

Chapter 21 – Healing the Broken Alpha

Even though it was just a dream, I still felt properly humiliated and ashamed. I felt around for my pajama top, but I couldn't find where I had tossed it when I had peeled it off my body. I finally shrugged and slid off the bed. He'd already rejected me. Even my dream-time mate didn't want me. Being half-naked was pretty much inconsequential at that point. "Lenora, don't leave." River sounded pained, but I wouldn't turn to look at him again. "Come back and sleep next to me," his voice was low and coaxing, but I wasn't going to fall for it again. I'd had enough of this nightmare.

Grunting at him, I crossed behind the foot of the bed, across the room to the big bed again. I rather wished I had something to slam or something to throw in this dream. Extra bonus points if it was something I could throw at River. But I settled for punching my pillow a couple times, making a proper indent for my head before I laid back down and pulled my mother's quilt over my body. And then up over my face for good measure.

Jenson had always told me that no man would ever want to touch me. I was half hoping that it was just Jenson being a jerk-brother and a bully, but it seemed there was a lot of truth in his words. I hadn't given it much thought before, because I had never in my life wanted a man to touch me. But now I was left for the second night in a row aching and lonely, and thoroughly confused by the way my nightmares were shifting and changing.

I'd never had dreams like this before. It was an entirely new and disturbing kind of nightmare. I dug my nails into my arm, but as usual, even though I felt the pain, I couldn't wake myself. All I could do was lay on the bed and close my eyes and wait to see which reality I woke up to next. It could be another grisley nightmare.

Or... it could be the first light of dawn painting the room in pale shades of grey, pink and mauve. I rubbed my eyes, which felt gritty and swollen and then peeled them open.

Everything looked perfectly normal. I was in my bed, River was across the room in his bed, laying on his back, with his mouth slightly open as he slept. The room was just as we had left it the night before.

I made a face as I looked at him. It wasn't his fault that the dream version of him had refused my pleas, and yet, somehow I felt the heat of resentment curling through my chest. I sat up and prepared to swing my feet off the mattress, but when the quilt fell away from my torso, my breasts and the rest of my body were subject to the slight chill of the room.

I looked down at myself in disbelief.

Where was my top? I squeaked and grabbed the pillow, using it to cover my breasts. I slipped off the mattress and tiptoed across the room, while my thoughts were racing madly.

I drew close to River's bed and looked down at his sleeping form. One hand was up by his pillow, palm up, fingers slightly curled and relaxed. The other hand was tightly fisted over his chest. And clutched between his fingers... was my pajama shirt!

I gasped and backed away quickly.

It was a dream! Just a dream!

But if it was a dream, how did my clothing end up in his bed? In his hands!

I rushed to the closet and grabbed clean clothes for the day. I wasn't sure if I was expected to dress in formal office wear when I was just working at home with River, but I decided to opt for my usual: a pair of worn and faded jeans and a simple t-shirt. I clutched the clothes, along with my pillow, and sidled my way from the closet to the bathroom door.

This was beyond embarrassing, and beyond mortifying! I had no idea where my dream had ended and waking reality had begun. In my dream River had come to the icy hallway, and pulled me from the nightmare. He had carried me in his arms, back to his bed.

But that had to be a dream, River couldn't walk, let alone carry me like a child to his bed. But if he didn't carry me, how did I get there? Could I really have been sleep walking again? In all my years of disordered sleeping, I'd never been a sleep walker!

I stared at my reflection in the mirror, and my fingers traced on the fading purple bruise that was right over my marking spot.

Unless...

River really could walk. Unless it had been River in my bed, and it had been River's lips and hands on my body that night. But it didn't make sense, none of it did!

I held my head between my hands. The only plausible explanation was that I was really and truly losing my mind!

I quickly showered, dressed, and slipped out of the bathroom. And just like yesterday, River was awake and sitting up in bed when I came out. I looked at his hands for my pajamas, but they had disappeared. My cheeks burned hot and red, and I couldn't bring myself to look him in the eye. God only knows what he must think of me, throwing myself at him in my sleep!

I suppose I should be thankful that he was a man of honor, and he had quietly set me aside instead of taking advantage of me in my confused state.

But damn it, I had wanted to be taken advantage of!

“Lenora, come here.”

I obediently went and stood near the side rail of his bed. I clasped my hands in front of my stomach like a servant and waited for his orders. Instead he silently held out my pajama top to me.

If only I could die right there on the spot! I sheepishly took the garment and wadded it up between my hands. “Sorry about last night,” I mumbled, looking down at the hardwood floor. “I was dreaming, I didn’t know what I was doing.”

“Oh really?” his voice was lightly teasing. “It seemed to me like you knew exactly what you wanted.”

I groaned out loud and turned away to take my dirty clothes to the hamper. With my back turned to him I asked, “Shall I go downstairs and prepare a breakfast tray for you?”

“Yes, that’s a good idea,” he agreed.

I nodded, thankful to have something to do, some excuse to get away from my own awkward, shameful moment.

My hand was reaching for the door handle when he called me again.

“Lenora?”

I dropped my hand and turned around, keeping my eyes down. I waited for him to speak.

“Next time you come to me, make sure you are fully awake and aware.”

Surprise made me look up then, and my eyes collided with his gaze. I searched his face to see if he was making fun of me, but his expression was serious. There was no sign of mirth or malice on his handsome face.

I then studied the way he was seated in bed, relaxed back against pillows even as the bed was lifted into its upright position. His legs were limp and motionless beneath the sheets, showing no sign that he could have exited his bed unassisted.

Except...I knew his thighs were thick with muscle, even his calves were toned and firm.

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The look on River’s face was terrifying, and yet he didn’t deny it. I half expected him to jump off the bed, prove that I was correct, and then throttle me. I realized, perhaps too late, that those strong arms that had so easily and gently carried me from one bed to the other could also tear me from limb to limb, even without the assistance of a wolf. I felt my

eyes grow wide with fear, and I spun around, yanked open the door, and ran out into the hallway.

I was halfway to the kitchen before I slowed down, but I still kept checking over my shoulder, for fear that at any moment River would come after me. What would he do to me now that I had discovered the truth?

Why was he keeping his recovery a secret anyway? It made no sense! Why wouldn't he want his family, his friends, his entire pack to know that he was well and strong and able to take up his position of leadership once more? I got to the kitchen, but this time it wasn't empty. Staff was still gathered around the stainless steel counters and appliances putting together breakfast for the household.

One of the cooks caught sight of me hovering in the door. She gave me a cold look and then asked icily, "Can I help you with something, Miss?"

I blinked, and wondered if the staff was yet unaware that I had legally married their Alpha. Would they speak to me like that if they knew that I was now the Luna? However, I didn't need to assert my position, I just needed to bring back a breakfast tray to my angry husband. "Sorry to bother you," I tried my best to give the woman a friendly smile. She didn't return it. "I need two breakfasts on a tray for the Alpha."

The cook exchanged a look with another worker, and I thought perhaps they were going to refuse. "If it's a problem, I can just fix him something myself," I said, taking another step into the kitchen. I didn't know these people, and I didn't want to start a fight with anyone, but I was going to get breakfast while I was down there. I wasn't going to return to a hungry, enraged alpha empty handed!

Finally the woman who had first spoken to me made a hand gesture to the other one, and they took down a tray and started arranging food. I noticed that there was only enough food and utensils being arranged to serve one person, but I said nothing. I could just sneak down later and serve myself a snack after the staff had finished their work.

When they were finished I picked up the tray and started back to the room.

I wasn't really sure I wanted to go back in there, even though I was carrying the peace offering of a fully loaded breakfast tray. But where was I going to hide in this house? We were sharing a room, at least until he decided to kick me out of it. I would just have to face the can of worms I had just opened.

Why did I have to say anything? Why couldn't I just pretend to be ignorant for a while longer?

I reached the door but found the lock had been engaged. I knocked lightly, wondering if he was going to keep me locked out of the room. But a moment after I knocked, the door lock

released, and I was able to push open the door. I scanned the room, but the bed was empty.

Suddenly a strong hand pulled me away from the door, and the tray of food I had been balancing on one arm crashed to the floor, sending all of the dishes tumbling. Food and a carafe of coffee spilled all over the floor. Before I could comprehend the mess before me, River had pushed me back against the door, and pinned me there with an arm across the front of my chest and the weight of his body leaning against it.

I didn't want to let my fear show, but I couldn't help it. I'd been pinned to the wall many times before, and I knew the pain to follow. I knew his hands would find their way to my neck, and he would squeeze until I couldn't breathe and little black spots danced in front of my eyes. Or he would raise his fist and take out his rage on my face and my body.

Or worse. There were even worse things. So I waited for the punishment to start. I kept my teeth clenched closed and my lips pressed together so that no screams would escape. I took just a moment to assess River's face, but I couldn't tell what his complicated expression meant for me. But I didn't close my eyes.

It was better to see what was coming.

"Lenora," River finally spoke, his voice low and unusually rough. It was more like he was groaning my name. He stared at me intensely with those beautiful eyes. I couldn't bear to look at them, so I stared straight ahead and let them grow unfocused, even though I remained aware of everything in my periphery. He shifted his weight and lifted his hand and I tensed, waiting for the blow.

"Don't be afraid, little mate," he spoke in a low voice, and the hand that I thought was going to hit me came gently to my cheek. "I'm sorry, I frightened you."

I blinked, but I didn't not understand.

"You are right, I can walk," he murmured, his hand stroking from my cheek to to my neck, and I sucked in a deep breath, anticipating that at any moment, his hand would wrap around my throat and he would cut off the flow of oxygen to my lungs. But his fingers only trailed lightly up and down my throat, barely teasing my skin with their touch. "I've been able to walk for months now, but no one knows it. Only my doctor and the physical therapist."

He breathed his confession near my ear. "And now you know my secret. But it's important that no one else knows." His nose grazed my temple, and I shivered involuntarily. "I didn't have an accident, Lenora. What happened to me wasn't a random freak medical occurrence. Someone tried to assassinate me, or at least incapacitate me. I'm just not sure who or how. We wanted to let them think they had at least partially succeeded while we continue to investigate."

I felt my mouth form into an “oh”, but I still couldn’t bring myself to speak or to look directly at him. I couldn’t quite line up his softly spoken words with his rather violent and surprising actions. Why did he have me pinned to the door, only to speak a soft, calm rational explanation into my ear. Why did he have a hand on my neck, only to caress me?

“Please, look at me Lenora,” his tone was soft and coaxing. It was hard not to look at him, as his face was only inches from mine, but it was a matter of bringing my eyes back into focus instead of staring through him like he wasn’t a solid object. He actually looked a bit concerned as he studied my face. He eased his body weight away from me, “I’m not going to hurt you, Lenora. I would never do that. But you have to promise me you will keep my secret, just for a few more weeks. Can you do that?”

I nodded slowly.

“Good girl.” He dipped his head, and strangely, nuzzled my neck, just above my marking spot. A strange feeling of excitement raced from my neck down my chest, almost like a mild electric shock, but so much more pleasurable. I felt my eyes grow even wider. His warm breath tickled my skin as he spoke. “I’m glad you know, I’m glad it’s out in the open, between us. It will make sharing a room so much easier.” He actually smiled, a small, lopsided smile. “I won’t have to think of an excuse to send you from the room every time I want to pee!”

I blinked at him, and swallowed, but my jaw relaxed a fraction. That was the worst though, when they fooled you into thinking you were okay, and then they came at you twice as hard. However, River simply grabbed me by the shoulders and crushed me against his chest, like he was...I don’t know? Happy? Relieved?

My eyes cut around his shoulder to the mess that was spread across the floor. “Your breakfast,” I murmured. “I need to clean it up.”

He squeezed me harder. “Leave it. I’ll call Remmy to bring us a new tray, and one of the cleaning staff will take care of it.”

“But I can-”

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I might have overreacted.

I knew I had been taking a risk by going to Lenora at night, but I was still a little shocked when she confronted me about my non-existent physical disability. She went out the door before I had time to gather my thoughts, and I spent the fifteen minutes she was gone anxiously wondering if she would run straight to my father with the news that I was up and walking.

Or worse. She might tell my half-brother. Even though he was my little brother, he was still too immature. He would certainly take that privileged information and spread it far and wide, if for no other reason than to have his five minutes of fame.

And yet, somehow deep down, I knew she wouldn't. I don't know where that confidence came from, when I barely knew this young woman. Perhaps it was simply that her quiet, shy demeanor made her seem trustworthy. But it felt like something else. Trust was a very foreign concept to me. I'd learned long ago as a young Alpha to trust no one unless they first earned that privilege.

All of that didn't explain why I had so forcefully grabbed her when she slipped in the door. I didn't mean to be so rough with her, but it was almost as if something took over my reflexes for a moment. Some instinct overpowered me, and I had this sudden need to claim her. If I'd had the ability, I almost certainly would have marked her, right then and there.

I'd frightened her. If I had been a wolf I would have sensed her fear right away. I would have smelled its chemical manifestation oozing from her pores. As it was, I could feel her heart hammering beneath my arm at double the normal speed. I observed the way her breathing became rapid and shallow, and the way the color drained from her cheeks, leaving her complexion ghostly white. But most of all, I saw the way she flinched when I raised my hand, like she believed I was about to strike her.

That she thought I would hurt her actually cut into me like a knife. The visceral reaction caught me off guard. Why should it bother me so deeply? Immediately I thought, someone has raised a hand to her before, and I felt a slow burning rage start in my belly. My little mate was meek and gentle and innocent. Who on earth would want to hurt her? When I found out who it was, they would pay. But in the meantime, I had to reassure her that I wasn't that kind of man.

I sat her down on the couch and then went to my phone. I put in a quick call to Remmy, and then jumped back into the hospital bed and covered my legs with the blanket. Within minutes Remmy arrived, along with another servant. Two fresh trays were deposited on my bedside table, and then wordlessly, the servants started to clean up the mess I had made when I thoughtlessly pulled Lenora aside.

I noticed the female servant give Lenora a dark, resentful look as she bent and began cleaning up the spilled mess. I searched my memory for her name. I had once known every man, woman and child in my pack on sight, but since the incident, my memory seemed to have grown as dull as the rest of my senses. I was pretty sure her name was Sabine something, and she usually worked in the kitchens.

"It wasn't Lenora's fault," I said, feeling the need to defend her. "I startled her when she opened the door. I caused her to drop the tray."

The woman looked up at me, the expression she gave me was a sharp contrast to the bitter look she'd just given my mate. Instead she spoke in a warm and friendly tone, almost like she was preening to me. "There's no problem, Alpha. Accidents do happen. We will have this cleaned up in just a moment."

A moment stretched into minutes, and I grew impatient for them to finish and leave. Now that Lenora knew my secret, I was eager to get out of the bed and join her. I wondered if Sabine was deliberately working slowly as an excuse to stay in the room. I rarely allowed the staff into my bedroom, apart from Remmy and a few other faithful, regular servants to try and minimize the gossip. Finally she gave the floor one last swipe, and the old butler hurried her out of the room.

As soon as they were gone, I engaged the lock again. Throughout the whole interchange with the servants, Lenora had stayed seated on the couch with her head bowed, like she expected me to rain down blows on her with a cane. Instead I rolled the side table around the room and parked it in front of the couch. I lowered it to its lowest setting and removed the covers from the food myself.

"Come," I encouraged her, "Let's eat."

I lowered myself to sit on the couch next to her, close enough that our thighs and shoulders were brushing, so when she shuddered, I felt the vibration go through her body, and into mine. I barely heard her whispered protest. "I can't eat now."

"Hey, look, I'm sorry I scared you, but it's no big deal right?" I reached over and lifted her chin, forcing her to look up into my face. "We're fine."

I wondered who the hell had hurt her so badly that she flinched every time I raised my hand? I lowered my voice and cupped her cheek. "Lenora, you know I've lost my wolf, right?" I dipped my head to look fully in her eyes. "You could easily shift into your wolf and tear me apart. I'm just an ordinary human man now."

Her brown eyes went even wider, and she shook her head against my hand. "No! I would never do that!"

"But you could, if you needed to defend yourself," I said firmly, dropping my hand. I picked up the fork and stabbed one of the fresh strawberries from my plate, and held it up to her lips. I noticed the way her bottom lip trembled before she opened and delicately used her teeth to remove the fruit from my fork.

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It was difficult to focus on work after everything that had happened, but River clearly had the ability to concentrate with laser precision on whatever task was at hand. After he had wolfed down his breakfast, he asked Remmy to have a desk moved to the room.

Within an hour, Remmy was back with the same men who had set up the big bed, moving a large desk into the room. Some furniture had to be rearranged to make everything fit; the couch pushed closer to the bed, the big bed pushed closer to the hospital bed, but eventually they had a nice little workstation set up. I could tell that River was waiting impatiently for everyone to exit the room, and then he threw back his blankets again and jumped from the hospital bed.

“You have no idea how tiresome it is to try and work from the bed day in and day out,” he grumbled as he tried out the rolling chair. I soon got the idea that the desk was not for my benefit, but for his. I was just the convenient excuse for a supposedly bed-bound man to order the piece of furniture. Not that I minded. It wasn’t as if I was proficient enough to need the workspace. If all I was going to do was continue to study files and take notes, I could do that while seated on the couch quite comfortably.

Except that River had a different plan. He asked me to bring him the new laptop from my case. I handed it to him and he opened it up on the desk. He then pulled up the heavy, wingback chair so that we would be sitting side by side. “Come on now, have a seat,” he placed himself in the heavy chair and patted his hand on the black leather seat of the office chair on wheels. I felt uneasy about the arrangement. “Why don’t you take that chair, I’ll take that one,” I pointed at the wingback chair.

“Just sit.”

I stood stubbornly beside the chair, and crossed my arms over my chest.

He raised one eyebrow at me. “Sit down in the chair, Lenora.” His lip curved in a mocking smile. “If you want this chair so bad, you will have to sit in my lap. Also an acceptable alternative.” He leaned back and stretched his legs out in invitation.

I looked at his long, lean, muscular legs, and some impish part of me wanted to take him up on the offer, straddle his lap, and wrap my arms around his neck. A

After all, there’s no confusion now. I’m wide awake.

I punked my butt down in the wheeled desk chair, and pulled myself up closer to the desk.

River nodded in satisfaction, and started moving the cursor on the screen. “Okay, here’s the deal. I’m going to show you how the email system works. Since you are going to be my personal assistant, it will be your job to go through the emails a couple times a day. Here is the log-in page, you are going to log in under my account, RBlackstone. Here is the password, which I change every three months.” He jotted a complicated password down on a piece of scrap paper, and pushed the laptop in my direction. I slowly typed it into the box. I barely knew how to use a computer, I’d never learned to touch-type properly. I waited for River to scold me or tease me, but he did neither. He simply acted like he didn’t notice I was so slow. Once logged in he took me to the inbox.

“If it’s obviously garbage, you can go ahead and delete it. As a general rule, I do not empty out the trash folder, just in case something gets put in there by accident. It automatically deletes things after a month anyway.” He leaned closer, and his distinct sweet sandalwood scent tickled my nose. He continued his lesson, seemingly oblivious to my racing heart and inflamed pheromones. “Now these are a little tricky, because you have to determine which department they really belong to, and then forward them to the correct place. Like this one is asking about maternity leave, so you’ll want to forward that one to human resources.

He deftly moved his fingers around the touchpad, selected the email, and then forwarded it to the correct recipient. He scooted forward so that his shoulder was bumping mine. “This one here,” he clicked open another new email. “This one is very simple, you can reply to it yourself with a generic reply. I don’t need to spend my time on this. I already have an entire folder of canned responses, so we just go over here, open the folder, select the category. For example this email is an invitation to a non-work related event. We send this nice thank you reply, which gives a vague refusal to the invitation. A few more clicks and he had answered the email and closed it.

He scrolled down the list to another one, and clicked on the heading to open it. “This one is clearly for me, personally. This is a contractor sending me a bunch of design proposals and estimates. So this one you will forward to my private email. This is the email that I use for private communications only, it is never given out to the public.” With a few clicks and strokes, he had forwarded that email to his other account.

In the process of instructing me, he had actually looped an arm around my shoulders. He was now leaning so close that if I merely turned my head, my lips would touch his cheek. “Easy enough, right?” He did turn his head then, and our noses were just centimeters apart. I saw his stormy eyes darken, and his long, curling lashes lower. He was going to lean in a fraction more, he was going to close the distance and kiss me again, but just when our lips were a hairsbreadth apart, there was a noisy knock at the door.

River frowned and I mirrored his expression. I had only been there a few days, but I had already learned to identify the people who frequented the room. Remmy’s knock was light and polite, his father’s firm and demanding. This one was unfamiliar to me.

In an impossibly swift movement, River was standing, carrying the heavy chair back to a neutral position by his bedside, and then slipping back under the blankets, relaxing back against the pillows and adjusting his shoulders. “Who is it?” he bellowed, pulling his own laptop out of the drawer and placing it on the rolling table, to make it look like he’d been working there the whole time.

“It’s me!” a slightly familiar female voice called back through the almost sound-proof door. “Please let me in, River.”

River gave me a strained look from across the room, and I had a feeling he was definitely thinking about ignoring the uninvited visitor. She had resumed beating the door

insistently, despite some masculine protest from the other side. “Brace yourself,” he growled under his breath, but I wasn’t sure if he was talking to himself, or he was trying to give me a warning.

He reached for the remote device and unlocked the door. It opened immediately, and as the door swung open, I saw the all too familiar tall, slim, trim figure of Ashley Whats-Her-Name from human resources. If possible, she looked even more beautiful and more elegant than she had yesterday in her office. Her green and blue wrap dress hugged her curves perfectly, and today her blond locks had been curled and pinned up behind her head, with just a few delicate pieces left to drape around her long neck. Her jewelry looked delicate but expensive, I was sure all the stones were the real thing. She held a clutch purse tucked under her elbow. Her haughty gaze was just as cutting and degrading as it had been yesterday.

She started to stride into the room, but stumbled to a stop when her eyes landed on me, still sitting stiffly behind the desk. Her gorgeous face froze in a hostile expression. “What’s she doing here?” she snarled, without even greeting anyone in the room.

Remmy came in behind her, looking as flustered as I’d ever seen the man. His little white comb-over had been flipped to the wrong side. “I’m sorry, Alpha, I told her you do not want to be disturbed,” the old butler gave Ashley a sour look, “Shall I call security?”

River waived his hand like an emperor, “No, Remmy, I’m sure that won’t be necessary. I’ll call you if I need anything.”

Remmy bowed his head in acknowledgement and left the room, shutting the door quietly behind him.

Once the three of us were alone, River pinned the beautiful woman with a hard, uncompromising stare. “What are you doing here, Ashley?”

“Oh River,” she purred. There it was again, the way she said his name had my hackles rising, and my wolf quite literally growling and threatening to come forward. “I’ve missed you so much and I’ve been so worried. I just had to come see how you are. I had an early meeting at Gemini so I thought I’d just swing over and surprise you with a visit.”

When she walked, it was like she was stepping on an invisible tightrope with her stiletto heels, causing her hips to sway enticingly. “It’s been too long, River,” her eyes cut coldly across to me, and she repeated her first question. “Why is she here?”

“I believe my father introduced her to the company yesterday, didn’t he,” River said with exaggerated patience. “Lenora is my new personal assistant.”

Ashley’s full painted lip poked out in a pout. “If you needed anything, River, all you had to do was come to me. You know I would do anything for you, right? Obviously you need someone with...experience.”

“Oh, I know you have plenty of experience, Ashley. Unfortunately, you were too busy going down on my cousin to help me out with my administrative work.”

I couldn't help the unladylike snort that left my nose. Ashley turned and sent me a look of pure, unadulterated hatred. But then she wiped it off her face and sashayed closer to the Alpha's bed. To my husband's bed.

“It wasn't like that, baby,” she said in a low, seductive voice. “You know it was a terrible time, I thought I was going to lose you. I was just so distraught, so I made a terrible mistake of turning to another man for comfort. But you know you are my only love, River.”

River made a gesture down his body. “But what about this, Ashley,” his voice had a cold, calculating edge that made me shiver with apprehension. “How could you want a man who is broken and incapable?”

Her spine stiffened, and I saw the way her eyes ran over his legs, which were hidden beneath the blankets. It was as if, as hard as she was pretending, she couldn't quite keep the disgust out of her expression. “But, I heard you were getting better...” her answer was weak.

Standing up from my chair, I smoothed my hair back and began stalking closer to the woman. She must have smelled my anger, because she turned around with a low growl to face me. As beautiful and elegant as she was, she was still a werewolf, and she still stood a full head taller than me, even without her stupid high heels. Her aura was strong, powerful, and threatening. I felt it surging against me, but for once, I didn't back down.

I stood my ground and even raised my chin, staring her in the eye, a clear and defiant challenge.

She glared down at me for a moment, before she tossed her hair aside and laughed, “Oh River, where ever did you find this little mongrel?”

River's face darkened dangerously, but the woman didn't seem to notice. She also didn't see the way his hand curved around the bedrail, until his knuckles turned white.

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I was shocked to hear River defending me. So was Ashley, apparently. She stood frozen beside his bedside, her mouth slightly agape. Her expression was momentarily so hurt and confused that I almost felt sorry for her. Almost.

“L-luna?” She stammered, taking a step back from River's side, as though he had physically struck her. “But River, Don't you remember? You said if neither of us found our

mates, then we would choose each other!” Her voice dropped to a whisper. “I was supposed to be your Luna!”

Her acting skills were superb. I would have been moved, if it were not for my inner wolf, who was vibrating with an unexpected rage. I had never before felt so possessive over anything, or any one, but my wolf was determined. River was ours.

“Things change,” River dismissed her claim. “The accident changed everything for me. Besides,” He pressed himself back against the pillows. “We were just kids when we made those promises. They didn’t mean anything.”

I could see by her flushed cheeks that it must have meant something to her, no matter how young they had been at the time. But what I couldn’t discern was whether or not she had any genuine feelings for the Alpha, or if she’d only been attracted to the promise of power.

“Thank you for coming to check on me, Ashley. The Blackstone Corporation appreciates your dedication. As you can see, my personal assistant and I have everything under control, and your services are not needed here. You better move along now before you are late for your meeting.” River said the lines flatly, like he had used them many times before to many other employees.

Ashley’s mouth worked over her teeth, and then she whirled away from River and stomped her way to the door. I thought I saw the gleam of tears in her eyes, but I couldn’t be sure. She grabbed the handle and paused for dramatic effect, before she looked back at River. “You will regret this, River Blackstone! Mark my words!”

She left the room and slammed the door after with a tremendous bang. The only sound to interrupt the silence that lingered after her was the remote lock re-engaging.

River swung his long legs off the bed with a sigh and set the remote down on the side table. “Come here, Lenora.” His voice was hard and demanding.

I shivered, wondering what punishment awaited me. I should have stayed quietly at my desk and kept my head down while Ashley was in the room. How many times had Jensen told me to remember my place? I stepped forward but kept myself just out of the alpha’s reach. I could tell that he was angry, and in my experience, angry men lashed out at whoever was nearest, regardless of their culpability.

He struck with the speed of a viper. I may have been out of reach while he was seated, but he was on his feet in a flash. I braced for pain, but instead his arm snaked around my waist and pulled me tight against his chest, knocking the breath out of me. In the next instant he had pulled me back to the bed with him. He seated himself on the edge of the mattress with my legs across his lap.

“Do you know who you are?” he growled low in my ear.

I trembled with a strange mix of excitement and trepidation. I tipped my head up to look at him, but I did not attempt to answer him, because I wasn't sure what he was looking for.

I knew who I was. I was Lenora Elizabeth Moore – no, Blackstone. But that was too obvious, he was prompting me for something else.

“You are my wife,” he said harshly. “You are the Luna of this pack. You must command respect from everyone around you. You do not cower before anyone. Not even me. Do you understand me?”

Despite what he was saying, I bowed my head and avoided the intensity of his green eyes. “Y-yes, Alpha,” I muttered. “But, it's just that–”

“Yes?”

“Well, yesterday your father did not introduce me to the company as your mate, or your luna. So, I thought that you wanted to keep our mating arrangement a secret.”

His fingers moved under my chin, forcing my gaze back up to his face. “I don't know why my father did that. I'm sure he had his own reasons. But as far as I'm concerned, the whole world can know that I've chosen you.” His gaze moved from my eyes to my lips, and unconsciously, I licked them.

He made a noise that was half growl and half groan and lowered his head, crushing his lips against mine. One hand was on the back of my neck, holding me in place, while the other one dove under my shirt and pressed against the bare skin of my lower back, spreading a tingling sensation up my spine, and straight down into my core.

He made me feel so many conflicting things, but whenever he touched me, I felt my wolf respond with an almost feral need. It seemed she had fully embraced River Blackstone as our mate, even if he didn't have a wolf any more. In the back of my head, she was pushing me, making me feel bolder than I really was.

Without breaking the kiss, I grabbed a hold of his shoulders and lifted myself up so that I could rearrange my legs and straddle his lap, scooting forward so that I could press myself as close to his body as humanly possible. He finally lifted his lips from mine, just so that he could take a gasping breath. “Lenora...”

“River,” his name rolled off my tongue, feeling so right, so familiar, like I'd been calling for him for a thousand lifetimes. My heart was beating hard and even my breasts were aching where they rubbed up against his body. I bent my head close to his ear.

“I know I'm not dreaming now.”