

## Chapter 2 – Healing the Broken Alpha

There would be no wedding, no white gown, no rings, and no banquet to celebrate my marriage to River Blackstone. I was wearing an ordinary pair of jeans and a Metallica t-shirt when my grandfather drove me to the Blackstone packhouse.

All of my worldly possessions had been crammed inside of two suitcases, and I was clutching a backpack to my chest as we pulled up the long, circular driveway in front of the stately pack house. It was almost like a castle built with the local stones and it had a beautiful tower that overlooked the grounds. There were guards posted at the door, but they stepped aside as we climbed the wide steps. The doors were huge, and they creaked ominously as they swung open.

It all looked very cold and very intimidating.

We were met by a household servant, who took us back to the office. My heart was beating so hard as we moved up the steps and through the hall that I thought I was going to throw up. Unfortunately I was cursed with a very nervous stomach.

When the butler opened the door to the Alpha's office, my eyes darted around, looking for my mate-to-be. I had a vague recollection that he had been tall, and dark haired, but I wasn't sure if I would recognize him now. He had been sick for a long time and was likely confined to a wheelchair. His once intimidating form was probably shriveled with atrophy.

However, inside the room I found the former Alpha and his wife, the younger brother and a third man who smelled human.

The former Alpha Darian Blackstone was still an attractive man, although his hair was iron-gray and his beard was growing white. He smiled at me with a friendly and gentle expression. I can't say the same for his mate, who regarded me coldly from her place on the sofa. She did not rise to meet me or extend her hand in greeting.

"Thank you for coming, my dear." Darian said warmly, "We are honored that you have accepted our agreement," he kissed the back of my hand and then turned to my grandfather. "Alpha Moore," He shook Grandfather's hand. "I don't believe you've met my younger son, Asher."

Asher Blackstone resembled his mother, in as much as he had fair skin and golden hair which was cropped short. He seemed to be a tangle of long arms and long legs as he rose from the seat beside his mother to greet us. He swept his cool blue eyes over me in a calculating way, and held my hand for a moment too long. I had to pull my fingers out of his grasp.

The other man in the room was introduced as Mr. Brooks, the family lawyer. I could tell right away that he was a human, which was curious, but he seemed completely at ease with the present werewolf company.

“Where is the groom?” My grandfather asked.

“He will not be joining us,” Darian Blackstone said solemnly. “He is... confined to his bed, and is very uncomfortable with strangers. But no matter, he has already signed the marriage certificate before a witness. It only remains for Miss Moore to add her signature.”

As if on cue, the lawyer opened a leather folder and laid two documents out on the desk, along with an expensive looking pen. My grandfather gently urged me forward with a hand at my back.

I sucked in a breath and took a hesitant step forward, picking up the papers so that I could read them carefully. One was the formal agreement between the two packs. My grandfather’s pack, Ridgemoore, and my soon-to-be mate’s pack, Blackstone. I laid that one back down, as it didn’t require my signature at all. I picked up the marriage certificate.

It was the standard, legally binding marriage certificate that the humans used to formalize their unions. I wanted to ask why Alpha Blackstone was requiring it, when most werewolves ignored the convention in favor of our own mating and marking traditions. However, with everyone’s eyes boring into me, I couldn’t find my voice to ask the question.

I willed my hand to stop shaking as I picked up the heavy pen. How could anyone write with such a weighty instrument? I scrawled my name on the appropriate lines and then handed the document back to the lawyer.

“Excellent, I’ll file these with the city registrar in the morning. Congratulations, Mrs. Blackstone.”

It took me a moment to digest the fact that he was speaking to me. I was now Mrs. Blackstone. With nothing more than a signature I had just changed my whole life, my whole identity.

The lawyer tucked the papers back in the folder, and then put the folder into his briefcase, like officiating a farce of a marriage was all in a day’s work. “I’ll just see myself out. Darius, I’ll be in touch.” Mr. Brooks nodded to my grandfather and then left the office, his footsteps echoing slightly as he moved down the corridor.

“Well then,” My grandfather shifted awkwardly. “I suppose it’s time for me to go as well. It’s a long drive back to Ridgemoore.”

I grabbed a hold of his forearm and clung to it, begging him with my eyes not to go. Pleading for him not to leave me in this strange place with these strange people. He patted my hand, and avoided my gaze. “Be good, Lenora,” he admonished me, as though I were still a little girl.

“Don’t worry, Stanley, we’ll take good care of her. She’s part of the family now.” Darian said the words kindly, but behind him, I could see that his wife did not extend the same sentiment. Her lips pursed together thinly as she rose to her feet.

Damian caught the movement and turned to instruct her. “Gayle, dear, make sure her things are sent to the room.”

She gave a demure nod of assent, and then grabbed the arm of her son, pulling him out of the office, leaving me alone with my new father-in-law.

“Well,” his smile slipped a little. “I imagine you are anxious to meet your new husband. Shall we?”

I really, really wanted to say, “Let’s not!” But I only nodded and followed meekly behind him as he left the office and turned left in the hallway. The nausea started again and I pressed a hand over my stomach, willing it to be calm. Vomiting on my new mate would not be an auspicious start to our wedding night.

The inside of the packhouse seemed like a maze to me, as we turned several corners and went up two sets of stairs before he stopped before a solid oak door. The old alpha knocked curtly before he reached for the handle and pushed it open.

I expected to find River Blackstone seated in a wheelchair, but it seemed that he was much weaker than I had imagined. He was in a hospital bed, which must have been custom built to accommodate his long body. His head was turned away from us, as though he didn’t want to see me at all, and I saw his large hand on the white bedspread, twisting the fabric into a fist.

“River! I’ve brought Miss Moore.”

The man on the bed did not respond.

“Well, I’ll leave you two to get acquainted, shall I?”

No, No! When he turned to go, I wanted to follow him back out. I even turned to do so, but he quickly closed the door, shutting me inside with his invalid son.

I swallowed hard and turned back toward the bed. The man did not speak or move, or even turn his face toward me. I took one step closer, and then another.

I knew nothing about this man, or the nature of his condition. How was I supposed to greet him? Could he hear me and understand me? Was I expected to introduce myself, like we were two strangers meeting at the grocery store? I reached out a trembling hand, and lightly touched the white, tense knuckles on his hand.

His head whipped around when our skin connected, and I was pierced by his angry green eyes. His dark brows slashed downwards, and his handsome face was distorted by a deep scowl. The force of his displeasure made me take a fearful step backward. "Well?" he demanded harshly, "have you seen enough?"

His voice was deep and rough, and it made something deep inside of me quiver, not in fear, but in excitement. I tipped my head in confusion. "Seen enough of what?"