

Chapter 31 – Healing the Broken Alpha

Seeing River back on his feet, and in his natural environment was like seeing a lion stalking the savannah. Or a wolf leading his pack. I wanted to fade into the background, or even go back to my desk and continue going over the files that the old alpha had given me to study, but River kept his arm securely around me as he moved through the offices. He went around greeting employees one by one, shaking hands, accepting their congratulations on his miraculous recovery.

He was patient, gracious, and composed, but I could practically feel his irritation vibrating through his skin anywhere he touched me. He was uncomfortable having so much attention focused on him. He didn't say that, but I could just... sense it. I thought that was a little strange, coming from an Alpha. I thought, given their dominant nature, that all Alphas love to be the center of attention.

I know my brother did. In fact Jensen became petulant and troubled whenever he wasn't in the spotlight. My brother could never have done what River had done, hiding in the shadows for months on end, finding his own strength, keeping quiet. My brother would have been shouting from the rooftops the moment he could twitch a pinkie finger.

Which probably explained why my family was always struggling with money, while River had a successful multi-billion dollar international empire.

Darian had suggested they make an official announcement before the company, but River had vetoed the idea. "It's not necessary. By now every person in this building knows that I am here, and that I walked in on my own two feet. Gossip travels faster than the speed of light."

And indeed, everyone who had access to the executive floor started pouring off the elevator. It kind of reminded me of ants rushing for the top of the anthill when my mean brother poured water in their nest.

Ashley was among the first to appear, looking like a runway model, wearing stiletto heels and a short skirt that showed off her long legs. I tried not to be jealous, but when I looked at her, I felt very plain and dowdy, even in the nice clothes that River had bought for me. She was wearing a pleasant and practiced smile, but I could see the venom in her eyes, especially when they landed on the River's arm that was looped around my waist.

I noticed, though, that she gravitated straight to River's cousin Zachary, and put her hands on him in a very obvious and possessive way. Sliding her hand across his chest and leaving it over the man's heart like she owned it. Zach seemed comfortable with her touch, and smiled down at her, and then put an arm around her shoulders.

"River, this is such a surprise," she simpered.

I didn't know how she could do it. How could she flirt with River even as she leaned against another man? "I was just at the packhouse, and you didn't want to let me in on this little secret? I'm so hurt!"

I felt my wolf stirring restlessly and growling in the back of my mind. I didn't like this woman. I didn't like the claim she had on my mate. I didn't like the way she looked at him now. Just yesterday she despised him because she thought he was paralyzed in bed. Now she was looking at him like a prized stud horse that she wanted to add to her stable.

I leaned closer to River, and strangely, I felt like his body heat was calming me.

Luckily, more people were coming off the elevator, their faces glowing with happy smiles as they all rushed toward their beloved Alpha and much respected CEO, pushing Ashley and Zachary further away.

No one even seemed to notice me there at his side, and no introductions were made, but I tried to study all the different faces and commit them to memory. After all, if they had access to this floor they must be fairly important people.

The elevator dinged again, and this time I recognized the people who stepped off. It was River's step-mother and his half-brother. Gayle looked as beautiful and poised as ever, her ash-blond hair smoothed back, her ears dripping with pearls, her baby-blue suit perfectly tailored to her elegant physique. However, her expression was flustered, and there was something about the death grip she had on her clutch purse that made me think she was just a pinch away from slapping someone with it.

She did not look at all pleased with River's miraculous recovery.

Beside her, her son walked along looking rather annoyed as well. But I think it was that alpha thing again. I think Asher was annoyed that all the attention was on River.

"River Blackstone!" Gayle snapped when she had elbowed her way into the circle of people that had surrounded us. "I can't believe you kept this a secret from your own family! Do you have no respect?" Her blue eyes were snapping like sparks from an overloaded electrical socket.

Darian smiled good-naturedly and tugged his mate to his side. "Oh, don't take it like that, love. I'm sure he had his own reasons! Let's just be grateful and thankful that he has finally made a full recovery."

Asher had stopped and was leaning against one of the fire doors in the hallway. His clothes all seemed just a bit too loose on his narrow frame, giving me the impression that he was playing dress-up in somebody else's clothes. Someone bigger, and more important. However, he was tall enough that he was able to see over the gathered crowd of people. "Not entirely recovered though, are you brother?"

Suddenly the noisy crowd all got quiet and tense, and River stiffened beside me, his fingers tightening almost painfully into my side as he fought to control his temper. People moved aside, opening a channel between the brothers. Nobody wanted to get caught in the middle if they decided to attack each other.

“Ash-” Darian’s voice was laced with warning, “Now is not the time, nor the place-”

River held up a hand to silence his father. “No, let him speak.” He raised his eyebrows at his younger brother. “You were saying?”

Asher smiled, and I recognized it as the same, cruel, predatory smile he’d once flashed at me. “I was just pointing out that you haven’t entirely recovered, because you’ve lost your wolf. You won’t ever be the man you used to be.”

There were several gasps among the crowd. No one seemed particularly shocked at the news. I think the loss of River’s wolf was already common knowledge. No, people were gasping because Asher had the gall to rub it in his brother’s face.

It was almost a challenge for dominance.

Almost, but not quite.

Instinctually, I let my hand wander under the River’s suitcoat. That wasn’t enough, so I tugged a little section of his shirt out of his trousers, just enough to make a space where my fingers could rest against the bare skin of his lower back.

I’m not sure if I was trying to calm him, or calm myself, because I could feel my wolf once again fighting to come to the surface. My gums were feeling itchy from the fangs that threatened to elongate out of my jaw. I wanted to step in front of River, as though my small body could do anything to protect him against the sharp words that Asher was flinging at him.

“You are right,” River said, the smooth calm of his voice a stark contrast to the agitation I could feel in his muscles. “I’m not the man I used to be, but don’t count me out, brother. I’m not dead yet.”

AUTHOR’S NOTE:

Thank you for reading! What do you think of the responses from his family? Let me know in the comments! #vote#

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The people continued to crowd around us in the hallway, until the crush of bodies pulled me away from River. He was pushed forward toward the elevators, and I was left behind.

I didn't make any attempt to follow him. It seemed like the entire floor emptied like someone had pulled the plug from a drain. River was pushed into the elevator, and when the small car couldn't hold any more passengers, the remaining employees started taking the stairs.

I didn't even know where they were going. Maybe they were moving the meet and greet to a larger venue. Perhaps there was a large conference room on one of the lower levels that could accommodate them. I looked around the now deserted executive floor, and was surprised to find River's doctor still leaning against the secretary's desk.

He was a big man, even larger than River, with dark skin and dark eyes like obsidian. He wore a crisp shirt with a dark blue tie, and while he seemed to have taken off his white lab coat for the occasion, he had forgotten to remove the stethoscope from around his neck. He smiled at me, and something about the wide stretch of his lips put me at ease.

"Well, that was exciting," Dr. Lucas said, straightening up.

I tried to force a smile that I really didn't feel. "It's wonderful. The Alpha is back. His people should be really happy."

He gave me a sharp look. "What about you, Lenora, are you happy?"

"Of course I am!" I said, too quickly. And I was, of course I was! I wanted nothing but the best for River, I wanted to see him completely restored to his full power and glory as an alpha and a business tycoon. It was awe inspiring to see how he swept into the building like the rising tide, bringing everyone and everything up with him.

But I felt a sinking sadness at the same time.

Perhaps it was just because I knew I would no longer have River to myself. I would no longer be his only companion within the confines of his sickroom. Maybe it was a dark shadow of jealousy as his attention was pulled in a thousand different directions, until there was none left for me. In the chaos of all those people, I'd been left behind and forgotten, and I just knew, that's how it was going to be now.

"Don't look so sad, Little Luna. Trust me, River still needs you, more than you know."

His words were kind, but I didn't really believe him. I passed by the secretary's desk and went into the Alpha's office, to the makeshift desk I had set up at the conference table. I had finished studying the files on the education sector, and Darian had given me a new pile based on recent land and property acquisitions. I sat heavily in the chair and rested my chin on my hands.

Dr. Parker decided to keep me company. He strolled in, apparently unphased by the fact that he was trespassing in the CEO's private office. He pulled out the chair at the other end of the table, and folded himself into it. His body seemed too large for the plastic and

metal seat, and I half expected it to collapse under his weight. For that matter, he seemed too large to be a doctor.

I recognized that I had a rare opportunity to speak to River's personal physician, alone, without River present. I picked up a pen and fiddled with it nervously between my fingers. "Doctor," I said, keeping my voice low, even though we were alone. "Can you tell me what exactly happened to River?"

He gave me a long look. "Didn't anyone tell you, already?"

I shook my head. "No. River never talks about it, and I'm afraid to ask. All I've heard are rumors and stories, and I don't know what's real and what's not."

Lucas leaned his elbows on the table. "There's a thing called Doctor-patient privilege, Lenora," he reminded me, and I felt my face flush. He was subtly telling me that I was prying into things that were none of my business. I was invading River's privacy, and I felt ashamed for my own curiosity. The doctor, however, seemed oblivious to my discomfort, and continued anyway. "But I can tell you the circumstances, after all, it's a matter of public record."

I looked up at him hopefully and waited.

"River had already gone home for the day, when he was called back for an urgent meeting here at the office. Except, he never arrived at the meeting. He wasn't answering his cellphone and no one had heard from him. After waiting for him for almost an hour, Zachary alerted the pack authorities, and they started searching for him. They found his car in a ditch on the side of the road, with River slumped over the wheel, unresponsive."

Even though it had happened more than a year ago, I still felt my throat tighten with apprehension as I pictured the scene in my mind.

"The medics were able to resuscitate him and they rushed him to the local hospital, and then we airlifted him to Prosperity Springs. The CTscan revealed that he had suffered a massive stroke right at the brain stem." The doctor's face looked grim. "He shouldn't have survived. The fact that he has made a full recovery is nothing short of miraculous."

"What caused him to have a stroke?" I couldn't stop myself from asking, even knowing I was violating River's privacy.

But Dr. Luke only shook his head sadly. "We haven't been able to determine the cause."

I thought of telling the doctor that River believed someone had done something to him to cause the stroke, that he believed he was the victim of an attempted homicide, but I bit my lower lip and kept quiet. It was my understanding that River and the doctor were close friends, so likely the doctor was well aware of River's theory.

However, I was wondering if maybe River was just in denial about the fragility of his own health. After all, who could have reached him, what could have been done to him, if he was just on the road, driving by himself?

I wanted to ask about River's wolf, but I knew that was pushing too far, so I switched topics and gestured to the folders. "I've been trying to learn about the business," I said just to steer the conversation away from River. "I don't understand how one pack can have such a massive reach, and control so much property and so much money."

"Well, Blackstone Innovations was started by River's great-grandfather, so it's had a few generations to build up its accounts," Lucas said almost offhandedly, like a multi-billion dollar company was no-big-deal.

"Oh," I said, randomly pulling a file folder from the pile. "Then River just inherited all this wealth?"

"Not exactly," The doctor shifted in the chair, which was clearly too small and quite uncomfortable. He reminded me of an adult trying to sit on one of those little plastic chairs they make for kindergarten students. "A lot of the growth has happened in the last decade or so, especially since River took over from his father. Between River and Zachary, well they have been rather ruthless in their acquisitions and buyouts. Hell, they practically own half the packs around here."

"I see," I said, although my brain couldn't really comprehend the scope of Blackstone's power and control. Darian had offhandedly mentioned that Blackstone had a larger gross national product than many small countries. I didn't understand at first, until I looked up the meaning of gross national product on the internet. I thought he was exaggerating, but it turns out, it was a valid claim.

How had my father ended up owing Blackstone half a million dollars? Did he get caught up in some kind of shady business deal? I was just a young teenager when he died, and I hadn't been involved in any of the pack business. Probably Jenson knew, but I couldn't exactly call up my brother and ask him. He'd sooner spit on me than give me any information, even if that information was valueless to him.

Surely River must know, though. But did I have the courage to ask him?

Chapter 33 – Healing the Broken Alpha

Being an Alpha is not nearly as glamorous as it sounds. Most of the time it's tedious work. It's settling disputes, balancing budgets and trying to get the damn HVAC contractor to come fix the boiler that has broken down three times in the last two months.

It also means you are always and forevermore a target. Wolves are territorial by nature, and no matter how well we try to assimilate into human culture, it seems that we are

always driven to be the proverbial top-dog, to have the biggest, strongest, healthiest pack, and to eliminate all rivals.

The wars between packs are unending. They squabble over boundaries, and resources, and even women. It takes very little to stir up an alpha, and the next thing you know, he's pulled together his best fighters, and he's off to challenge his foe.

The fight-to-the-death with fang and claw might have worked in the old days, but now we were too visible. The boundaries between the human world and the hidden werewolves had blurred. There were even packs like Prosperity Springs which had fully integrated cities.

The downside of such progressive movements was the human government trying to bring their idea of law and order down on our packs.

Humans do tend to frown on bloody raids and deadly duels.

For my part, I had learned to channel my alpha instinct into the business. My older cousin, Zachary, had taught me to take my aggression and my need to dominate into the boardroom. Instead of cutting down my enemies out on a bloody battlefield, I sliced them apart piece by piece, financially.

However, as my father pushed me toward the front of the large conference room on the second floor at Blackstone Innovations, I didn't feel like a conqueror. I felt like a puppy with my tail tucked between my legs.

Lenora had gotten separated from me somehow, but when I tried to go back for her, my father had taken my elbow firmly in hand to steer me forward. When we were pressed tightly in the elevator he had whispered in my ear, "Don't let them see Lenora as your weakness, River."

When I glanced back I saw Luke leaning against the secretary's desk. He gave me a thumbs up and cut his eyes toward Lenora, just before the stainless steel doors slid closed cutting her off from my sight. I hope that was a signal that he was going to watch over her in my absence.

He damn well better not try anything else, or I will personally decapitate him.

Dad was right. I was clinging to Lenora like a toddler holding tight to their favorite teddy bear. It not only made me look weak and vulnerable, it could potentially put Lenora in danger, if anyone got the idea that they could get to me through her. I had to get my head right, and remember that taking a wife was meant to be a strategic move.

I forced myself to smile over the crowd of employees that had filled the conference room to capacity. Not all of my employees were members of my own pack. I had also hired many talented young wolves from surrounding territories. Even as I smiled, I was picking

faces out of the crowd, staring them in the eye, seeing who lowered their gaze respectfully, and who continued to boldly hold my gaze, knowing full well I no longer had a wolf to force my authority.

I did not let my smile falter. I tried to remember what it felt like to be powerful and confident, and projected that memory as I recited the speech that I had been rehearsing in my head for months.

“Ladies and gentlemen, it’s an honor to be able to stand before you once again...” I continued to scan over the faces, mentally noting the ones that were giving me rapt attention, the ones that appeared bored, and a few that seemed to be silently sneering at me.

“...And finally, since we are already gathered here like this, I think this is a perfect opportunity to announce that I have chosen a mate.” There was a surprised murmur from the crowd. “When a man faces his own mortality as I have over this past year, he begins to think seriously about the future and the legacy he would like to leave. I’m at an age where finding my fated mate seems unlikely-“ and bloody impossible now that I have no wolf, I added silently. “So for the stability of the pack, I have taken Lenora Moore, the granddaughter of Alpha Stanley Moore from Ridgemoore to be my Luna. We will announce a date for the official Luna ceremony later this week.”

For a moment there was stunned silence. Then someone began to clap, and slowly it gained momentum until there were shouts of “Congratulations! Yeah Alpha! Welcome back!” Among the cacophony of clapping hands and whistles.

My father met my eye and gave me a nod of approval, and my cousin Zachary put his hand on my shoulder. I thought it was meant to be a congratulatory gesture, a clap on the back in recognition of my wonderful oratory abilities. Instead, his fingers dug into my flesh, and I could feel his aggressive aura pushing at me.

Zachary stared at me, his expression warring between disbelief and outrage. “That mousy little woman in your office? Lenora Moore? Your dad’s so-called assistant? That’s the woman you’ve chosen to be Luna of the pack? Have you lost your mind??”

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My cousin was lucky that I didn’t have my wolf. If I had been whole at that moment, I probably would have ripped his head off his shoulders without a second thought. As it was, I stepped right into his face and glared at him. My hands balled into fists, and I was ready to throw punches even if I was sure to lose. “What gives you the right to question my decisions, Zachary? Last time I checked, I’m still in charge around here.”

He met my gaze, arrogant and unafraid.

Zach wasn't just my cousin and the VP of the company, he was also supposed to be my beta. He was supposed to be the first person to have my back at all times. But instead of looking out for my interests while I was sick, he swooped in and took over my girlfriend.

It wasn't that Ashley was a prize worth fighting over. Hell, if I'd been an able bodied man at the time and he had come to me to tell me he had feelings for her, I would have happily stepped back. Even before the accident, it wasn't like Ashley and I had been that serious. She was just comfortable, familiar and convenient.

But it was the principle of the thing. How could you do that to the man who was supposed to be your best friend, not to mention your Alpha. And I hadn't even been down that long when they made their move, so they couldn't say that they had no hope that I would ever recover. Zachary betrayed my trust on a very deep and personal level.

That's why, upon my recovery, one of my first acts was to strip him of his Beta title. He could remain the BP of Blackstone Innovations, as long as his job performance warranted the honor, but there was no way in hell I was going to trust him to be my second when it came to the welfare of my pack.

Or the welfare of my family. A low growl worked its way out of my chest, and my father's hand descended on my shoulder. "Okay, that's enough."

His voice still carried the heavy edge of the Alpha command, which mine now lacked. Zachary was forced to drop his gaze and look down. I didn't need to submit to my father, but I knew that this was neither the time nor the place for a confrontation with my cousin. "Why don't we head upstairs and fetch Lenora," my father suggested. "And then we can head out to lunch to celebrate."

It only took the mention of her name to relieve some of the tension in my shoulders. I brushed past Zachary and deliberately knocked into him with my shoulder, just to show him that all was not forgotten or forgiven. Childish? Maybe. But satisfying.

There were too many people milling around in the hallway and clogging up the elevator, so I opted to take the stairs, climbing them two at a time until I reached the eleventh floor. I was barely winded and just beginning to sweat by the time I pulled open the door at the top. It took all of myself to walk, and not run down the hallway to my corner office. The door was ajar, and I could see Lenora perched on my desk, talking to Luke like they were old and close friends.

I felt the ugly claws of jealousy scraping at me.

Luke was my friend. In fact, I had tried to convince him to take over the now vacant position of beta. He had refused, stating that the medical practice he ran with his partners was his passion, and it took up far too much of his time. He wouldn't be able to dedicate himself to me or to the position.

I had respected his honesty, and his decision. Apart from my father, I trusted Luke the most, but I wasn't sure I trusted anyone with Lenora. I felt more possessive and protective over her than I ever had over Ashley, or any other female for that matter. I had no idea that taking a chosen mate could make a man feel this overwhelmed.

Her sweet brown eyes found me in the doorway, and her face lit up so sweetly, like she was truly happy to see me, like maybe she'd been missing me while I was away in the same way I had been missing her. I strode quickly across the room, lifted her off the desk and straight into my arms, crushing her body against mine. I buried my head in her neck and took deep breaths. Even if I was only smelling the essence of her shampoo and my body wash, it somehow calmed my nervous system and brought everything back into proper focus.

"So how'd it go?" Luke asked from his seat at the conference table. He was tipping back in the chair, and looked completely relaxed and at ease.

Lenora squirmed like she wanted to get down, but I tightened my arms around her. I carried her around the desk and sat down in my roller chair, leaving her to rearrange herself on my lap. She tipped her face back to look at me. "If people see us like this..."

"Let them see," I growled. "You are mine, they might as well get used to it."

Luke chuckled, and I shot him a glare, before I answered his original question. "It went as well as can be expected," I said, suddenly feeling tired. It was the first time I had left the house in months, and the effort was exhausting. Not the physical exertion, but the mental and emotional one. "There was a mixed response, both to my return, and to my announcement that I have chosen a luna."

Lenora shifted in my lap. "You...you told them?"

"Yes." I reached up and stroked her cheek. "I made the announcement that we would be holding your Luna ceremony next week."

I saw her cringe and shrink. "They won't like me," she whispered.

"They will love you," I said firmly. Silently I added, just like I do.

Luke brought me back to the conversation at hand. "Any particularly strange reactions that red-flagged you?" Luke asked, uncrossing his legs and climbing to his feet.

Immediately I thought of three. My half-brother, my stepmother and my cousin. All people who were close to me, people I called my family, people I should have been able to trust. And yet...wasn't their reactions natural? When I stepped into the office, my half-brother lost his chance to be the alpha. When I stepped into the building, my cousin lost the chance to be the CEO.

And my stepmother?

Well, I didn't have much to say about her. She and I had never been close. She tolerated me and I tolerated her, but she was never "motherly" toward me, and I never expected her to be. So I didn't exactly expect her to welcome me back with open arms.

So in a way, their reactions didn't strike me as suspicious at all. Just human nature and werewolf nature rearing their ugly heads.

In reality, there were a lot of faces in the crowd that seemed discontented. Too many to narrow down who might have had a motive to strike me down. And who knew what they were aggrieved over. Maybe those scowling faces just didn't like the idea of being ruled over by a wolfless alpha. And I couldn't blame them. If I were in their place, I would also be questioning my loyalty.

Because a pack is really only as strong as their alpha.

"So we are still at zero," I grumbled, more to myself than to Luke. I still had no leads, no clues, no direction as to what had happened to me, and who was responsible.

"Patience, River," Luke said, his voice growing somber, "If someone wanted you dead, and they know that they failed, they will make another move. Just make sure you are ready for them when they come. Don't let them finish the job this time."

Lenora gripped me a little harder, like the idea of losing me bothered her. I stroked her back and nodded to Luke, acknowledging the truth of his words. But if I didn't know how the hell they had gotten to me in the first place, how was I supposed to stop it from happening a second time.

"Meanwhile," Luke resumed his wide, easy going smile. "The show must go on. Better get cracking on that Luna ceremony." He winked at Lenora and then gave me a jaunty salute before he moved out the door with surprising speed and grace for a man so large.

Chapter 35 – Healing the Broken Alpha

I never in my life aspired to be a Luna. It didn't matter that I was an alpha's daughter, I knew that I was too small, too weak, and simply not smart enough to carry the huge responsibility of being the caregiver of an entire werewolf community. To that end, my family had never bothered to give me the prerequisite training. I was lucky to even finish high school.

I thought this whole arrangement with River Blackstone was going to be for show only. I didn't think they'd actually make me go through the ordeal of a proper luna ceremony. But for the next week I found myself being bombarded by professional planners, and spending waaaaay too much time with my step-mother-in-law than I was comfortable with.

“Now,” one of the planners crossed her long slender legs and handed me a book that was full of fabric swatches, “We want all of the colors to coordinate nicely, so the table clothes and the linens should all compliment the colors of your dress.”

I had spent two days arguing with the former luna about the dress. She was trying to point me in the direction of white, fluffy, ruffled, beaded monstrosities. They kind of gowns you see Bridezillas fight over. The kind of dresses that make women look like giant frosted cupcakes. I didn’t want to wear white at all. I wasn’t some sweet, innocent, Victorian bride.

The dress I had chosen was a deep turquoise color. It had loose sleeves that fell to the elbow and a deep scooped neckline. The bodice fit snugly until my hips, and then the full skirt floated to my knees.

Gayle had complained that it was too plain, but I had stuck fast on my choice.

People think that because I’m quiet, that I’m easy to push around. They don’t know how stubborn I really am.

I looked at the fabric swatches. “Why can’t we just do white table cloths?” I said. I saw Gayle scowling out of the corner of my eye, shaking her head in disapproval. The party planner rolled her eyes. I sighed and took the book into my lap. I flipped through the pages of swatches and found deep, shimmering blue. “How about this one?”

The party planner brightened, “Oh, that is nice!”

Gayle pulled the book out of my hands. “Hmm, it’s not bad, if we go with the darker tablecloths, we could do white flower arrangements...”

I had the feeling that Gayle lived for this kind of thing. The planning, the embossed invitations, the decorating, the menu, the cake, the music. The dresses. It was like my presence was completely forgotten as the two older women bent their heads together and started an animated debate over floral arrangements. I didn’t even know the names of the flowers they were tossing out, beyond the usual roses and carnations. I wandered over to the window and looked down at the manicured lawn, and the dense forest beyond.

How had this arrangement become so confusing? This whole mating was just a business transaction. I came to stand next to a crippled, wolfless alpha, and the same alpha cleared my family’s debts. What I wanted or how I felt about anything was never taken into consideration, so why were they bothering to ask my opinion now? Even if Gayle planned the whole thing from top to bottom, why should I complain? It was all for show anyway. I wasn’t really going to be a luna.

Maybe I should have let her put me in the cupcake gown with the puffy sleeves?

Nah, I still had some dignity left.

The confusing part was that it was starting to feel too real to me. When River and I were alone together at night, it didn't feel like a farce any more. He had ordered his men to take the hospital bed away, and we now slept together in the big bed that had been custom made to fit his big body.

I was afraid I was starting to fall in love with the Alpha, and that wasn't part of the arrangement.

The treeline outside the window was calling to me like a siren.

"I...I need to go out for a run." I announced abruptly.

"Lenora, you need to take your responsibilities more seriously!" Gayle admonished me. The party planner had a little smirk on her face, clearly showing that she had no respect for me.

I gave her a fake, polite smile, "You are so much better at this than I am, I'm sure you will make the best choices." Even as I was speaking the words, I was easing my way toward the door.

I hadn't let my wolf out to run since I had come to stay with River Blackstone. Not that I shift frequently, and Goddess knows I'd never been given the opportunity to train as a wolf, but now and then she got restless, and if I didn't give her space to express herself, she would make my life hell. Besides that, it was high time I got to know the forest that surrounded the Blackstone packhouse.

Once I was under the cover of the trees I slipped out of my clothes, rolling them up carefully and sticking them in the crotch of a striped maple. I glanced around to make sure I was alone before I crouched down and let my wolf-spirit take over my body. There was no pain as bones cracked and popped, only a brief feeling of a hot flush as my skin bloomed with soft fur. I stretched my nose toward the sky and took in the unfamiliar scents of the forest around me.

A lot of wolves had criss-crossed through these trees. New scents covered older scents, and I had the feeling that I was probably standing in a patrol route. I put my nose down into the leaf litter and began sniffing my way through the trees, trotting casually from tree to tree, memorizing the layout of the woods, marking the landmarks so that next time the forest would be familiar.

I found a small clear stream and stopped to lap up the cold, refreshing water. When I lifted my head, I heard a faint noise coming from upstream. My ears perked up and I scented the air. I smelled nothing, but I was sure I'd heard movement in that direction. Curiosity pulled my feet in that direction, and I found myself following the small stream as it meandered through the trees, around big boulders, and across patchy clearings.

Just when I thought it was only my imagination, I would hear something again. A rustle of leaves. The snap of a branch. Once I thought I heard a strange disembodied giggle.

The terrain became rougher and began to climb. I knew I had probably wandered far enough, but I felt like the thing I was chasing was just there, just around the next bend, and I pressed further, not caring that burs were getting snagged in my fur, or that the sun was starting to dip lower in the sky.

The stream finally broke through into an old homestead site. There were crumbling, moss covered rock walls outlining what once must have been a farm yard. All of the buildings were gone except for an old stone cellar hole, and a fireplace with a broken chimney that pointed up into the sky like an arthritic finger.

It wasn't unusual to come across these old ruins in the woods. What was unusual was that it seemed like someone might be living here. There were freshly burned logs on the hearth of the old fireplace, and a blackened cast iron pot that smelled like canned baked beans. In the corner of the cellar hole was an old tattered blanket, neatly spread on the ground, with an old teddy bear propped up against the stone foundation. The bear was missing one eye and looked like it had been torn apart and sewn back together many times.

My first thought was that a child must have stumbled upon the ruins and had decided to play house.

I looked around for the occupant of the camp, but I seemed to be alone. I cautiously approached the stone foundation and sniffed around. Someone had spread mint, catnip and rosemary around the site, almost completely masking the scent of the occupant.

Why would they go to that trouble? Certainly, a child wouldn't be that careful, not even a werewolf child. I crept closer and sniffed around the blanket and the teddy bear, and made out the faint scent of a wolf.

It smelled of cloves, with an almost familiar hint of vanilla.

Suddenly, I felt like I was trespassing. I quickly jumped out of the cellar hole. I took one last look around but saw neither wolf nor man lurking in the deepening shadows. My wolf whined slightly, laced her ears back against her head, and took off down the mountain, back in the direction of the Blackstone packhouse.