

Chapter 16 – Healing the Broken Alpha

Having Lenora gone should have been a relief. Without her presence in the room I was free to drop the bed-ridden alpha act and move around at will. I should have been able to apply myself to my work and my research without distraction.

But instead of that, I found myself anxious and distracted. I was unable to focus and ended up pacing the room, my thoughts on Lenora instead of the business at hand.

It wasn't until I picked up that old, ratty quilt that she left neatly folded at the bottom of the bed and pressed it against my nose that I felt some modicum of calm. Despite the fine linen on my bed, she still wrapped herself in that quilt at night, and even with my dull human senses I could smell her unique essence on the fabric.

I wrapped the quilt over my shoulders and had the brilliant idea to log into the Blackstone security system, where I had the ability to monitor the CCTV cameras from anywhere. With a few strokes of the keys I was bringing up the camera in my corner office. The angle wasn't great. She was sitting with her back to the camera and I only saw her face when she turned to listen or to speak to my father, which wasn't often. Most of the time she sat quietly reading through a file and taking notes by hand. A new laptop was set up on the table beside her, plugged in and charging, but she didn't touch it.

Keeping the video feed open in a small window in the corner of my screen, I started working on the documents I was reviewing. In some small way, it made me feel like I was there, working beside her, instead of being shut in the prison of my own room.

I took comfort in the fact that my self-imposed confinement was nearly at an end.

Still, I was watching the clock, impatiently waiting for the work day to come to an end. I breathed a sigh when Lenora finally stood up and stretched. She placed the big binder on the desk and then packed her notebooks and laptop into the carrying case. She stood quietly while my father slipped on his jacket and gathered his own things. I stiffened when I saw him put a hand on her shoulder.

I didn't want anyone to touch her, not even my father.

The video feed didn't have audio, but I could see her face now, and her lips didn't move. She slipped quietly into my father's shadow as he left the office, her head down, shoulders hunched defensively.

That stirred something dark within me. She was my luna, although it was only meant to be a temporary arrangement. Leave alone the fact that she was my wife, she was the daughter of an alpha! She should carry herself with strength and pride! I hated the submissive way she presented herself, like a dog that had been beaten too many times.

My mate was too meek. Too vulnerable.

I logged out of the security system, and prepared myself for her return. I folded up the quilt and put it back on the bottom of the bed, just as she had left it. I put on my silk pajamas and slipped back into the hospital bed. I arranged my laptop and my work files on the side table, but I was only pretending to work. All my attention was focused on the door, in anticipation of her return.

She knocked softly and waited for me to call out permission before she opened the unlocked door. She slipped quietly into the room and her eyes went immediately to mine. It almost seemed that she was glad to see me. But it must have been my imagination, there was absolutely no reason for her to feel any fondness toward me. Still, I had an unfamiliar urge to welcome her warmly. I even wanted to wrap my arms around her and crush her small body against my chest. For reasons unknown, I had missed her the whole day, and I now desperately wanted to feel her skin against mine.

I stuffed that impulse down, feeling angry with myself for even entertaining such thoughts. I spoke with as much indifference as I could muster. "You're back."

"Yes, I'm back." she stated softly, lowering her briefcase to the floor beside the bed. I really needed to order her a proper desk for the room, if we were going to be working in here together tomorrow. She retreated to the bathroom and came out a few minutes later, dressed in a pair of leggings and another faded t-shirt. Which reminded me.

"There's a package for you on the bed," I informed her gruffly, and pretended to read the words on my screen, even as I watched her timidly approach the box on the bed. Her small hands peeled off the packing tape and removed the three outfits I'd taken the liberty of ordering for her. There was a dark skirt and blazer with a pearl colored shell, a simple and modest navy blue dress, and a pair of women's trousers with a bold, floral print top.

She held the garments in her hand and blinked at me owlishly. "You...these...are these clothes for me?" There was a suspicious wobble in her voice, like she wanted to cry.

The idea of my little mate crying made me feel almost panicked. "Yes, they are for you," I answered quickly, and then cleared my throat and schooled my voice and my expression to be as cold and emotionless as possible. "If you are going to represent me in the office, you need to at least look presentable."

Her face blanched, and she looked almost as if I'd slapped her. But then she recovered and her face returned to a bland and neutral expression. "Thank you. I appreciate your...concern."

I knew my words had been cruel, but at least I had averted a terrifying emotional moment.

“Try them on,” I said, dismissing her lame expression of gratitude. I certainly didn’t deserve it. “If everything fits, I’ll have Remmy take them to be washed, so that they will be ready for you on Wednesday.”

“O-okay.” She clutched the new clothes against her chest and scrambled back to the bathroom. I kind of wished I could ask her to come out and model the clothes for me, so that I could assess my choices, but I couldn’t figure out a way to make the request without it becoming awkward.

Fifteen minutes later she emerged again, with the new clothes all neatly folded in her arms. “Everything fits very nicely,” she said in an almost-whisper. “The trousers are a little long, but if someone could lend me a needle and some thread, I can hem them myself.”

I stared at her blankly. A luna who did her own sewing and mending? I was beginning to feel like I had married Cinderella.

“Ask Remmy,” I checked the time on my screen. “You should go down to the dining room,” I stated dismissively. “Dinner is served at 7:00 PM.”

“No.”

Her refusal was surprisingly firm.

“No?”

“I want to eat here, with you.” She set the clothes carefully on my dresser and turned to face me.

Her soft statement pleased me more than it should have. But I kept pushing her. “What if I don’t want to eat with you?”

Her chin tipped up stubbornly. “Then I will sleep hungry,” she stated flatly. And just to prove her statement, she went to the big bed and crawled up on it, flipping back the blankets. She reached for the old quilt and made herself comfortable, wrapping the quilt around her body and then nestling her head back into the pillows.

She sniffed, wrinkling up her nose. She brought the edge of the quilt up to her face and pressed her nose into the fabric. “Why does my mother’s quilt smell like...you?”

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I breathed deeply of the sweet sandalwood scent that now seemed to permeate my mother’s quilt. It was so strong, like he had spread the blanket and rolled around in it or

something. But when I asked him about it he only looked at me like I was crazy and then went back to his work on the laptop.

I sighed and rolled over, putting my back to him, pulling the quilt tighter around my body, and burying my nose deeper in the soft cotton. Secretly, I loved the smell. I still had no idea why it was all over my blanket, but I took some measure of comfort in the scent, even while my heart was aching.

It shouldn't bother me. This man was a stranger to me; his opinion should not matter to me. The fact that he hated me so much shouldn't dig into my heart and make it ache like this. I had really tried my best to make the man like me, even if he would never love me, but still he found me repulsive. I had shamed him by going to his business in my shabby clothes, and he disliked me so much that he didn't even want to eat a meal with me.

Well, good and fine! I didn't need to eat anyway! It wouldn't be the first time I'd slept on an empty stomach! I would rather go to bed hungry every night than go down to that dinner table and try to eat while my mother-in-law glared daggers at me, and my brother-in-law undressed me with his eyes. Yes, I would rather keep company with my cold, mean husband than try to be polite and well mannered in front of my inlaws.

The only person in this house who was even remotely friendly toward me was my father-in-law. But I couldn't keep taking advantage of his kindness, or he too, would grow tired of me.

It was only seven in the evening, and I hadn't brushed my teeth or braided my hair for the night, but who cared anyway? It wasn't like I was sharing the bed, so I didn't need to worry about offending my husband with my bed head and morning breath! I forced my eyes closed and started counting my breaths, trying not to let my ears tune in to the sound of his fingers moving nimbly over the keys of his laptop, or the creak of the hospital bed as he shifted his position.

I should probably have asked him if he needed anything before I crawled into bed like a petulant child, I thought guiltily. Whether he wanted me for a wife or not, he was depending on me to help him with certain things. What if he needed another sponge bath with those disposable wipes? What if he needed assistance to shave his face? How did he get back and forth to the bathroom anyway? I assumed the staff must help him when he needed it.

Well, if he needed help, he could ask for it, but I wasn't going to go offer anything. It would seem like I was desperate for his attention, like I was just trying too hard to get close to him.

And I wasn't. Or even if I was, I wasn't going to let him know it.

I had almost started to drift off to sleep when I heard the lock disengage from the door. A moment later there was a light knock and someone entered the room. Without rolling

over, I recognized the sound of Remmy's particular footstep, just before I smelled his minty scent. I heard a bit of noise from River's hospital bed, as the food tray was placed on the bedside table, and cutlery was arranged.

"Kindly take the Luna's new clothes for washing," River asked politely. "And if you could please find her a sewing kit, she'd like to make some alterations to the trousers."

"Of course, Alpha." I turned over to see the butler pulling my new clothes off the dresser. He hung them over his arm like a dish towel and gave me a stiff smile before he exited the room. I sighed and rolled back.

The sad thing was, I really loved those new outfits. Whoever had selected them had somehow known my exact size. I didn't recognize the brand on the label, but I knew enough to recognize that the fabrics were expensive and the craftsmanship was really high quality. At first I'd mistakenly thought the clothing was meant to be a gift of care and affection. But it turns out they were only offered as a means of self-preservation.

I had embarrassed him today.

Well, I had embarrassed myself too, but there was little I could do about it. I didn't have money to buy new clothes. Things had been so tight at home after my father died that I didn't dare ask for anything extra. The little that my grandfather had given me had been promptly taken away again by my brother.

"Lenora." River's voice cut through my unpleasant musings.

"Hmm?"

"Please come eat with me. Remmy brought up a meal for two."

I pushed my mother's quilt down and rolled over to face him. He had adjusted the bed to the fully upright position, and a heavily laden tray was spread out before him on the side table, along with two sets of cutlery and an extra glass of wine.

I didn't drink, but everything else on the plate looked absolutely scrumptious. I hadn't eaten in the morning. There wasn't enough time before I had to commute to the office with the former alpha. And when Darian had escorted me to the company cafeteria for lunch, I'd been acutely aware of all the eyes staring at me, not only out of curiosity, but with a sort of thinly veiled contempt, and, well, my appetite had failed me.

Now the savory scent of wild game was teasing my nose, and testing my empty stomach. And after all, he did say please.

I wanted to refuse, but I realized that I was being childish. It wasn't like River Blackstone would suffer if I refused to eat! So I threw off my quilt and slid off the bed, pulling up the heavy wing-backed chair so that I could reach his bedside table. I tried not to look at him

as I lifted the covers off the plates that Remmy had delivered. There was venison stew with warm crusty rolls. Thick chunks of meat and hearty root vegetables were swimming in a thick, dark gravy.

I arranged the plates and the silverware so that everything was within River's easy reach, and then sat down and picked up my fork.

Surprisingly he sat up, leaving the support of the pillow and mattress, and his hand reached out and caught my wrist in a firm but gentle grip. He held it there, his thumb stroking over the tender skin of my inner arm. His stormy eyes bore into mine, and his expression was very serious.

"As long as I'm alive, Lenora, you will never sleep hungry."

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"You will never sleep hungry while I'm alive."

I said the words, and I meant them. I did not bring Lenora to Blackstone in order to mistreat her or make her miserable. I knew it wasn't an ideal situation for her, being forced to join herself to a broken Alpha like me, but I didn't have any intention of exacerbating her suffering. I certainly had no intention of denying her the most basic need of food.

Still, I couldn't help but wonder why she was refusing to eat downstairs. I narrowed my eyes at her suspiciously. "Was my father unkind to you today?"

She looked up from her plate with an expression of surprise. "What? No! Your father has been nothing but kind. He was very patient with me today." She said it with such conviction that I did not doubt her.

"Then why are you refusing to eat with my family?" I felt an uneasiness creep into my awareness. "Is it my brother?"

Asher could be very immature, and I knew he sometimes came off as a jerk. The way she stiffened seemed to confirm my suspicions, even when she shook her head in denial. However, she looked up and met my stare directly. I no longer had the wolf-ish ability to give anyone the dominant alpha stare, so she had no reason to fear meeting my eyes. Not that I would have stared her down, regardless. Lenora was meant to be my mate, that made her my equal. In fact, it pleased me to see her acting so boldly.

"I prefer to eat here with you." She reiterated. "That's all."

I didn't really believe her, but at the same time, her answer made me feel warm inside. Could it be that she really just wanted to stay near me?

She finished her meal, and then quietly began to gather up the dishes.

“I can call Remmy to do that,” I said, as she carefully stacked the plates and glasses on the tray.

“There’s no need,” Lenora said quietly, “I’ve got it.”

She slipped out of the room to return the tray to the kitchen, and returned a few short minutes later. She shut the bedroom door and then turned to me. “Can I assist you with anything?”

I thought for a moment. “Yes, could you bring me my toothbrush.”

She went to the bathroom and returned with my electric toothbrush, the toothpaste, a glass of water, and a plastic basin that I could spit into. While I brushed my teeth in bed, she went into the bathroom once more. When she came back out her breath was minty and her hair had been pulled to one side and braided. She took the items from me, and I heard her wash out the basin and put it away below the sink.

She appeared again near the foot of my bed. “Is there anything else?”

I should have told her no. I was ready for bed. I had already snuck into the bathroom to empty my bladder while she carried the tray of dirty dishes down stairs. I should have said goodnight and turned my back to her sweet face and uncertain eyes. She almost looked...wistful.

It would be better for her, better for me, if I kept my distance.

“Yes,” I said gruffly, despite myself. “Come here.”

She approached the bed slowly. I had pushed the over-the-bed table aside in preparation for sleeping and lowered the side rails, but the back of the bed was still up, keeping me propped in a sitting position. She stopped, standing just out of my reach.

“Come closer,” I demanded.

Something flashed in her eyes, but she took another step nearer, to the point where I could lean forward and grab her waist, pulling her onto the bed with me, right onto my lap. She was small, her weight was almost nothing in my hands.

Her eyes went wide with surprise and she gasped, but she didn’t fight me. Her soft, round bottom settled perfectly into my pelvis, and she twisted her body to see my face and gauge my next move.

I had no idea what I was doing, but having her there in my arms felt very right and natural. It shouldn't be so comfortable to hold a virtual stranger in my lap, but it was like her body was made just to suit me. Her curves fit perfectly into my dips.

Deep down I heard some dull inner warning, but I pushed it aside to enjoy the brief moment of closeness.

I ran my hand up and down her back, feeling some of the tension leave her spine at my touch.

If I still had my wolf, I could have purred to her, and the rumbling in my chest would have calmed and comforted her. But it seemed the touch of my hand was having much the same effect, and with a little urging, she let her body relax against my chest, and her head rested next to my neck. I breathed deeply of the scent from her hair and let my eyes close for just a moment. Bits of her hair tickled my chin, so I reached up and smoothed the black strands back into place.

She tipped her head up to look at me. Her brown eyes were like warm pools of melted chocolate, with little bits of gold flecks around the iris. Her naturally long eyelashes lowered shyly, but not before I saw the desire in her gaze. Somehow, even though she thought I was paralyzed in bed, she still felt some attraction. That was quite remarkable in itself. What would she feel if she knew I was, in fact, an able bodied man?

I felt a hell of a lot more than mere attraction. Even though I knew I should keep a distance from her, I found myself cupping her cheek and lowering my head to taste those sweet lips again. Her lower lip trembled slightly before she ever so slowly began to kiss me back. I stroked my thumb over the softness of her cheek and slipped my tongue around the curve of her lip. She sighed into my mouth and parted her lips in an unconscious invitation. I deepened the kiss, invading her mouth with my tongue, eliciting a slight moan from her.

The small sound went straight to my groin, and I began to grow hard under the comfortable weight of her backside. She stiffened when she felt the evidence of my arousal pressing against her backside. She gasped softly and turned her head away, breaking the kiss. Her hand had slipped from my shoulder down to my chest, and she abruptly pulled it back as though it had burned her. She swallowed hard and refused to meet my eyes again.

The urge to show her exactly how able-bodied and capable I was practically overwhelmed me. I longed to shift her so that she was facing me and her soft thighs were straddling my hips. I longed to press my hardness into the inviting softness of her core. For a moment I thought about doing just that.

She was such a quiet and composed young woman, surely she could keep my secret?

She shifted, trying to get away from the pressure of my erection, but I didn't let her move from my lap. She sat up straighter, her small hands pressing my chest, taking the warmth of her body away from mine. "Alpha River," her voice was a little hoarse. She cleared her throat and tried again. "Wh-what was it you needed from me?"

I dropped my hand from her face and ran it along her thigh, eliciting a shiver from her. My little mate was so innocent and so responsive. She glanced up at me, and I could see the lust in her eyes, and the warm heat infusing her cheeks.

"Just this," I said in a low voice. She averted her face from mine, so I nuzzled her hair again with my nose, breathing in deeply. "A goodnight kiss from my wife."

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I felt like my face was on fire when the alpha finally released me and let me slide off the hospital bed. More than my face, it felt like my insides had turned to molten lava, and the source of that volcano was right between my thighs. My wolf was whining and I felt a feral need to rub myself against the hardness that sprang up under my backside. I wanted the friction, I needed it!

When I went to the big bed and climbed on it by myself, I felt the aching emptiness keenly. If I had been alone in the room, I might have taken care of it myself, but I wasn't going to take the chance on River hearing me pleasuring myself while he lay in a hospital bed just a few feet away.

So I wrapped the quilt around my body and tried to think of something else. Something boring. Something embarrassing. Like my day at the office. Like the way everyone had looked at me like I'd stepped in dog s.hit and was tracking it through the building. Like how stupid I felt trying to understand all obscure business and financial terms I'd encountered while reading the file about Blackstone Academy.

I had felt the resentment oozing from the other employees. I felt their cold stares biting into my back every time I had to step out of the office. I felt their judgment falling down on me, but it was nothing compared to the harsh words I was saying to myself. And lucky me, I would get to do it all over again on Wednesday.

But tomorrow, I would get to stay home and work with River. That thought filled me with a different kind of anxiety, one that bordered on...excitement. I don't know why, but I was looking forward to spending the day with him, working from home. Maybe I could ask him the questions I had scribbled down on my note pad. Maybe I could ask him why they had given me a laptop computer. Which work was I expected to do with it? Maybe... I would just get to be close to him all day.

I had almost recovered from my goodnight kiss, when a wicked thought entered my mind.

Would it be strictly business between us... or would he reach for me again?

And just like that, I felt the need ignite all over again.

I sighed and rolled over so that I was facing his bed. He had put out the light, but with my wolf-senses I could still see the outline of his bed, and the shape of his large body under the covers. He lay flat on his back staring up at the ceiling, and I could see that his eyes were still open.

What did he think about?

Was he regretting the kiss we shared? Or did he, too, long for more?

I stared at him a long time, half-wishing he would turn his head on the pillow and look at me, or better yet talk to me. I wanted to hear the deep rumble of his voice, I wanted to feel that curious way it soothed all of my raw edges. I wanted him to tell me things, common things, secret things, small things that would let me get to know him better. I longed to feel some connection with him.

But River remained silent. At some point it started to rain, and the sound of the drops pattering against the glass of the windows finally lulled me off to sleep.

But there was no peace in sleep, as I felt myself being pulled into the lucid hell of my dreams. I jerked awake, but I wasn't really awake. I was just aware inside another dream. I flinched in a bed, but it wasn't the huge, custom made bed that I fell asleep on in River's room. This was my twin bed back in RidgeMoore House.

It was the same bed I'd been sleeping in since I was four years old, with the same stained and sagging mattress. I'd long since outgrown the frilly white and pink comforter, which was now threadbare and coming apart at the seams. My hands reached out, searching for my mother's quilt, but I felt nothing but the cold sheets on either side of me. I sat up and leaned over the edge to check the floor, but the quilt was gone.

Then, from the corner of my eye, I saw my mother passing down the hall through the open door. It was dark, and there were no windows to illuminate the hall, but still I was sure I had seen her figure moving through the darkness. I slipped from the bed and started to follow her.

I missed her so much. I just wanted to talk to her one last time.

I knew this was a dream. I knew my mama was gone, but as long as I was stuck in this dream-world, I wanted to be near her. But as I moved down the hallway, it was getting colder and colder. My bare feet were starting to stick to the floor like I was walking on ice, and my ankles were aching. Part of me wanted to go back to my room, back to my bed, and crawl under the blanket.

At the end of the hallway, my mother turned back, finally I could see her. I could see her black hair hanging loose around her hips, framing her beautiful brown face. But then she opened her mouth and she started to scream. Her screams were like glass shattering in my ears, and although I clapped my hands over my ears the shards of sound still cut through me, until my hands came away from my face covered with blood. I backed into the wall and felt the icy chill against my back, as my nightgown froze to the wall, trapping me there.

I turned my head and saw something moving at the other end of the hallway.

It was the shape of a man, a huge man, his black form filling the space like a grizzly standing tall. He came closer and closer, and with every step he made, the temperature plummeted. I could see my breath vapor in front of my face, and I knew that monster was coming for me.

I'd had this dream before, so I already knew what was coming. I opened my mouth to scream, but no sound would come out.

I screamed for the only person I could think of who could help me. "River." It came out as a whisper of air. He would never hear me.

If I could scream, really scream, I could wake myself up, I could escape from this nightmare before the monster came, before his freezing breath touched my face. Before his dull claws raked across my stomach. I couldn't run away. My feet had frozen to the floor, and my body had stuck to the wall like a tongue to a frozen flagpole. I couldn't pull away without skinning myself.

I still fought it, though. Thrashing, twisting my head back and forth, still trying to get sound out of my paralyzed throat.

"Help me!" it was barely a whisper, and I knew nobody would hear me. Nobody would come to my rescue. I was going to die.

Again.

I turned to my mother, but she was already dead. She lay there on the frosted hallway floor in front of the broken window at the end of the hall.. Snow blew in through shattered glass, swirling around her, the flakes that rested on her body were quickly turned to crimson droplets.

Tears spilled down my cheeks and quickly froze in place. "Please," I cried silently, "Please wake up." I wasn't sure if I was speaking to my mother, or to myself.

The cold couldn't make me numb enough. I felt everything, every time. I felt my nightgown tear away from my body, exposing my naked flesh to the dark monster. I never saw his face, only his extended claws as his hand slashed across my soft belly. I felt my

skin tear under the dull nails, ripping roughly like a piece of paper being shredded. I felt the hot run of blood rush down my thighs, but I couldn't look down. If I looked, I would see my own intestines spilling out of the gaping tear in my stomach.

I felt the cold creeping deeper and deeper into my chest as I bled out, but the monster wasn't finished. Without a sound he lifted that hand again, and this time it came down on my face, one claw raking straight through my eye, blinding me, while the others ripped away my cheek, leaving flesh flapping from my jaw.

The pain... the pain was more than words could describe.

And then the final blow, the one that raked across my neck and tore my throat wide open. Death was on me, crushing me. I could no longer see, I could no longer breathe. Pain was fading away and all I felt was cold, heavy dread.

Maybe this time I won't wake up at all.

Maybe this time I will stay dead forever.

"Lenora!"

I turned my head with difficulty. Death was still pinning me down. I struggled to open my eyes. I wanted to open them, but I couldn't.

"It's alright, my sweet girl. I've got you."

I knew that voice, but he'd never spoken to me like that.

Hands slid under my body. They were not monster claws, and although they were cool, they were not ice-cold. I felt myself being lifted. I don't know how I got free from the icy hallway, but the cool hands pulled me close to a strong firm body. It was not the body of a monster, it was the body of a man.

A man who smelled like sandalwood and vanilla.

"Don't be afraid, you are safe," he spoke softly into my ear, and cradled me close to his chest. I felt the sensation of being carried through the air, but I wasn't afraid. His arms around my body were like steel, so strong, so unyielding. I willed my body to move, to cling to him, but my hands wouldn't obey. I was still paralyzed by the night terror.

He set me down again, and I whimpered, fearing that he would leave me alone. He hushed me like I was a child, and a moment later I felt him slide behind me. He pulled my body closer against his, and ran his hands up and down my arms. "Mother Moon, you are freezing," he murmured, and I felt warm, soft blankets being pulled up over my body. Blankets that were saturated with his sweet scent.

“River...” somehow I managed to get his name past my frozen lips, though it was only a whisper.

Then his body pressed firmly against my back, and his arm locked around my middle, keeping my body firmly against his. I felt his cool lips press against my neck, but unlike my last sexy dream, this time he only kissed my marking spot lightly and then left it. “Sleep, little mate,” he murmured again. “I’ve got you, and I’m not going to let you go.”

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Once again I was torn from my sleep by distressed sounds coming from the other bed. I called out to her, but Lenora didn’t respond to my voice. I didn’t even wait to debate with myself, I slipped out of the hospital bed and knelt on the mattress next to my mate. I couldn’t see her clearly in the dark with my dull human senses, but she kept making breathy sounds like she was trying to scream, and her head and arms thrashed around like she was fighting in her sleep.

Even when I nudged her shoulder, she didn’t wake up.

What was happening to my little mate in her sleep? What kind of nightmares was she having that took her so deep that I couldn’t wake her even when I tried?

Unlike last night when she was so easily soothed, tonight she wasn’t as responsive.

I considered my options. Leaving her alone in the bed while she cried wasn’t even a choice. Either I stayed with her in the big bed, and risked her waking up before me in the morning and discovering my secret, or I could carry her back to the hospital bed.

I could just tell her she sleep-walked into my bed again. The hospital bed was really too small for two people, but that wasn’t so bad. It meant she would stay pressed close beside me the whole night, no matter which way she turned.

I scooped her up and carried her gently and carefully to the bed. As soon as she was in my arms, she stopped fighting, but she was still making small, pitiful, whimpering sounds, like she was in great pain. Even when I set her down on the mattress, she didn’t wake up.

Lying down beside her, I pulled her back against my front, and wrapped her protectively in my arms.

Although I was sure she was still sleeping, I heard her whisper my name. Hearing my name on her lips made my heart clench. I circled my arms protectively around her and made myself comfortable, now and then murmuring things that were meant to comfort and reassure her.

It didn't matter much what I whispered in the dark of night, she was still dreaming, and she wouldn't remember what I had said.

Her body was ice cold. I had grown fond of feeling the warmth of her wolf against my cool human skin, so it was a shock to feel the frigid temperature of her skin under my palms. I ran my hands up and down her arms, trying to use friction to bring some warmth to her limbs. It seemed to take a long time for her natural warmth to return and her ragged breathing to even out.

Eventually I got uncomfortable laying on my side. I eased my arms out from under her and rolled over onto my back. The weight of my body in the mattress caused her to roll back against my side.

I had to get out of this damn hospital bed so that we could sleep comfortably together in the big bed. I was growing impatient to end this charade and reclaim my life.

What was left of it.

I was just starting to drift off again when I heard Lenora mumbling something. I was going to ignore it as more sleepy mumblings, when I caught my name on her lips again. "River...how did you find me?"

I lifted my head from the pillow to look at her. Her hair had come loose from her braid, and the silky black strands were tangling around her delicate face and catching in her mouth. Her eyes were still closed, but her lips were moving. "River...?"

I reached out a hand to stroke her hair away from her lips. "I'm here, sweet girl."

Her expression flickered, but I couldn't see well enough in the gloomy darkness to be able to make out her emotions. However she sighed, and reached for me. Her small hand stroked up and down my chest over my pajamas. She grumbled, as though she was not satisfied, and her hand tugged my shirt until her fingers found their way under the silky garment. She sighed happily when her fingers found the flesh of my stomach and began to make long slow strokes up my chest, and then back down, right to the waistband of my pajama bottoms.

All thoughts of sleep fled from me as I sucked in a breath and tensed beneath her sleepy exploration. It was the most delightful torture. With each sweep of her hand she seemed to grow bolder and more curious. Her fingernails scraped lightly over my flat nipples, and then danced along my ribs. When they reached the bottom of their path, they began to tease lightly under the edge of my bottoms, as though she really wanted to get inside, but was still too shy to do so.

"Ah Lenora, wake up, darling," I groaned, but her eyelids didn't even flutter.

"I'm dreaming," she mumbled. "You aren't real."

“No sweetheart, I’m very real. Open your eyes.”

Her eyelashes fluttered. “I know I’m still dreaming,” she whispered. “I’m asleep in the other bed, this is just a dream.”

And then, as if to prove it, she sat up and threw her leg over my hips, so that she was sitting on me, just like I had fantasized about when I had kissed her goodnight. “If I was awake, you would never let me do this,” she murmured, rocking her hips against me. I couldn’t help the way my body responded.

I was fascinated. How could she not tell the difference between waking and dreaming? But I took advantage of the opportunity to probe into her thoughts. “Why wouldn’t I let you?”

“Because,” she let the word out in a sorrowful sigh. “You don’t like me.”

“Lenora…” How could I explain to her the complicated situation I found myself in? Because I liked her a lot. And that was going to be a problem for me later. Because later, I would have to set her free and let her go back to her own life, and I was afraid that if I let myself get too fond of her, if I let myself get too attached, she would tear out my heart and take it with her.

“Why are you in my dreams, River?” There was a slight moan to her words. “Why do you make me feel like this?”

I couldn’t resist, I let my hands slide up her thighs to grip her hips. “How do I make you feel?”

She made a little mewling sound, like a kitten. “So…hot. So empty. I feel like…something is missing.”

I let my hands slide up over her breasts, cupping them lightly. They were just the right size to fit in the palm of my hand. I swept my fingers over her nipples and immediately they beaded up under her night shirt. She made an approving sound and arched her back, thrusting her breasts against my hands. She continued to ride the ridge of my arousal, with only the thin fabric of our night clothes separating our bodies.

“Lenora, you aren’t dreaming,” I tried again to convince her, but she shook her head against the idea.

“Don’t,” she hushed me. “Let me have this. Please, River.”

She brought her hands to her waist, grasped the hem of her nightshirt, and lifted it over her head, baring her body, exposing her naked skin to my touch. “Touch me,” she demanded.

When I hesitated, she grabbed my hands and pressed them back against her breasts.
“Please!”

“Lenora,” I gritted my teeth. “I can assure you this is absolutely real. You are awake, you are in my bed, and this is really happening.”

“Okay,” she breathed, pushing my pajama shirt up around my armpits.

“I’m serious Lenora, we can’t do this if you aren’t fully aware of what is happening right now.”

She leaned forward, brushing her bare nipples against my chest. She shivered at the sensation before she boldly kissed my lips. “I want this,” she assured me, trailing light kisses along my jaw. “I want to make love to my husband.”