

Chapter 11 – Healing the Broken Alpha

Climbing into that big bed all by myself felt weird. The bed itself was bigger than the bedroom I had occupied back home. I could lay in the middle of it and stretch in every direction and still not reach the edge.

The sheets were so soft and smooth they were almost slippery, and the pillows were like clouds. I almost felt guilty as I glanced over at River in the hospital bed on the other side of the room.

He had used the controls on his bed to recline the head of the bed back to a neutral position, and was laying there, staring up at the ceiling, like I wasn't even in the room. He didn't look nearly as comfortable as I felt.

Strangely, I think I was more at ease when I had shared the hospital bed with him. I had slept soundly and had woken up feeling warm and safe. But I had probably crowded him and made him feel cramped. With a sigh I turned onto my side with my back to him and closed my eyes. I had dragged my mother's quilt into the bed and now hugged it to my chest instead of covering my body with it. I knew it was immature to cling to a comfort object like a child, but I wasn't willing to put it away.

I had fewer nightmares when I slept under her quilt.

The night terrors had started after my father died, if you can even call them that. I can only describe it as being awake while trapped in a nightmare. I was completely lucid, but unable to wake myself up, no matter how hard I tried. I had seen myself die thousands of times, in every imaginable way. It was so realistic, so life-like that sometimes I couldn't tell the difference between the waking world and the dream world. Sometimes I would try to wake myself up in the dream, only to open my eyes up inside another one.

Someday, I thought, I won't be able to wake up at all. That was what scared me the most. That I would get trapped there forever.

I was asleep when I felt the mattress sink beside me, and I smelled the sweet scent of sandalwood. I knew I had to be dreaming. Obviously, there was no way that my mate could get out of his bed and climb into mine. It was just another dream... so real and yet impossible.

His hands felt warm and a little rough as they circled my waist and pulled me close against a rock hard body. I felt his breath on my neck as he pressed his nose close to my hair. I stiffened beside him, because those dreams usually started off as something nice and ordinary, but they very quickly turned dark and terrible. What would River do to me in my dream?

What did I want him to do to me? The thought sent a shiver down my spine, because quite honestly, I liked the way his hands felt against the skin of my midriff. I liked the solid feel of his body behind me. I even liked the way he smelled. And I wanted more.

After all, it was only a dream...

His hand started to caress my tummy, drawing slow circles with the tips of his fingers, gradually creeping around over my ribs, like he was testing to see if I was ticklish.

Luckily, I'm not.

I felt his lips press hotly against the side of my neck, and that wandering hand tightened slightly, and then ran from my shoulder down my arm. I could feel the evidence of his arousal pressing urgently against my backside.

I should have been afraid; this was one of my nightmares. River would hurt me, or he would force me. Somehow or other this enjoyable interlude was going to turn painful and ugly.

And yet, I couldn't call up any feelings of fear or anxiety. It was like his scent wrapped around me and soothed all of my distress. His hand slid up and down my arm a few times and then it splayed across my chest, cupping my breast through the thin material of my pajama top. My breasts fit perfectly in his large hand, almost as though they had been made for one another. I tried to keep still, and keep quiet, but when his thumb flicked over my nipple, I couldn't stop the little moan that escaped my throat.

More, I wanted to beg, but I kept my mouth clamped shut. I didn't want the good feelings to stop. I didn't want the River in my dreams to suddenly turn into a monster. I wanted to roll over and take my turn, I wanted to feel that body again. I'd barely gotten to experience the soft skin over his hard muscles when I bathed him, but in my dream, I could be so much bolder. I could explore and touch and taste all I wanted. I could find the places that gave him pleasure. I could run my hands up his ribs and see if he was ticklish.

But I didn't dare.

He rubbed against me from behind, the ridge of his desire nudging between my legs, asking for entrance.

Should I open my legs and invite him in? I wanted to, even my wolf seemed to be crying out for fulfillment. I slid my top thigh forward, just a couple of inches.

River made a low noise in his throat, but he didn't take advantage of the way I had opened to him.

His strong fingers gently massaged my breast, and his lips moved down my neck, to my shoulder, to the marking spot. When his lips landed there, I felt a jolt that went all the

way to my core. Yes, I wanted to cry, mark me. I was his chosen mate, he was supposed to give me his mark, to claim me. I felt the light graze of his teeth, and then he sucked on my skin, intensifying the ache even more. But then he withdrew without biting me. The hand over my breast squeezed a little and then let go. The mattress sagged slightly, and then the heat of his body was replaced by the cool night air.

Chapter 12 – Healing the Broken Alpha

I always wake up feeling tired and groggy after my night terrors. I rolled over with a groan, stretching out on the huge bed, feeling like I was swimming through a sea of sheets and blankets. I peeled open my gritty eyes and squinted at the windows, noticing that they were just barely beginning to show the first flush of watery dawn light. From the window my eyes darted across the room to the hospital bed.

River had rolled over on his side and had one arm folded under his head. His chest was rising and falling gently and he seemed to be sleeping peacefully. When I thought of the way I had dreamed of him touching me, I felt my face growing warm. I should probably be ashamed of myself, lusting after a man who can't even get out of his bed.

I slipped out of the covers and shivered a bit at the morning chill. I quietly made my way to the closet and looked at my rather pathetic choice of clothing. There was nothing there that was even remotely appropriate for a corporate office. I pulled out a straight black skirt and a plain blouse. The blouse was old and a little frayed around the collar and the cuffs, and the skirt was slightly faded from too many washings, but it was the best I could do. I took my clothes and slipped into the bathroom to get a quick shower.

As I was toweling off, I wiped the steam away from the mirror. I began running a comb through my damp hair to speed along the drying process. I couldn't see myself clearly in the streaky mirror, but when I pulled my hair away from my neck, I noticed a dark spot on my shoulder, right at the junction of my neck.

Right over my marking spot.

I tried to crane my neck to see the spot myself, but I couldn't see anything. I rubbed the towel over the mirror and leaned closer. It looked like a bruise.

It looked like a hickey.

I stood frozen in front of the mirror.

I tilted my chin up to see my neck better. It seemed like there were more spots there, though not as dark or pronounced as the one over my marking spot.

It was just a dream.

So how had those marks gotten on my skin?

I didn't have any makeup, so I had no way to cover the marks. Luckily the worst of it would be hidden under the collar of my blouse. I brushed my teeth and finished getting dressed, but all the while my stomach was pitching back and forth like a ship at sea. I wasn't sure what was upsetting me more, the prospect of going into the Blackstone offices, or the idea that a real person might have gotten into my bed last night and touched my body so intimately.

I had been so sure that the dream-dream man was River. I had not only let it happen, I had welcomed it.

But a dream man didn't leave marks. And my mate was bed-ridden. Could someone else have come into the room? But didn't River keep the door locked?

I twisted my hair up into what I hoped was a proper and professional looking bun, and then slipped on my worn and scuffed shoes. When I slipped out of the bathroom, River was awake. He had adjusted his bed so that he was sitting up, and he was watching me with a cold, closed expression. I felt his eyes sweep up and down my body, from the simple bun, down to my shoes. Whether he approved or disapproved, I couldn't tell.

Even though he'd just woken up, he still looked very handsome. There was a shadow of a beard on his jaw, and his hair was ruffled, but it didn't detract from his overall appeal. If anything, it only made him appear a little more dangerous. I stared at his lips a little too long, remembering the feel of his mouth in my dream.

But if it wasn't his mouth...

I swallowed down the urge to vomit, and hoped he couldn't see the bruises on my neck. What would he think if he knew someone had been in my bed? Would he be angry? Outraged? Would he care at all? Would he think I was loose and easy?

Did it even matter what he thought?

I felt my spirit sinking. I twisted my fingers together in front of my stomach. "Should I wait for your father down stairs?"

He turned his face away from me. "It would be better," he said flatly. "I don't want him coming in here looking for you."

I nodded and went to the door. I paused with my hand on the handle and looked back at him one last time. He seemed not to care that I was leaving, and didn't even offer me a good-bye, let alone a good luck.

Why did I let that bother me? Why was I harboring these expectations that would only lead to more disappointment? I let myself out quietly. I was barely two steps down the hallway when I heard the locking mechanism engage.

Was he locking me out, or locking himself in? When I returned in the evening, would he welcome me back, or would I be sleeping somewhere else tonight. The anxiety was starting to choke me.

I found Darian Blackstone waiting for me near the front entrance. He was wearing a grey suit with gold-diamond cufflinks. Beside him, his mate Gayle was dressed in an immaculate rose colored suit. She looked both feminine and powerful, her blond hair clipped back away from her face with a pearl-encrusted barrette, with matching pearl stud earrings in her delicate ears.

She took one look at me and rolled her eyes. Her expression said so much that words were not even necessary. I was so far out of my own league that I was like an alien from another planet. "I'm going to take the Lexus," she said, turning her back on me like I didn't even exist. "I have to go to Prosperity Springs for a meeting at 2:00."

"Okay darling, no problem. I'll see you tonight then," the former Alpha leaned down and gave his wife an intimate kiss on the lips. I turned my head away politely to give them some privacy.

"Let's go Lenora, don't want to be late for your first day."

Chapter 13 – Healing the Broken Alpha

"Argh!" Once Lenora was out of the room I threw back the blankets in frustration and jumped out of bed.

Lenora was making things much more complicated than I had anticipated, through no fault of her own! I couldn't seem to stay away from her. During the night she'd been mumbling and moaning in her sleep, like she was in the grip of a terrible nightmare. She sounded so distressed that I tried calling out her name to wake her up, but to no avail. I'd only meant to calm her from her bad dreams, but once I was on that bed with her I lost control.

Laying next to her felt so good, and so right. I was no saint, I'd been with many women in my lifetime, but I had never had an experience like that. I could no longer scent like a wolf, but even my dull human nose was beginning to appreciate the smell of my shampoo in her hair, and the way my citrusy soap lingered on her soft skin.

Touching her was a risk. I knew at any moment she might wake up full. All she had to do was roll over, and my secret would be outed too soon. But I couldn't help myself. She was

so warm, and her body so luscious, once my fingers found bare skin, I couldn't stop. The curve of her belly, the lean muscles of her arm.

The full, generous curve of her breast.

Her body responded so readily, even though she was still lingering somewhere between dream and wakefulness. Somehow I convinced myself that I could have just one little taste of her salty-sweet skin. But one taste could hardly satisfy my hunger. I was like a starving man who had been given only a lick of something so rich and savory.

I might not have a wolf, but I still had the urge, the instinct, the compulsion to mark her. But what good would it do? No wolf, no venom. No venom, no mark. I might leave a scar if I broke her skin with my dull human teeth, but it wouldn't be the same. It wouldn't change her scent, it wouldn't bond us together. It would only make her bleed and feel pain, and maybe mess up her chances of ever finding her real, fated mate.

So I just sucked on the spot, gaining a surprising amount of sensual pleasure and satisfaction from such a simple act. I wasn't really aware that I'd started to grind against her backside until she moved her leg, giving me even more access to the heated promise of her core.

That's when reality hit me.

I couldn't make love to a woman who wasn't even fully conscious. And I couldn't wake her up without ruining all of my plans. I had no other choice than to leave her alone and retreat back to that hateful hospital bed.

Well, at least I'd managed to pull her out of whatever nightmare had been disturbing her. For the rest of the night she slept quietly. I knew, because I didn't fall asleep again until the early hours of the morning.

I could tell that she felt uneasy around me when she came out of the shower. She looked at me like she was almost afraid of me. Had she actually woken up enough during the night to know what I had done? When her eyes fell on me her face flushed prettily and she looked away with an almost guilty expression.

What did she have to feel guilty about? If anyone should feel bad, it was me. After all, I was lying to this woman. And I had nearly taken advantage of her in her sleep.

She looked so sweet and innocent...but those clothes she was wearing! I didn't want to embarrass her, but they were entirely inappropriate. I'm sure even a second-hand shop would have discarded them as worn beyond redemption. I would have to do something about her wardrobe. Shame on her brother and her grandfather for not providing her with clothing that befitted an alpha's daughter.

But as long as she was my Luna, I would make sure she was well taken care of. I went into the closet and checked the sizes of the scant amount of clothes that were hanging on her side. I wasn't an expert in women's clothing by any means, but I could order her some generic professional outfits to get her started. Later she could pick out more for herself.

I pulled on a pair of shorts and put myself through the rigorous physical workout that Andrew had designed for me. The workout consisted of body-weight exercises and the resistance bands to target specific muscle groups. I then used a jump rope to improve my cardio endurance. When I emerged from my convalescence, people were going to be amazed.

I was not the weak and helpless invalid they all assumed me to be. In the last few months I had made a lot of gains. I'd put on weight, built muscle, improved my balance and flexibility.

The doctor was right. I was in the best shape of my life.

As a human.

But my wolf was gone, and that made me weak and vulnerable in a way that no amount of push ups or pull-ups or squats could ever remedy. I couldn't shift, my metabolism was slower, I didn't heal, and my senses were dull. I couldn't follow a scent trail, or see in the darkness. Hell, I could barely see in broad daylight.

And what's worse, everyone knew it. I don't know who let it out, but it was already public knowledge that the Alpha of Blackstone had no wolf. Who was going to respect a wolf-less alpha?

No matter how I punished my body, I would never be the werewolf I was before. Those who had once been my allies now looked at me with pity, and my enemies were looking at me while licking their chops in anticipation of an easy kill.

Just how long could Blackstone survive with a defective leader?

Hopefully long enough for me to destroy the person who had done this to me.

I finished my workout and then went to shower and shave. When I turned to the mirror I saw the smudges she had left on the mirror by wiping away the steam after her shower. I frowned as I pulled out some paper towels to clean away her small and delicate fingerprints. I couldn't help but wonder how she was getting on at headquarters. I knew all too well how cut-throat the workplace could be. The more I thought about it, the more restless I felt.

I would not have allowed her to go, except that I trusted my father to look out for her. There was no way I would have entrusted her to any other man. She was too beautiful, too innocent.

What if someone else caught her eye while she was away from me? What if some hungry young wolf realized what a treasure she was and snatched her away from me? What if she found her mate while she was out in the workplace.

The last possibility scared me the most. I wouldn't hold her to our marriage vows if she found her soulmate. That would just be heartless. I had always planned to set her free once I had fulfilled my plans, but now that I had her beside me, I liked that idea less and less.

Chapter 14 – Healing the Broken Alpha

The Blackstone Corporation office building was the tallest building in town. Eleven stories might not have been that impressive, but in a small werewolf town, it looked like the tower of Babel. The ultra modern steel and glass structure glinted in the morning sunlight, reflecting the bright blue sky above, and the surrounding trees in the park below. I walked meekly behind my father-in-law as we entered the building through the glass doors that fronted the building.

I wanted to change my mind, and go back to the packhouse, back to River's secluded bedroom, back to River. It defied explanation. Even though he was sickly and bedbound, when I was in his presence, I felt safe. I felt protected. Out in the world I felt more like the prey than the predatory wolf that I was.

The big, open lobby had burnished marble floors, and our footsteps seemed to echo from the high ceilings. I kind of thought it was an enormous waste of space, when the only furnishing in the enormous room was the circular information desk in the center. Darian approached the desk confidently, and gave the middle-aged receptionist a dashing smile.

"Good morning, Martha!"

She flushed a little and smiled back, brushing her graying hair out of her face. "Good morning Alpha!" She peered behind him and looked me over. "Who do you have with you today?"

"Ah, this lovely young lady is Lenora Blackstone. River's chosen mate."

Martha's eyes widened, and she immediately straightened and seemed to look at me with a new respect. "Oh my, Luna, it's so nice to meet you. Welcome to Blackstone Innovations Corporate Offices. If you need any help with anything, you just come down here and see me!"

I stammered a thank you. It was strange to hear anyone calling me Luna.

"Right then, I'm going to take her up to human resources and get her into the system. You have a great day, Martha."

“You too Alpha!”

As we walked away I noticed she reached under the desk and seemed to have activated a switch. We veered away from the main bank of elevators to a smaller one off to the side that was marked with a sign that said “PRIVATE-RESTRICTED.” It had no call button, but when Darian held his ID badge up to the little black box beside the stainless steel doors, there was a soft beep, and the doors slid open.

Inside, there were rows of buttons, and he selected the ninth floor. “Right, so like I was telling Martha, we’ll head on over to HR first and get you security clearance and a name badge. They’ll probably have some paperwork you need to fill out, the tax forms and benefit enrollment and all that. But I should warn you ahead of time...Ashley can be...well, she and River have a history.”

I didn’t know what that meant, and I didn’t know who Ashley was, but I was about to find out. The elevator doors slid open, and we stepped out into a hallway of offices. Most of the doors on either side were open, and a few people looked up from the desks curiously as we passed. A few people called out greetings to the former alpha. About halfway down the hall we turned into the door marked “Human Resources Department”.

Once we stepped inside the door, we entered a little waiting room, with a few chairs pushed up against the wall, and another, smaller receptionist desk. Darian greeted that person, and once again explained that he had brought up a new employee. This time he didn’t mention that I was River’s mate. I followed his lead and smiled politely, but didn’t give out any more information than was required.

“Right, well, you know Ashley requires an appointment–” the receptionist started to hedge, but one look at Darian’s face as he lifted his eyebrow at her, and she reconsidered. “But I’m sure she has a few minutes to squeeze you in, Alpha. Give me just a moment,” she scooted out of her chair and dashed to one of the other doors that opened from reception.

A moment later, one of the most beautiful creatures I’d ever seen stepped out. She was tall and willowy. Her red dress clung to her tiny waist and dropped just to her knees. She had golden blond hair which she wore loose, and pulled over one shoulder, leaving the graceful arch of her neck bare on one side. Her make up was impeccable, and her lipstick seemed to have been custom made to match the exact shade of red on her dress.

I felt like shrinking into the floor. I was never more aware of my poor, dowdy clothes than I was at that moment. I had never felt more out of place, more out of my element. I should not have come here.

“Ah, Ashley, nice to see you.” Darian said smoothly.

“Likewise, Alpha Blackstone. How is River doing? You know I’ve been so worried about him!” When I heard River’s name from her lips, I stiffened. Something about the way she

said it irked me. She didn't call River by his title, she called him by his first name, like they were close friends. Like they were intimate.

I shouldn't care, it shouldn't matter. I bit the inside of my cheek and kept quiet.

I saw a muscle twitch in Darian's jaw, too, but his face remained polite and smiling. "He's doing very well, thank you. I think he will be coming to the office in person very, very soon." He glanced over at me, and his eyes twinkled as he smiled.

"But for now, I've brought someone else. May I introduce our newest employee, Lenora. She needs all the new hire paperwork."

When Ashley's gaze found me, her expression turned hard and cold. She continued to address Darian as though I wasn't even present. "I see. But it really wasn't necessary to bring her up yourself, Alpha. We could have simply scheduled her to come in for a new-hire orientation. We hold one every other Tuesday, as you probably know."

"Well we don't want to wait until next Tuesday, so I hope you can take a moment of your time to get her set up right now." It was quite remarkable the way he could speak so politely, and issue an order all at the same time. The lady in red looked like she wanted to refuse, but thought better of it. Instead she smiled coolly and gestured toward her office door. "Of course, why don't you have a seat in my office, and we'll get it started. Linda was it?"

"Lenora," I corrected her quietly.

"Okay, then," she gestured toward the two chairs across from her desk, and then circled around to take her own seat. She slid open a file drawer and took out a packet of papers which she slid across to me, along with a ballpoint pen that bore the company's howling wolf logo on the barrel. "You go ahead and start filling that out, and I'll just get some basic information into the computer so we can issue your name badge."

I picked up the pen and looked down at the questions on the form. Darian had introduced me as Lenora Blackstone downstairs, but I hadn't taken any steps to legally change my name, and I wasn't sure that I wanted to. So I just printed out my maiden name on the forms.

Ashley's manicured fingernails, also painted red, began to dance over the keys. "So, which floors will she need access to?"

"She needs full, unrestricted access, including the elevator and executive floor."

That gave the woman pause. She looked across the desk at me with her eyebrows raised. Then her expression cleared into a rather degrading smirk. "Oh, I got it, janitorial services right? You must be the new cleaning lady..." She pronounced it with an obvious sneer, and again I felt like sliding beneath the chair.

Clearly she thought the only way a person like me would have unrestricted access to the Blackstone building was if it was required for me to clean the toilets on every floor. And sadly, she wasn't wrong in her assessment. I'd never had a formal job, and I probably wasn't even qualified to work in the housekeeping department. However, Darian put his hand on my shoulder.

"No, Lenora is my new executive assistant."

Her fingers froze again. "Pardon? I didn't know you were looking for an assistant." Her look turned icy again. "I know you've been out of the office for awhile Alpha, but there is a procedure to follow to create a new position." She gave me another disdainful look. "And we always advertise new positions in-house before we hire from outside. It was part of River's 'promote from within' initiative."

I glanced nervously back at Darian, but he seemed unphased by her thinly veiled complaint. "River approved this appointment, personally, so I'm sure you'll understand why we circumvented the usual procedure."

I noticed that he still didn't mention that I was River's mate, or use the term "Luna."

I finished filling out the paperwork, and pushed it back across the desk to the woman. She stopped typing to flip through the pile of papers. Her hand stopped when she saw what I had written for my address. She looked at me sharply. "You are living in the pack house?"

"Yes, ma'am."

Darian also nodded in confirmation.

"You didn't list a phone number—" she continued to scan the documents.

"I don't have a phone," I replied quietly.

"You can put in River's personal phone as her contact," Darian said, and he looked like he was trying to hide a rather smug smile. "He'll always know how to get in touch with her."

I ducked my head but I heard how she huffed and started tapping the keys again. A few minutes later she had used her cell phone to take my picture, and then printed out a plastic name badge on a special printer. She attached a lanyard and handed it across the desk to me.

The photo was terrible. I was too pale, my eyes were too wide, and my hair was scraped back too severely from my face. It looked like a criminal mug shot. Darian thanked her and escorted me out of the office and back toward the private elevator. Ashley watched us go with a cold and calculating look on her perfectly beautiful face.

“Let’s make sure yours is working,” he said, gesturing to the small black box. I pressed my name badge against it the way I had seen Darian do, and sure enough, there was a beep, and the doors slid open.

“I don’t know why River lets Ashley work in human resources,” Darian said absently as he pushed the button for the executive floor. “There is nothing human about that woman.”

Chapter 15 – Healing the Broken Alpha

The executive level was even more spectacular than anything I’d seen so far. Most of the offices were all walled with glass, so that the panoramic view was unrestricted, showing the spread of the Blackstone township below, from the small urban center, to the packland forests, and the mountains beyond that. I knew that Ridgemoore was somewhere to the south, and the city of Prosperity Springs was to the west, but they weren’t visible in the landscape.

Each office seemed to have a huge desk, and other furnishings according to the style and function of each occupant. I felt like a bit of a voyeur watching the people at their desks as we passed by. They were all absorbed in their own work, and no one took much notice of our passing. I suppose they were used to working inside of their little fish bowls and had learned to ignore what was going on outside.

Darian led me to the largest corner office, the one that was designated for the CEO. There was a private secretary sitting at a smaller desk outside the door. She looked up and smiled at the former alpha, and then gave me a cool, suspicious look.

“Ah, this is River’s secretary, Janet. Janet, this is Lenora, she’ll be working with me until River returns.”

“Yes, sir.” Janet said with professional courtesy. She gave me a tight-lipped smile. “Welcome to the company, Miss Lenora.” I took in Janet’s appearance. She was very beautiful. Not as stunning as the woman down in HR, but definitely very attractive in her own right. She had natural red hair that was trimmed in a pixie style around her delicate face. She wore a form-fitting mint-green dress with a very short skirt. The color made her grass-green eyes really pop.

Somehow it gave me a sinking feeling, thinking about River coming to greet this lovely woman every day when he went to work. No doubt she brought him his morning coffee and probably escorted him to important meetings. I couldn’t stop the unreasonable surge of jealousy that overwhelmed me as I wondered what else she assisted him with.

For one moment I had the twisted thought that I was rather relieved that River was confined to his bed and unable to come into the office. Then I banished it as mean and unfair. Even if he was enjoying the benefits with his personal secretary, I couldn’t wish anyone to suffer as he was suffering.

I picked at the frayed edge of my cuffs, feeling even worse in front of the secretary than I had in front of Ashley. “Th-thank you,” I managed to stutter before I scurried into the office and Darian shut the door behind me.

The CEO’s office was not faced with glass like the others, but was paneled in warm, natural oak, shutting it off and giving some privacy from the rest of the offices on the floor. There was, however, a two-way mirror that allowed the boss to see out over the floor without being observed. There was a huge, L-shaped desk, a small conference table with chairs, and a comfortable looking sofa with a glass-topped coffee table.

Darian sat down in the rolling office chair with a groan. “We’ll have to arrange to have a desk put in here for you. For now, I hope you don’t mind working at the table.”

“No, of course not, the table is fine.” I took that as my cue to take a seat in one of the chairs at the conference table. But once I was there, I had no idea what I was supposed to do.

He opened a laptop and booted it up, and then pulled a thick stack of files from a drawer of the desk. “You will have to familiarize yourself with all the facets of Blackstone Innovations,” he started explaining absently, “And it’s a lot, as we have dozens of divisions under our umbrella. Real Estate and property development, Finance and Investing, The Blackstone Fashion line,” He kept listing off things until my brain went numb. How on earth was I ever going to learn the ins and outs of so many different industries?

“Let’s start with something small, shall we?” He pushed his chair back and went to the door. He opened it and spoke to the secretary. “Janet, could you get me the files on the shifter schools?”

“Yes, of course.”

A few minutes later, Janet returned with a massive three ring binder and set it down on Darian’s desk. “This was a project that I started myself,” he said with some measure of pride. “It’s a private school for shifters. I like to think of it as the Montessori of the werewolf world. Gets our kids out of the human public school system, and gives them a chance to develop in a safe, nurturing environment. There are now fourteen schools in operation across the country, and one in Canada.” He picked up the heavy binder and dropped it in front of me with a thud. “Start reading, take notes, ask questions. By the end of next week, I want you to know everything there is to know about our private education sector.”

I swallowed nervously and nodded, as I pulled the binder closer. “Um, could I have a pad of paper, and a pen please?”

This time Darian didn’t bother to get up from his desk. He pushed a button on his phone system that apparently activated an intercom speaker on Janet’s desk. “Janet, could we get

some supplies in here? Lenora's going to need a laptop, a briefcase, notebooks, pens, highlighters, the whole office supply catalog!"

"Yes, Alpha," came her obedient reply over the speaker.

Twenty minutes later she came back with her arms full of everything the alpha had requested. A brand new laptop, still in the box, an expensive looking briefcase that could be carried on the shoulder or converted into a backpack, a stack of notepads, and an assortment of pens, markers, and for some reason, a calculator.

I had no idea what I would need a calculator for.

Janet hardly looked at me as she set the items on the table. "Shall I bill these to the executive petty cash account?" she asked Darian.

"That's fine. By the way, see what you can do about getting a small desk moved in here, by tomorrow if possible."

"You got it," she said cheerfully, but the look she gave me was full of annoyance. "Also, Alpha, Zachary is asking to see you, if you have time to work him in."

Damian glanced at his Rolex. "What time is my first meeting?"

"Not until ten."

"Fine, send him in." He sat back in his chair and addressed me. "You might as well get to know everyone, while we are at it." He gave me a funny look before he flipped open the first file and started going through the papers.

I took my cue from him and opened the cover of the massive binder, which had to be eight inches thick. I started reading the original proposals which had been submitted to the board before the first school had ever been built. I thought it would be boring, but actually the concept fascinated me. In my home pack, there were very few children, certainly not enough to warrant our own private schools. We had all been bussed to the nearest elementary school, where we were integrated with the human children. We were definitely treated differently by our peers and the teachers alike, and by the time we left for junior high, I think most of us werewolves had grown sour about education. We wanted nothing more than to escape from the suffocating system. I certainly hadn't enjoyed my school years, but maybe that would have been different if I'd had the opportunity to attend one of the Blackstone Academies.

I was reading through the prospectus that had been printed for the very first school when there was a quiet knock on the door, and Janet poked her head in the office. "Excuse me, Alpha. Zachary is here."

A tall young man strode confidently into the office. Immediately I saw a strong resemblance between River and this younger man. His face was narrower, and his body seemed less mature than River's but he had the same dark good looks, the same aura of power and charisma.

"Zach, come on in, have a seat. This is my new executive assistant, Lenora. Lenora, my nephew, and the company VP, Zachary Blackstone. He's my brother's oldest son." Again, I noticed the fact that my father-in-law didn't elaborate on exactly who I was in the Blackstone family. It was curious that he would openly share that information with the front door receptionist, but he was being so vague with his upper executives. However, I simply smiled and extended my hand, "Hello, nice to meet you."

He gave me a quick look, and then did a double take. On the second glance, his eyes ran over me in a slow, assessing way that made me feel like squirming. "Likewise." He gripped my hand gently, and held it a moment too long. Then he seemed to dismiss me as he took a seat in front of Darian's desk.

"Uncle, I didn't know you were looking for an assistant. I would have given you an excellent recommendation."

"No need, everything has already been sorted. Now, what did you need to speak to me about?"

"It's the Hakefield account," Zachary said, his face settling into a serious look, "they are expressing more concerns over River's health, and are threatening to pull out. They want a face to face meeting with the CEO to confirm that he is alive and well."

Darian ran a hand over his face and sighed tiredly. "I think they are grasping for any excuse to back out of the deal," he muttered. "Maybe we need to dig deeper into their financial records."

They continued to talk about accounts and deals, investors and capital, and a bunch of other terms that I didn't really understand. Finally Zachary stood up and prepared to take his leave. He paused by the door. "Maybe, if I could just talk to River myself, I could talk some sense into him."

Darian frowned and steepled his hands on the desk. "He was adamant that he didn't want to see you, Zach. I'm sorry."

Zachary pushed his hands into the pockets of his sport coat. "He's still sore about Ashley, isn't he?"

Of course I had no idea what Zachary was talking about. Was he referring to the Ashley from human resources that had looked at me like she wanted to eat me alive? My father in law had mentioned that River and Ashley had a history. I had a suspicious sinking feeling

that there might have been some kind of romantic relationship between my new mate and the gorgeous woman downstairs.

The older man looked mildly amused as he glanced over at me. His next words seemed to confirm my suspicion. “No, I think River has moved on from Ashley at this point.”