

## Chapter 26 – Healing the Broken Alpha

I froze with Lenora still cradled in my lap. I wanted her, there was no denying that. In that moment I wanted to possess her, body, mind and spirit, more than I had ever wanted to possess any she-wolf in my life.

But when I chose Lenora Moore to be my chosen mate, I had never intended for the relationship to become physical. It was just an arrangement, to serve a purpose. And when the purpose was fulfilled, I was going to quietly divorce her, with a handsome settlement, and allow her to go on with her life, and hopefully find her real mate, and live happily ever after. I was never going to mark her. I couldn't even if I wanted to.

But what was I supposed to do? I was craving her like my next breath, and given the way that she was grinding against me, she wanted me just as much. She had wanted me when she thought I was paralyzed in bed, and she wanted me now. It was like she had never seen what a broken man I was.

Maybe that was part of what made her so beautiful and so irresistible to me.

That and the fact that she had no agenda. Women came to me because I was the Alpha. They wanted to experience that power, even if it was only for a few hours. They wanted to try and seduce me into choosing them to be my luna, or if not that, my mistress. They went to my bed in hopes of winning my affections and getting their hands in my pockets for their own self-serving needs.

Lenora had never asked for anything from me. She hadn't even asked to be a part of this union, I had virtually forced it on her. She was already my wife, she had nothing to gain by seducing me now, so I could only deduce that her desire was genuine. She had a need that I could fulfill. Still, I had to give her a chance to back out of it.

“Lenora–”

“River,” she interrupted me, arching her back, pressing her soft breasts against my chest. She looked me directly in the eyes, something she rarely did. “I'm not dreaming now.”

I groaned in defeat, and used my hands that were already under her shirt to lift her t-shirt over her head. She willingly lifted her arms to assist me. I tossed her shirt aside and ran my hands lightly down her ribs, gazing at her body with rapt attention. Her skin was dark and golden everywhere, there were no tan lines. Her full breasts were restrained in a simple black bra that was in no way meant to be sexy or sensual, but on her, it was perfect.

While i had been staring like a school boy, she was busy trying to tug my pajama shirt over my head, completely forgetting that it had buttons that might have been easier. I undid the first three buttons on my chin and then finished shucking it off myself.

Lenora licked her lips, and ran her fingers over my chest, exploring the planes much the same way she had the day she had bathed me. Her small hands smoothed over my skin, scratched through my chest hair, and traced little circles around my nipples. While she was distracted, I smoothed my hands over her back and found the catch to her bra. I flicked it open, and dragged the straps down her shoulders, releasing her soft globes from confinement. I cradled them in the palms of my hand, wondering at the near perfect weight of them, the way they fit as though they had been made just for me.

She mewled like a kitten and arched her back to press them more firmly into hands.

One thing was for damn sure, if I was going to make love to my mate, it wasn't going to be on the damn hospital bed. I easily picked her up, and carried her toward the big bed. She hooked her ankles behind my back and clung to my neck like a monkey. And then seemed to be drawn to the skin around my marking spot. She licked it first, like she was sampling the salt of my skin, and then she began to cover it with hot, wet, sucking kisses. By the time I put her down, her teeth were scraping my skin.

"No, Lenora," I pulled her away gently. I tried to untangle her arms and legs from my torso, but she hung on tenaciously, surprisingly strong for such a small woman. It was a keen reminder that she wasn't just any she-wolf, she was an Alpha's daughter, and some of her father's strengths and traits must have been passed on to her, even though she rarely displayed them.

I ended up kneeling on the bed, with her still wrapped around me, and then leaning forward to rest her back against the mattress, and lay her head on the pillow. Only then did she relax her legs. But she kept her hold on my neck, and reached again with her mouth for my marking spot. Again, I had to forcefully push her head away from my shoulder. "No marking, Lenora."

Her eyes looked confused, and flashed with a strange sadness, like I was rejecting her. I cringed, but I had to remind her. "I'm just a human now, Lenni, I can't mark you. And you can't mark me. No biting. Do you understand?" I looked deeply into her eyes, and she solemnly nodded. Right before she nuzzled her nose into my neck, and dragged it up my jaw, and her teeth bit down on my earlobe.

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I had never been with a man before. The closest I had come was when one of Jensen's friends had cornered me in the hallway and tried to grope me. Luckily, Jensen had put a stop to it before it went any further. The sickening, frightened feeling I had that day was nothing like the hot, liquid pleasure I was feeling now.

I should probably feel shy and anxious that River would find me inexperienced and clumsy, but instead I felt bold. Maybe it was because my wolf was so close to the surface, so eager for this mating to happen.

“We aren’t making love on a hospital bed,” River muttered, and his hands clasped me under my butt, lifting me, and carrying me to the bigger bed. He set me down on the mattress and then knelt in front me, his green eyes seeming to glow as they raked over my body. His hands reached for my shirt, and drew it up over my head.

“What the hell is that?” He growled unexpectedly, his eyes glued to the scars across my abdomen.

Ah s.hit, I’d forgotten about that. The scars had been there so long that I no longer even thought of them, they were just a normal part of my body. Four wide, jagged, silvery lines that curved from under my breast, across my navel, down to my hip. I looked down at myself, and blinked, half wishing that I had waited to have this encounter after dark.

“Um, just old scars,” I said, picking up a pillow to cover them with.

River pulled the pillow gently from my hands. “Scars from what?”

“A rogue attack, or so they tell me.” I said quietly, looking away from his face, unable to bear the intensity of his expression. “The night my mother died.”

He spread his fingers, but as large as his hands were, he could not fit a finger into each of the grooves. The claw that had swiped me must have been twice the size of his hand. “What kind of Rogue could do that?”

“I–I don’t remember it,” the familiar lie slipped off my tongue. My memory of that night was patchy, but the thing that had killed my mother, the thing that had killed me, was no rogue. It was a different kind of monster. But when I tried to describe the murderer to my father and the doctor, they shook their heads at me and said that I was just imagining things. I was just seeing things from the perspective of a terrified child. I didn’t remember correctly, and I was not a reliable witness.

I thought perhaps the scars were so ugly that River had lost interest, but his fingers caressed my skin over the silvery marks and then came back up to cup my breasts through the lacy cups of my bra. It wasn’t a pretty bra, just a practical, serviceable one. I wished I had something pretty and alluring to wear, something to entice him.

But apparently the man needed no enticing. He reached behind my back and undid the clasp with practiced ease, and then eased the straps off my shoulders, leaving my breasts bare to his scrutiny. I blushed and sought to cover myself with my hands, but he gently pushed them aside, and then pressed me back into the pillows.

“Don’t hide from me, Lenora. You are beautiful. I want to see you. I want to see all of you.”

His hands glided over the sides of my breasts, skimming over the nipples lightly, and the feeling of tingling electricity shot straight through me, making me moan with the

undeniable pleasure of it. His fingers trailed lower, down over the scars, down my belly, until he reached the waistband of my pants. He looked at me with a questioning glance, and I bit my lip and nodded, giving him silent permission to continue.

He hooked his fingers under the elastic and eased them down, taking my underwear with them. I lifted my hips to assist him, wishing he would move faster. He slowly and deliberately pulled everything off, all the way down past my knees and ankles, and finally, pulling them off my feet. He tossed them aside, and then crawled back up my body on his hands and knees.

“But what about you...” I said, a little breathlessly. It wasn’t fair that he could see me, but I couldn’t see him. His chest was already bare, but I wanted to see the rest of him. He sat up on his knees and obliged me, shoving his pants down past his hips. My eyes were riveted to the impressive organ between his thighs, and I licked my lips in unconscious anticipation.

River chuckled, and rolled off to one side to remove the rest of his clothes. “Are you that hungry, little mate?”

“Yes,” I said frankly. How could I tell him what he made me feel? How could I tell him that there was a terrible, empty ache at my core? How could I explain what happened every time he kissed me, every time he touched me? I sat up and reached for him, letting my hand slide along his length.

“Nora, have you-?” the nickname came off his lips naturally, but he had never called me that. I tipped my head at him. The only person who had ever called me “Nora” was my mother, so long ago. Everyone else called me Lenni for short.

“No,” I admitted, but before he could stop me, I lowered my head to taste him. No, I had never touched a man like this, I had certainly run my tongue along the ridges of any man’s member. But I had read books, I had seen a few movies, so I wasn’t entirely clueless. And it wasn’t that hard, as some sort of instinct seemed to be guiding me. But he didn’t let me continue very long before he was pulling me up, and crushing his mouth against mine with his own kind of frantic hunger.

His hands moved over my breasts. He cupped the weight of them in his palms, and then gently kneaded the flesh. My body responded, and my nipples grew hard and taut. I cried out when he pinched them slightly, and then rolled them between his thumb and forefinger.

River laid me back down against the pillow, and kissed his way down my neck, stopping at my marking spot. The spot throbbed under his lips, almost as urgently as the place between my legs was throbbing. I desperately wanted him to close his teeth. I didn’t care if his teeth were dull, I just wanted him, needed him, to break the skin.

But he didn't. He sucked hard on the spot, and then moved downwards, turning his attention back to my breasts.

I tried not to whine, and my disappointment was quickly forgotten as his mouth began to lavish attention on my breasts, and his hand crept between my legs, rubbing against my mound, putting pressure on that needy, aching place. I moaned and planted my feet, pushing back against his hand.

"River," I moaned his name, and spread my legs wider.

His mouth left my breasts, and the cool air against my dampened nipples made them pebble even harder. He watched my face carefully, as his hands parted my lips down below, and his finger stroked my most intimate place. "You are so wet," he murmured.

His finger, moistened with my own fluids, moved forwards to draw circles around my bud, and I cried out at the unfamiliar jolt of pleasure his finger brought. While his finger continued to work, he kissed me once more, driving his tongue into my mouth, while he supported his weight on one elbow. My hands clung to his shoulders, my finger tips digging into his flesh.

I closed my eyes tightly.

I felt like I was losing myself, becoming someone, something else...

He pulled back from the kiss, leaving my lips swollen and tingling. "Are you ready for this, Lenora?"

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River lined up at my center, and I felt the first nudge of his invading member. Instinctively I tensed up, knowing that the first time was supposed to hurt. At least, that's what I heard, from gossiping girls in highschool, and from the junk novels that I'd secretly read under the stairs.

"Don't tense up," River said, his voice like warm, soothing caramel. "Just relax, and let me in."

I tried to do as he instructed. I drew in a deep breath and willed my body to be soft and yielding. River braced himself and eased himself in slowly. "Oh sweetheart," he groaned, squeezing his eyes closed. I couldn't tell if it was in pain, or in pleasure. "You are so tight."

Was that supposed to be a good thing or a bad thing? I was waiting for the ripping, searing pain that was supposed to accompany the first time, but nothing happened. I felt some discomfort as his huge member stretched me from the inside, but not pain. When he

had fully sheathed himself in me, he paused, his arms trembling, waiting for me to relax around him.

“Are you okay, Lenora?” he gazed down at me intently. I could see a little bead of sweat forming near his hairline, and I wondered if this was really straining him.

“I’m okay,” I whispered back, licking my lips.

Then he began to move. That’s when the magic began. I don’t know how else to describe the feeling that he created in me. The pleasant tingling that spread over all of my skin, the heat that was building in my core, the friction of his movement inside my body, the weight of his torso leaning into mine. All of my senses seemed to be heightened, and I was overwhelmed by each sensation, the coolness of the sheets, the rough hair on his legs, the scent of sandalwood that was enveloping me.

I wanted it all, and I wanted more. That feeling in my core was building, spiraling, expanding, but it wasn’t enough. I felt I was on the edge of something, but I was being held back by some invisible tether.

I don’t know where I found the strength, but I grasped his shoulders and rolled him over roughly, without him ever slipping out of my body. I sat on top of him, riding his hips, taking control of the pace, the motion, the angle. But River wasn’t going to let me do it all alone, he grasped my hips and began to rock me up and forward and then push me back down his length, guiding me in a motion that brought him profound pleasure.

He made a primal noise under me, a noise that sounded very wolfish, for a man that had no wolf. His fingers dug into my thighs, urging me to move faster. My breasts swayed and bounced in time with my motion, tempting him to bring his hands up, to hold them and squeeze them as we moved together. He was raising his hips now, pushing his member in deeper as I came down, slamming our bodies together with a wet and satisfying smack.

And then, unexpectedly, River stiffened underneath me and swore, and his member pumped inside me. I felt the hot gush of his seed at my core as his limbs trembled.

“Oh hell, Lenora, I’m sorry,” he pulled me down and mumbled into my neck, crushing my body against his.

“Sorry for what?” I asked, my words muffled by his hair.

“I didn’t wait for you. It’s been so long, and you were so sweet, I...I lost control.”

“But...” I didn’t know what to say, he was still inside me, and I loved the feel of it. I didn’t want him to pull out. “It’s okay.” I wasn’t sure if I was reassuring him or reassuring myself.

“It’s not okay,” he said firmly, “It’s your first time. I should have made sure...”

Suddenly he rolled us over, leaving me on my back as he slid off the bed and left me, heading to the bathroom. Leaving me there naked, and alone, and feeling more bad about the fact that he had just left me there than the fact that I hadn't had an orgasm. Not to mention I was sticky between my legs. I wondered if there had been blood. In the books there was always blood on the sheets.

I surreptitiously rolled over to check. There were some dark, wet spots of body fluids, but no sign of any blood. I would have to pull those sheets off and wash them myself, if River wanted to keep his recovery a secret from the household staff. I squeezed my legs together in hopes of not getting anything more on the sheets and waited for my turn in the bathroom.

River returned holding a wet washcloth. I started to get up to go clean myself up, but he gently pushed me back down and spread my legs again. He used the warm towel to gently clean between my legs and along my thighs. Strangely, even though we had just made love, it felt embarrassingly intimate to have him washing the evidence from my body.

But, I had once bathed him. Turnabout is fair play.

He dropped the towel to the floor, and I thought that was the end of it. That is until he spread my thighs apart again and moved his shoulders between my knees. "Wh-what are you doing?"

He gave me a sly grin before he dipped his head back between my legs. "You haven't finished yet." The flesh of my lower lips was already swollen and sensitive. He spread my lips with his fingers and began to lick and suck, making a new explosion of sparks ignite in my core.

"River!" I cried, grabbing his hair.

"You taste so sweet," his deep voice vibrated against my body, "Amazing."

His mouth closed over my bud, and my world imploded. A guttural cry ripped from my lips, and I pulled hard on his hair as my body arched and spasmed underneath him. Electricity shot through me, and my insides clenched, like they were searching for his member, longing to hold it inside again. I felt another wetness, but this time it was my own, and River seemed eager to taste it, to lick it away.

It was embarrassing, and yet strangely satisfying to see him licking his lips while his chin was still wet and glossy.

"Next time," River promised, climbing up the bed to flop down next to me and gather me in his arms. He pulled me next to him, arranging my back tightly against his front. "Next time I will make sure you come first," he mumbled, sounding a little sleepy.

My body shuddered again, just at the low promise of his words.

There will be a next time.

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“I can’t do this anymore,” I confessed, as I paced the room.

“Then don’t.” Luke sat down in the chair and crossed his legs. He seemed to be quite bemused by my current state of unrest.

“Look, you’ve been laying low for months trying to flush this person out. We haven’t gotten any closer to finding them, and they don’t seem to be in a hurry to make the next move. Maybe they need a moving target.”

I stopped pacing and stared at him. “Maybe you are right. Maybe they need to see that I’m not weak and helpless.” I cringed as I said the words, because without my wolf, I really was weak and helpless. How could I defend myself against a shifted wolf?

“I don’t suppose this has anything to do with that pretty little mate of yours?” My personal doctor and one of my best friends teased, wiggling his eyebrows at me.

I growled deep in my throat. My wolf might be gone, but I could still make the vocalizations. The truth was, it had more to do with Lenora than I wanted to admit. She had gone to the office with my father today, and I hated it. She had dressed up in the new office clothes that I had bought her. She now looked professional, classy, demure, and if possible, even more beautiful. I could just imagine how men would be eyeing her as she walked the halls.

I had slept beside her last night in the big bed. I had plenty of room to stretch out my arms and legs, and had kept her soft body tucked against mine the whole night. I had felt guilty and a little bit frustrated that my performance had been somewhat lacking, but damn, she had been so perfect. Too perfect. I was so satiated that I slept deeply and heavily all through the night. I think she also slept quietly, without any nightmares. If she stirred during the night, I was too deeply asleep to hear her.

I hope that wasn’t the case.

“It’s not about Lenora,” I lied. Well, it wasn’t only about Lenora. This life I was living, staying confined to my room, playing the part of the crippled invalid, it was exhausting. Not only did it drain me mentally, it was playing havoc on my spirit. Before Lenora came, all I could remember were long dark days, heavily shadowed by depression and thoughts of death.

And what if I never found the person who attempted to murder me? What if they came back to finish the job?

Or what if there was really no murderer? Was it possible that I had really just suffered a freak, unheard of stroke at such a young age?

That doubt plagued me more than any of my other worries. Because if there was no one to blame, what was left? It just meant that I was a broken alpha with no recourse but to step down in shame and do what?

Go live among the humans?

I spun on my heel and went to the phone I had left on the side table. I stabbed at the screen to one of the preset numbers and waited for the butler to pick up on the other end. "Remmy? I need to have my black suit pressed. Yes, immediately please. And have a car ready for me in forty-five minutes."

Luke whistled under his breath. "You're serious then?"

"Yes, this is the perfect time. The house is empty, everyone has gone to work except the staff. No one will see it coming!" I felt my heart beating faster in anticipation of seeing the look on everyone's face when they realized that I was up and walking, strong and able bodied. I had waited a very long time for this moment. An impossibly long time.

There was a knock on the door, and without thinking I yelled, "come in," already quite forgetting that I was supposed to be on the bed. Remmy pushed open the door and then stumbled to a stop as he saw me across the room, still in my pajamas, but clearly standing and mobile on my one.

"A-Alpha!" The old man exclaimed, and then his lower lip trembled, and his eyes began to turn red as he quickly blinked away tears. "It's good...it's so good to see you on your feet sir. The pack will be overjoyed at this news." He laid the plastic-wrapped suit on the big bed, bowed slightly, and hurried from the room.

"Remmy," I called before he reached the door.

"Yes, sir."

"Tell no one," I said sternly, "I want to make the announcement myself."

"Of course, Alpha. My lips are sealed." He tried to keep a proper, solemn face, but his lips kept betraying him, pulling into a wide, happy grin. "Congratulations on your recovery, Sir." He bowed again and then left, shutting the door quietly behind him.

"Hmm, he took that well, I'd say," Luke observed.

"We'll have to be very keen to watch for the people who have a negative reaction," I commented, already yanking off my pajama top. I pawed through my drawers for an undershirt and pulled it over my head. "Would you like to escort me to the office, Doctor?"

“I thought you’d never ask! I was going to insist on coming anyway! I can’t wait to the reactions! And of course, as a safety precaution, you should definitely walk with your personal physician. It might be too much for you; the stress could cause you to relapse.”

I couldn’t tell if he was joking or serious, so I chose to ignore his last statement. The idea that I could regress back to my former state of being in pain and paralyzed and unable to communicate was almost my worst nightmare. No, I couldn’t go back to that.

I was healed, my body was strong, my mind was strong.

Only my wolf was gone.

I pulled a pale blue dress shirt from the closet and began buttoning it. “I don’t need a doctor,” I insisted. “But you can accompany me to the office as my friend.”

Luke shrugged. “Fair enough.”

I picked out a somber tie and knotted it around my neck. It had been more than a year since I had donned a suit and walked into my own office, but my hands hadn’t forgotten the motions to tie the tie. I shrugged the jacket of my suit on, and checked my reflection in the mirror over my dresser, which only showed from the waist up.

“Fine,” I said shortly. “Let’s get going.”

“Hmm, that’s a good idea,” Lucas Parker drawled out the words with slow deliberation and an amused look. “But you might want to put on your pants first.”

I glanced down and saw that in my haste, I had tucked my dress shirt into the waistband of my pajama bottoms. I groaned and started shucking off the pajama pants. “Wonderful,” I grumbled as I kicked the stupid silk pajamas off my feet, “Now they will know that I lost my mind as well as my wolf.”

Luke stood and handed me the trousers that went to the dark suit. “They will be so happy to see you alive and well, they won’t care if you are stark raving mad.”

A little thought niggled at the back of my mind as I grabbed a belt and worked it through the loops on the pants. How would Lenora feel, seeing me walk into the office? Would she be happy that my secret was out? Would she be proud to see me standing tall again?

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The driver pulled up in front of Blackstone Innovations, and I spent a long minute looking up at the steel and glass building. Before my accident I had probably spent more hours inside that building than I had spent at my own home. It had been a big responsibility,

running a multi-billion dollar company while governing a large pack. But I had lived for that challenge.

Now that I was back after a more than a year's absence, the place felt foreign, and almost threatening. Walking inside those doors was tantamount to painting a big target on my back. But then I thought of Lenora. I had put her at risk, sending her in alone and unprotected.

Nevermind that she was with my dad, who, despite his age, was still a powerful and formidable alpha wolf. If my would-be murderer had gotten to me, I knew they were clever enough to get to or through my father to get at my mate. What if they decided to use Lenora to get to me? With a growl I pushed my way out of the vehicle, and started stalking up the steps, with Dr. Luke following close behind.

I pulled open the glass doors and strode inside. Faking a strength and a confidence that I didn't feel. At first people looked at me and dismissed me as just another business man in a suit walking through the lobby, but then they quickly did a double-take, as they stumbled to a stop to stare at the Alpha that they believed to be nothing more than a bed-ridden vegetable. I lifted my chin and ignored them, as I went straight to the reception desk.

"Hello Martha," I greeted the older woman.

"Hello, welcome to—oh my moon and stars! Alpha River! You—Your—" Her face paled and her mouth hung open. She pressed her palms against her cheeks.

"Yes, Martha. Could you switch on the elevator, please."

"Y-yes, sir, of course." She reached under the desk for the switch that powered the executive elevator.

I smiled my thanks and pulled out my security badge. I hoped they hadn't deactivated it during my long absence. But when I got to the elevator, and pressed it against the electronic box, the doors slid open in a silent welcome.

I stepped inside, and Luke stepped in beside me. He gave me a thumbs up. "So far so good!" He said, like that was supposed to encourage me. The elevator began its smooth ascent up to the eleventh floor, where the executive offices were located. Perhaps because I was both dreading and anticipating the moment, it seemed to go especially slow. Finally it slid to a stop and the stainless steel doors slid open, revealing the office level that was both so familiar, and so strangely foreign at the same time.

Nothing had changed in the past year, and yet, it felt completely different. There was still a planter full of bamboo in the corner, though it was taller and fuller than I remembered. The layout of the offices was exactly the same, though one or two of the name plates might have changed in my absence. There were cries and exclamations as I started to

walk down the hallway. People's heads jerked away from their computer screens, and workers came out of their offices to stare, and in some cases, to bow as a gesture of reverence and subordination to their alpha.

I didn't deserve their admiration, not now. Now I was really just an ordinary man with a title walking down the halls. But I kept my head up and my shoulders back as I made my way down to the corner office. I could hear them whispering as I passed.

"It's Alpha Blackstone! He's back!"

"Did you know?"

"He can walk?!"

"He doesn't look sick at all!"

"Was there a memo?? I think I missed the damn memo!"

"Did you know about this?"

"No!"

"Does Zachary know?"

My secretary caught sight of me, and she stood up so suddenly that her heavy wheeled chair tipped over backwards and clattered to the floor, banging into the wall in the process. "Alpha! Alpha you are back!" she gasped, as if she was informing me of something I didn't already know.

"Hello, Janet. Is my father in?"

"Y-yes, I'll—" before she could fumble with the intercom system, the door to my office opened, and my father was there, glaring out into the hall.

"What in tarnation is all that racket? Janet did you—" my father's words trailed off as he caught sight of me standing strong and tall before him. His face paled, and his mouth opened and closed several times as he tried to comprehend what his eyes were seeing. "Son—" he stumbled forward and grabbed a hold of my shoulders in his big beefy hands. I had the feeling he might have fallen down if he wasn't holding on to me.

"River..." Apparently overwrought with emotion, he pulled me into a bone-crushing hug. "I knew it," he grumbled into my ear. "I knew you would recover." He pulled back to look me over, his aging face creasing into a broad smile "You are looking so fit, too!"

"You know I've been working with the doctor and the massage therapist," I said, but I was already trying to see past him. "Where is Lenora?"

He stepped aside, and I saw her there, framed in the doorway, her sweet, innocent face wreathed in happy smiles, her hands clasped over her heart like she was witnessing something truly emotional. "Lenora..." I strode up to her and took her hands.

She blinked up at me. "You came."

I smiled down at her. "Something told me it was time," I lifted her hands to my lips and kissed them. Touching her made all of my anxiety shrink down. Like everything was right in the world as long as she was beside me. It was a bizarre, but comforting feeling.

The moment was interrupted by someone slowly and steadily clapping their hands.

"Well holy s.hit, look who's back!" I heard a familiar and irreverent voice exclaim behind me. I turned and found my cousin Zach still clapping. "Welcome back, boss. It's good to see you!"

I regarded him coolly, as I stepped in front of Lenora, putting my body between my mate and my cousin. I narrowed my eyes on him and regarded him coolly. "Yes, I'm back." I said, with a forced smile.

I wasn't about to forget that my cousin had stepped in and taken over my girlfriend the moment I was incapacitated. Not that I cared any more, whatever feelings I had ever held for Ashley were long gone, and as far as I was concerned, he was welcome to her. But that didn't mean I would forget what he had done. His actions smacked of disloyalty and disrespect.

And I had no intention of letting him get anywhere near my new mate.

I would have expected more from any man, but especially from my own cousin, the man I once regarded as my best friend. Now I eyed him suspiciously. But he only grinned like nothing was wrong and extended his hand. "Seriously man, it's good to see you looking so...well."

I grunted, but I accepted his hand and gave him a firm and hearty handshake.

My father came beside us, clapping a hand on each of our backs. "This calls for a celebration!"

"No, no," I held up my hands, "Dad, I don't want to make a big deal about this. Let me just resume work without a lot of hype and fanfare."

My dad threw his head back and laughed, like I had said something ridiculously funny. "Who's talking about you? I want to celebrate for me!"

"Huh?"

He grinned and threw his hands in the air. "I get to retire! Again!"