, my Luna, and you were Lupus Claw. I was, too. I had gone

through all the rituals and paid my respects to Noah Claw so I could be in my mate's pack, and our child wouldn't be born as a lone wolf."

"So you couldn't go back," I said slowly, the truth of it dawning on me. "Even though Dad just ditched you, you couldn't go back."

"I couldn't go back," Josie said, sighing sadly. "But it worked out okay. I was able to start my garage, and you were such a good baby, Luna. You didn't give me any trouble at all. I was so happy to be your mother. I could have gone on like that until you were eighteen and ready to spread your wings, strike out on your own — but when you were ten, Arden got some kind of bee in his bonnet and decided I wasn't fit to raise his child. He was barely interested in a few yearly visits before then. I had no intention of handing my baby over just because he asked." She shook her head. "You know the rest."

I frowned. "Do I? No one really told me what happened, even when I found out you hadn't died. I even confronted Dad about it before I left Oklahoma, but he kept avoiding the topic."

My mother snorted and shook her head. "Well, I guess I shouldn't be surprised. Arden's mother and Arden's new wife, Lynn, worked together to get me banished. I'm *still* not sure on what grounds, but you don't get an opportunity to question that when the alpha shows up at your door, his red eyes blazing. You do what he says. You don't get a choice." Her voice warbled at the end and when I looked back over, I realized silent tears were streaking down her cheeks.

My heart lurched and I slid across the bed, wrapping an arm around her shoulders and pulling her close. "I'm sorry, Mom," I whispered. "Being rejected *sucks*. It really, really sucks."

Her voice was hoarse when she whispered back. "No one understands until it happens to them," she agreed, wiping her cheeks with the heels of her palms. "At least it happened privately. I saw the video, Luna. I'm so, so sorry that happened to you. No one deserves something like that. I'm so sorry. And I'm sorry that I wasn't there to punch that ugly man right in his stupid face, too."

I tried to laugh, but the noise that came out was a hoarse sob. "Fuck. I wish someone punched him," I murmured, trying not to outright bawl. I pressed my face to her shoulder as tears spilled over my lashes and down my cheeks. "Damn it. I said I wouldn't waste any more tears on him."

We sat like that for a while, hunched over and shedding silent tears until

our eyes finally ran dry. When I sat back up, I felt — refreshed, somehow. Like it was a festering wound that needed to be opened, the infection had been bled out, and now I could begin to heal. “I have been thinking since we spoke on Friday,” I admitted, drying my cheeks. “Honestly... I’m not sure I want to open myself up to being hurt again. Not like that. I don’t know that I could take it.” I inhaled deeply. “I like Remus. I do. But being with him is complicated, and I wanted a fresh start — I’m not sure I can do that if everyone in my new pack thinks I’m Public Enemy Number One. People aren’t happy with me and Remus together. Even I can sense that.”

My mother studied me for several long minutes, and then she nodded, pulling me into another sideways hug. “Whatever you decide to do, I’ll support you.”

“Thanks,” I murmured. I could feel she genuinely meant it.

My phone buzzed and I frowned, leaning over to my nightstand. *Tala?* I shrugged and was about to lean back when it buzzed again. And again. And again. The last message contained text.

DON’T IGNORE ME, Luna.

*THAT DOESN’T SOUND like Tala at all. Has some creep stolen her phone?*

Curiosity got the best of me and I leaned back with my phone, flicking the messaging app open. One by one, I looked at the images and played the videos, my stomach sinking with each one. The last video didn’t feature just Tala — Marnet was there too. My friend looked like she was tied to a chair, Marnet leaning casually against it as he smiled for the camera. It felt like my stomach hit the floor.

I lurched to my feet. “Mom, we have to go get Remus. *Now.*”



# REMUS

## Remus' Penthouse Suite

### Austin, Texas

I hadn't had my coffee yet, but I didn't feel inclined to make myself a cup, either. Once I'd shown Josie where Luna was, I made my way to my couch, stretching out across its length as I stared up at the ceiling. I hadn't slept well the night before — or any night since my mother and her squad had confronted me — and the exhaustion was finally starting to catch up with me. My eyelids felt heavy and my chest felt heavier; before I knew it, I had drifted off entirely.

*THE SUN SHONE high overhead as a pair of wolves raced across a golden field, the summer grasses rustling as the silver-gray canines slipped between the blades. There wasn't a house for miles; not a building to be seen; not even a car, truck, or bicycle on the road. It was just fields; cattle might pasture there in the winter months, but it was free for now, and it was all theirs.*

*The larger wolf stretched out his stride, covering more ground than his running partner. His ears folded against the wind, the earth churning beneath his paws; the smaller wolf tucked his hindquarters, galloping after the other, but he never caught up. He didn't even put a dent into the length between them. At best, all he managed to do was keep the older wolf from disappearing entirely.*

*Once he crested a rolling hill, the older wolf began to slow, eventually coming to a halt. He was barely winded, but the younger wolf stopped beside him with heaving sides and a long tongue hanging out of the side of his mouth. The older wolf gave an amused rumble. "You need to learn to pace yourself, Remus. You're still growing, but an alpha should know when to spend his energy and when to save some for later."*

*The young wolf snorted softly, giving a high-stepping prance with his front feet. "I've still got some energy left, Dad," he replied, a wolfish smile dancing in his bright eyes.*



*His father shook his head. “You'll learn,” he replied, setting out at a leisurely walk. There was nowhere for them to be. There was no need to disappear and hide; there was no one to see them. They could enjoy the spring sunshine on their thick coats, the peace and quiet away from their home in the city. “It isn't all about you, Remus — especially when you become alpha. Often your needs and the pack's needs will coincide, but it isn't a guarantee. At least once in your life, a time will come when your needs will conflict with the pack's. A poor alpha will think only of himself or a small subset of his people; a strong alpha will think of all his people and how best to serve them, even if he himself must make sacrifices.”*

*The pair began to walk up the next hill, this one with a single, large tree. The older wolf paused in the shade, sighing happily as he settled down in the high grass. His son only sat, eyeing him with curiosity. “The decision might even feel wrong,” he said after some time. “I have had to make choices that felt against my nature, but I had to remember what I'd learned and why I was alpha. I am alpha for my pack. For the people of Silverstreak. I had to remember everything my father taught me, and I will do my best to pass all that knowledge on to you, so it will help you as it did me.”*

*The younger wolf was quiet for several lengths after that, seemingly rolling his father's thoughts over in his mind. After a few more moments, he bumped his father's shoulder with a paw, his tail waving playfully behind him. “When the time comes, I'll be ready,” he said, not a hint of doubt in his voice. “C'mon, I think I smelled some quail on the other side of the hill. Let's bring some back for Mom!”*

*He broke off at a run, leaving the older wolf to shake his head, extract himself from the grass, and jog after his eager son.*

I WOKE WITH A START, half lifting myself off the couch, when I realized nothing was there. It was only a dream — or a very old memory. I couldn't have been more than ten or eleven when my father and I had hunted quail together. That field didn't even exist anymore; it had been bulldozed when my father was still alive. A strip mall sat there now.

After a moment, I sat up, staring into my kitchen. *Is this what my father meant?* I glanced over my shoulder at the closed bedroom door. *Is Luna right? She can't be. I love her.* I hadn't said as much — the right moment hadn't come up. Those words were meaningful, and I didn't just want to blurt

them out, only for her not to believe me. As it was, she seemed convinced I'd leave her for another woman who might not exist because "fate" told me to. Was I supposed to hold on to her or let her go?

*Which one is best for the pack?*

When Bane arrived a few days ago, we'd gone over some notes before going on a field trip of Austin and the surrounding areas, visiting packmates at their homes and businesses. Where once most of them would have been happy for a visit, the warm welcomes felt muted at best. To make matters worse, no one would actually say anything to my face, too afraid of causing offense. Only when I sent Bane on his own would anyone share their grievances, and my beta would report them back to me. The list was longer than I'd realized.

*Remus attacked a rival pack during a Moonmate ceremony. He broke the rules!*

*Remus is thinking about expansion when something weird is going on with Silverstreak Motors. He should stay in Texas.*

*Why was Remus in Arkansas?*

*Who's that girl with Remus?*

*Remus is with that girl from the Moonmate ceremony. That Lupus Claw girl. She's trouble.*

*Remus is being duped by Marnet's mate. That entire video? Totally staged. She's here as a spy, and she's going to take Remus down. He's putting the entire pack at risk.*

The complaints went on like that, ranging from the mundane to the absolutely absurd. Luna was not a spy, and she certainly was *not* still Marnet's mate (nor had she ever been). They might have seen the video circulating the internet, but they hadn't been there. They hadn't seen Luna in the days and weeks afterward, as she tried to process what had happened. Why it happened. She was still processing it now, even if she was in a much better place.

*Bane was there, though.* Bane had seen all of it. The assault, how Marnet had left Luna broken and bloody — how skittish and concerned she'd been. How long she'd struggled. And yet, even Bane seemed unconvinced, more on the side of the pack. He doubted her, too. There was no reason. No proof. No one could offer a shred of evidence that Luna had done anything to sabotage me or the pack, but the suspicion remained. My beta had even suggested we make an example out of Luna, certain that would help quiet some of the

rumblings of rebellion.

*But how am I supposed to make an example out of the woman I love?*

The base of my head was starting to throb. If I kept chasing my tail like this, I would get a damn headache. I hauled myself off the couch, walked over to my kitchen and grabbed a glass from the cabinet. First, a glass of water, then coffee. Then I needed to get to Silverstreak Motors to sort out the financial issue. The longer I studied the records, the more convinced I became that it wasn't just a fluke or some nervous investors.

Someone had arranged for all of these events to happen simultaneously to make Silverstreak Motors more vulnerable. I would bet my entire territory that *someone* was Marnet Claw. *Why can't anyone see we're chasing our tails with this mate business? It's a non-issue. Luna is a non-issue. Marnet? He's an issue. He's a big fucking issue.* More than I'd bargained for, perhaps, but the fact that no one else seemed to notice what a threat he'd become was really grating on me. Even if they disagreed about my tactics, the takeover had been done. It was over. We had to look forward.

After I finished my water, I set the glass down and reached into the pocket of my sweats, fishing my phone out to check the time when it started to vibrate right in my hand. For a moment, I simply stared at it, mildly flummoxed. Seff's name flashed across the screen. *Why the hell is Seff calling me so early? I moved to accept the call anyway. Maybe he's gotten some more news on Marnet and the Whitewater fortune.*

"He—"

I didn't even get a greeting out before Seff started talking. He sounded breathless like he'd run up twenty flights of stairs. "Remus! Remus, I'm so glad you picked up," he panted.

"What the hell is going on, Seff?"

"Remus— Last night— Wine— Tala— There's a note—"

I scowled, shaking my head. "Seff, you need to take a breath. I can't understand what you're saying. Did something happen to Tala?"

"Yes," he panted, and then he finally took a deep inhale. There was a moment of silence, and then Seff began to speak again, much slower this time. "Tala and I had dinner together last night. We've been, uh, seeing each other. Casually."

When he paused for longer this time, I realized he was waiting for some kind of reaction. I rolled my eyes and motioned with my hand for him to get on with it, even if he wasn't in the other room. "Yes, yes, I figured that out by

the way Tala talked about you,” I huffed. “She’s a grown woman. She can make her own decisions.” I could threaten him about hurting her later if I needed to, but I always suspected Tala was more than capable of doing that herself.

“We went to bed after we had dessert and wine — I thought it tasted funny, but Tala was certain it was just because we mixed a red wine and a mint dessert. But I just woke up, Remus, and there’s a note.”

“From Tala?” That didn’t sound like her. If she wanted to stop seeing someone, she’d tell them to their face. No one had ever accused my cousin of being a coward.

“No. It’s from—”

“Remus!” The bedroom door almost flew open, Luna stumbling out with her phone held out in front of her. I whirled around, trying to motion I was currently on the phone myself, but she pointed wildly at an image on the screen. “Marnet has Tala! Marnet has Tala! He just started sending me pictures!”

“Shit.” I tipped my head towards the phone. “Seff, stay put. We’re going to get there as fast as possible. Do not trust anyone. Call if you feel like you’re getting worse.”

I hung up and opened my contacts. I needed to talk to my beta, stat. As if on cue, my front door swung open, and Bane himself marched into my foyer, followed by a few other men. Confusion and red flags swirled in my skull as I glanced at my phone, the line ringing — but there was no matching ring coming from Bane. I hung up. “We need to go to Oklahoma, Bane. Something has happened to Tala.”

He didn’t so much as look at me; his gaze trained on Luna, he marched over to the pair of women, grabbing her phone and restraining her in a matter of seconds. Entirely stunned, Luna simply stood frozen, staring at my beta like he’d grown a second head. Even Josie looked too shocked to move before another one of his men grabbed her.

“Bane!” I snarled, striding over. At the same time, even *more* people entered my apartment — it was the same group of elders, led by my mother. *She must have given Bane her key.* I didn’t have the time to consider the implication of that.

“You’ve left me no choice, Remus,” Fiona snapped, eyes dark as she glowered at me. “I told you time and again, but you just did not listen. I cannot let the pack fall apart like this, not after your father and I worked so

hard.”

I whirled on her, my vision already going red. “What the fuck are you—”

She lurched forward and slammed her hand against the side of my neck. Something stung and I snarled, lunging back as my hand flew up. There was an empty syringe in her hand; the needle was still poking out of my neck. “What th— Wh—” I stumbled another step. My tongue felt fat and heavy; I couldn’t even lift it to shape words. My vision had gone blurry as I wobbled, and all the red had faded away. It felt like I was staring at my mother from beneath the water while she loomed over the pool — had I fallen? Was I on the floor?

“I am sorry it came to this, Remus,” Fiona said. She sounded so far away, like she’d entered another galaxy. I was adrift in space, my vision slowly fading to black. “But an alpha makes a sacrifice when she must. Until you come to your senses, I will act in your stead and steer Silverstreak out of this mess.”

I didn’t hear anything else she said. The darkness opened its gaping maw and swallowed me up, leaving only a deafening silence in its wake.

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# **ALPHA'S SACRIFICE**

CHOSEN BY THE ALPHA: BOOK 2

Skye Wilson

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