

Gathering of Wolves

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Chapter 1

The Family

Luna Skinner stared at the big old ranch house in the middle of nowhere. She frowned.

"It's not so bad," Carmen said. She put her arm around her daughter's shoulder.

"Nothing a wrecking ball can't fix," Luna's brother, Bane, said as he joined them.

"Bane, you're awful," their mother laughed. She went into the house, dragging a large suitcase behind her.

"I wish for once we could buy a new house with fresh paint and a front lawn," Luna sighed.

"Forget it, Luna. We are never going to be like other people," Bane said. He gave a nasty smile and added, "Hey, if

you want to fit in, start plucking your eyebrows. Unibrows aren't a good look these days."

Luna glared at her brother. How dare he talk about her eyebrows that way! So what if they grew across the bridge of her nose? It wasn't like his were any better. What bothered her most was how mean Bane was about it. He was 17, a year older than she, and he was so sure of himself. Once they had been close. They had roamed together for hours. Now, it seemed as if they were always fighting.

In her room, Luna hung up her clothes, put her few books on a shelf, and made her bed. Carefully, she picked two framed photos out of a box. One photo was of her father. The other one was of a silvery-black wolf. Luna placed the photos on a dresser and walked to the open window.

The hot sun was beginning to go down behind the mountains, making long, purple shadows on the desert floor.

Car horns honked in the yard. *The family has arrived*, thought Luna. She saw her cousins, aunts, and uncles getting out of vans and cars. Asher Stone, the loner who had forced his way into their family and become leader, was there, too.

Luna thought about her father. He had been the leader of the family until he was shot by a farmer's bullet. It had made him weak. In her family, you could not be weak. To be weak was to invite someone strong to kill you. For her father, that someone had been Asher Stone.

"Mom wants us to come and say hi to Stone and the others," Bane said from the doorway.

"I have nothing to say to that man," Luna said angrily. Her golden eyes flashed with anger. She shook her head, making her long silvery-blond hair fly around her shoulders.

Bane ran his fingers through his own silvery-blond hair. "At least we agree on something. We just have to

ignore him until . . .”

“Until *what?*” Luna asked. Her stomach felt tight. “Can’t we just live like other people?”

Bane said, “You can’t change who you are, Luna.” He gave her a disgusted look and left the room with a swinging stride.

Luna walked slowly to the huge living room. It was noisy with relatives. Luna stayed at the edge of the room, wanting to escape.

“Listen, everyone,” Asher Stone shouted. Everyone became quiet as the muscular, black-haired man spoke. “I just want to say I hope we will all be happy here. We have 400 acres—a lot of room to roam.” He flashed a brilliant smile of perfect white teeth. “We’ll start building more homes and a community hall soon. Until then, we’ll use the barn for family meetings.”

Luna watched her mother walk over to stand beside Asher Stone. “Why does

she even go near him?" she asked herself angrily.

Bane stared at Asher. "If he knows what's good for him, he'll hang around someplace else."

Luna frowned as she climbed the stairs to her room. She was sick of her family, sick of her life as a member of the pack. Why couldn't she just live a normal human life?

Chapter 2

David

It was twilight at the Desert Springs Golf Course and Resort. The last of the golfers had left. David Reed picked up a hose and washed off a golf cart. It had been a long day, and he still had work to do. He didn't mind, though. His dad wouldn't be home for hours. Since his mom had left them, his dad seemed to work all the time. David knew he himself was doing the same thing. Home wasn't a happy place these days. Besides, his old truck always seemed to need something fixed. The money from his part-time job came in handy.

David jumped into the golf cart and drove it down the hill to the pro shop. He parked it with the other clean carts waiting in line to be rented.

Bill Taylor, the owner of the course, stepped out of the pro shop. "You can leave after you sweep up the range balls, David," he said. "And bring in all the range ball buckets."

"No problem, Mr. Taylor," David said. He walked toward the driving range where golfers practiced hitting buckets of balls. He jumped on the tractor. It had a rake that gathered the golf balls. He unloaded the range balls into a large container. He stacked the range ball buckets and locked them in a shed.

A howl echoed across the darkening desert. It sent a chill up David's spine. His dad was out there somewhere. He was a park ranger, and the desert park where he worked was huge. He knew everything about the animals that lived there. David knew his dad could take care of himself. But when David heard a howl like that, it sounded like death. Somewhere, one animal was hunting—and another would die.

David jumped as a body loomed out of the shadows.

“Hey, David, I didn’t mean to scare you!” said a friendly voice.

David relaxed. It was Mike Webb. He was a security guard at the resort. He worked nights, patrolling the grounds. He made sure no one went onto the golf course or broke into the swimming pool.

There was another echoing howl, and David jumped again.

Webb’s lined face cracked into a grin. “It’s just a coyote, David.”

“It sounds more like a wolf than a coyote,” David said.

“How can you tell the difference?” Webb asked. He stared at the mountains.

“Coyotes tend to yip a couple of times, then howl,” David explained. He and his dad might not talk much these days, but he knew a few things.

Suddenly, the howling turned into a terrible scream. The hunter had found a victim.

Now Webb jumped. David looked at him closely. He knew Mike Webb had been in the Vietnam War. He'd seen a lot of blood and death there. He used to drink to forget. But then he got help and stopped drinking. He got this job. A lot of years went by. But Webb said he always had to be careful. He said the past had a way of coming back to haunt him.

Webb gave David a shaky smile. "The howling has been getting louder lately, like the packs are bigger or something."

David frowned. "I know. I have this feeling something weird is going on in the desert at night."

Webb wanted to change the subject. "Did you hear about that big family moving to the old Scorpion Ranch?" he asked. "How often do you hear of an extended family all living in one place?"

David thought about the empty house he was going home to. "It sounds pretty good to me," he said. He gave Webb a wave and walked to his truck.

Chapter 3

In Town

A week after they arrived, Luna went with Bane and their cousin Lobo into Desert Springs. As they drove down the main street, she sighed—another small town in the middle of nowhere.

Bane and Lobo saw two girls entering a café. “Want a burger?” Bane asked. He drove the van into the parking lot.

“I could think of something tastier than a burger,” Lobo growled playfully.

“Don’t even think like that,” Luna said. Thoughts led to actions, and actions in her family left people dead.

Bane grinned. “He’s joking. We know better than to start something so close to home.”

Luna looked at Bane and Lobo, wondering what they *really* knew. They

seemed so dangerous lately. Had they, or some of the pack they hung out with, killed those teenagers camping in the woods? There were the sheep, too. A lot of sheep were killed where the family used to live. The sheep were torn up and left around like they were just killed for fun. Is that what made the farmers mad and sent them on a wolf-killing spree? Her father had nothing to do with it, Luna knew. But he had been in the wrong place at the wrong time, and a farmer had shot him in the leg.

Then Asher Stone had killed her father, and they had all fled to this new place where no one knew them.

Luna took a deep breath and flung open the door of the café. She rushed in and bumped into a boy. His drink flew out of his hand and splashed all over her.

“I’m so sorry!” said David Reed.

“My fault,” said Luna, feeling her face get hot.

David grabbed some napkins. “Here,

use these," he said. As he handed her the napkins, he noticed that her fingernails were long and curved.

Luna wiped off her arms, her tank top, and her shorts.

David stared at Luna. She was the most beautiful girl he'd ever seen. Her silvery-blond hair was tucked behind her low-set ears. Her eyes were golden.

"Can I buy you a soda or something to make up for ruining your clothes?" David asked nervously.

Luna smiled. "I'm OK, really."

"Please," David said.

Luna heard Bane and Lobo laughing at her. That made her angry, but she smiled sweetly at David. "I'll have a root beer."

Bane and Lobo ordered burgers to go and sat in a booth to wait. As Luna and David waited for Luna's drink, they introduced themselves. David told her he lived in town. She explained they'd just moved to Scorpion Ranch.

“How do you like it so far?” he asked.

“The desert is pretty,” said Luna. “I didn’t know there were so many wildflowers and small animals.”

Bane was close enough to hear. He laughed rudely. “My sister *really* likes small animals,” he said.

Luna glared at him.

Bane looked at David’s smaller size and decided he would be no trouble. “We’ll be outside, little sis,” Bane said. “Don’t be long.” He and Lobo picked up their order and bounded out the door.

“Sorry. My brother and cousin are jerks,” Luna said.

“They like to tease you, I bet,” David said as he handed her the root beer.

“Yeah. Thanks,” Luna said, taking the cold drink. “I’ve got to go.”

David was afraid he would never see her again. He knew he had to take a chance. He cleared his throat. “Ummm . . . do you want to go out sometime?” he asked.

Luna frowned. She thought she might like him, but she didn't want him showing up at the ranch. "I don't know."

"I work at the Desert Springs Resort," David said. "I can use the pool after I get off work. Come by tomorrow night and we'll go swimming."

"OK," Luna said. David walked outside with her.

In the van, Bane and Lobo glared at David. Their nostrils opened and closed as if they wanted to remember his scent.



Later that night, Luna paced back and forth in her room. Her family had gone running. They had asked her to go with them. She had said no, wanting to get away from them for a while. But she could not ignore the full moon outside her window. She felt it pulling on her.

As she stared at the sky, her muscles rippled and cramped. She fell to her hands and knees. Silver fur grew from

her skin. Pointy ears pushed up through her skull as her lower face grew into a long snout. Her teeth became long and sharp, and her eyes burned yellow.

When the change was complete, she raised her head and howled. She leaped through the open window and landed softly on the ground below.

Her nose twitched as she smelled the desert air. A light breeze touched her back as she ran through the moonlit night. She heard every sound that the small birds and animals made.



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