

Chapter 10 – Healing the Broken Alpha

The last time someone had made a home-cooked meal just for me, was my mother, just before she left us. Not that the kitchen staff doesn't make decent food, but there is just something extra special about having someone cook just for you. It was a surprising gesture coming from Lenora, and it almost made me go soft inside. I had to remind myself, rather harshly, that she had only become my mate for the sake of the money her family owed me. If I hadn't called in their debt, she never would have looked twice at a broken alpha like me.

And I couldn't blame her. Even if I'd regained control over my body, I remained wolfless and weak.

Still, I appreciated her effort, and she really was a good cook. The quiche was rich, with just the right amount of savory vegetables, the bacon was crisp, and the blueberry muffins were light and fluffy. They were still warm and fresh from the oven, and the little butter I spread inside melted instantly. I hadn't had a great appetite since the incident. Some days I had to force myself to eat, for the sake of keeping my strength. I couldn't remember the last time I'd enjoyed a meal so much.

But I absolutely couldn't let myself get used to it. Because when all of my plans were accomplished, I was going to cut her loose.

Some of the maintenance men came in to set my bed back up. I noticed the way she flinched in fear when someone came to the door, and the way she slipped around the bed, creating a barrier between herself and the workers who entered the room. I hardly had time to wonder who or what she was afraid of exactly. It couldn't have been me, since she was using me as protection. Had someone here made her uncomfortable, or was this some old wound from her past?

Did I really want to know? While I was pondering that question, my father came through the door without even a knock. Since I had become ill, he had a tendency to treat me more like a child than like a grown man. The lack of respect rankled with me, even though I knew deep down that he didn't mean anything personal by it. My illness had forced him to take on many of the alpha responsibilities that he had previously passed on to me, so naturally he was acting more like the alpha.

I had offered to cede the pack back to him entirely, but he refused to take the title again, at least not officially. The alternative was to give the leadership mantle over to my little brother, but both my father and I agreed that he was too young, and too immature to handle that amount of responsibility. So I remained, the Alpha of Blackstone, even in my incapacitated state. I wasn't sure how long that was going to last though.

"I came to talk to you about taking your mate into the office tomorrow." My father dropped that in my lap like a live grenade.

Immediately, I didn't like the idea. She'd just gotten here, and she was like a shiny new toy. I didn't want to share her with anyone. I wanted to keep her there beside me. I wanted her to cook me nice things and keep me company through the long, lonely days. I stole a look at her. I saw the flash of disappointment that she tried to hide. I saw the way her posture drooped slightly.

Of course she would be dying to get away from me, to get away from this sick-room as soon as possible. And who was I to hold her back? I stuffed down the bitter feelings and gave my father's words due consideration. He did have a point. I knew there were plenty of doubts about my capability of continuing to run the business, despite the fact that I'd been largely doing everything required from my bed. Sending Lenora to the office would buy me a little more time to get all the pieces into position before I made my next move.

So, I reluctantly made the concession. Part time, three days a week. I didn't do it to make her happy, I did it because it suited my plans. The fact that her eyes brightened again meant absolutely nothing.

Before my father left, there was another knock at the door. From the corner of my eye I saw her take another cringing step backward. I checked my watch and realized that it was my massage therapist. "Come in, Julian!" I called. The door opened a crack, and Julian's head popped in. His eyes widened slightly as he took in the newly set up bed, my father, and finally, my mate.

"Oh, sorry, am I interrupting?"

"Not at all," I gave my father a narrow-eyed look. "My dad was just leaving."

My dad grinned, not in the least bit offended. "Right. I'll see you bright and early then, Lenora! I like to leave here by eight-thirty. He slapped my leg under the blanket and then stood to go. "See if you can work some of the orneriness out of him, would you, Jules?"

"I'll try my best," Julian promised solemnly, stepping further into the room.

Julian didn't look like a massage therapist. He looked like a professional wrestler. He was big, and had bulging muscles, and a lot of tattoos all over his body. His macho appearance was actually a cover for a very soft and gentle man. Even though his fingers looked like fat sausages, his hands were incredibly sensitive. He could feel out every tight spot, every knot, every restriction. He had a bag slung over his shoulder, and he strode up to the bed. He gave me a once over and then looked across at Lenora, who was hovering near the wall giving him a look that was half fearful and half curious.

"This is my masseuse," I said, making a quick introduction. "His name is Julian Filemon. Jules, this is my mate, Lenora." I gave him a look, trying to communicate with my eyes, to tell him that she was still ignorant of my actual physical condition.

“Right, the mate! I didn’t know that was happening so soon!” He offered Lenora a smile that dimpled his cheeks and made him look much more approachable. “It’s very nice to meet you, welcome to Blackstone.”

Julian was a Blackstone native, although he’d moved with his partners to Prosperity Springs to open their business. He pushed aside the food tray and put his bag on the table. “How are you feeling today, Alpha?”

That was a loaded question. I borrowed the word from my father. “Ornery.”

I watched him begin unpacking his massage oils from the bag. “Well, I’ve got some peppermint and rosemary oils here, that might improve your mood.” He cast a meaningful glance over at Lenora and then back at me.

I cleared my throat. “Lenora, Julian is going to remove my clothes for the massage. Perhaps you should take the tray back to the kitchen. We’ll be done in about an hour.”

A stricken look crossed her face briefly, but didn’t think it was at the prospect of seeing me naked. After all, she’d already bathed me, and seen just about everything. Whatever she was thinking, though, she hid it well, and hurried around the bed to collect the tray with the dirty dishes.

“There’s a library on the ground floor,” I offered. “If you enjoy reading.”

She gave me a wide eyed look and then ducked her head before she went out of the room. I used the remote to engage the lock after she left. Julian turned back toward me and whistled low between his teeth. “Now I see why you chose her, River,” he said, giving me a speculative look. “Who knew that the Ridgemoore Pack was hiding such a rare beauty?”

I sat up and stripped out of my pajamas, rolling over onto my stomach so that he could begin the massage. I couldn’t help but wonder what would have happened if I had taken the initiative to go and claim her sooner. What if I had gone to Ridgemoore when I was still a wolf, and courted her properly? Would she have agreed to a chosen mating then, without being coerced by her family’s debt?

I folded my arms and put them beneath my forehead as he began to knead his fingers into my calf muscles.

I had waited too long. Now, I would never know.