

Chapter 36 – Healing the Broken Alpha

By the time I made it back to the small where I had left my clothes, darkness was falling. The Blackstone house looked like a haunted castle, dark and foreboding against the twilight sky. Here and there windows were illuminated behind sheer curtains.

I had a heavy feeling as I changed quickly and rushed into the pack house, using the side entrance near the kitchens. I had stayed out much longer than I intended, and I was running to get back to River's suite.

In my hurry I rounded a corner and plowed straight into a solid body.

"Whoa there, what's this?" Asher's fingers curled around my upper arms like talons, biting into my flesh.

I froze, unsure what to say, or what to do. My eyes moved past him to the door of the kitchen, just a few meters down the hall, hoping and praying that there would be some servants coming or going to see us in the dimly lit corridor. But given that it was nearly dinner time, it seemed they were all occupied in the kitchen, and no one was moving in the hallway.

Still, if I screamed now, surely they would hear me.

Asher leaned down and pushed his nose into my hair near my neck, breathing deeply of my scent. It creeped me out, and I struggled against his grip.

He didn't release me. "You know you've got the alpha all in a tizzy," He said with a lazy, malevolent smile. "He's got half the patrol out looking for you. He was afraid his little luna got lost in the woods."

My breath caught in my throat. Would River be angry with me for coming in so late? I feared his displeasure even more than I feared his lecherous brother. "Let me go," I said tersely, trying to twist away from him. "I need to go to him."

"Not so fast," He used his superior strength to push me slowly into the wall. My back hit the cold stone surface. "Where have you been?" His eyes narrowed speculatively. "Who were you with?"

I glared up at him. "I went for a run, and I wandered everywhere. I didn't go any place in particular." I growled, resenting the fact that I even had to explain myself to this man. For some reason, I was very reluctant to tell him where I had been and what I had seen in the woods up on the side of the mountain.

He was not my alpha, nor my mate, and he had no right to demand answers from me. If anything, I now outranked him as the luna. In some packs, harassing the Luna was a serious crime.

But I wasn't officially the luna yet, not until we completed the ceremony.

He leered at me, and licked his lips. "I don't believe you," his voice dropped to a low purr that was probably intended to be seductive, but instead it made me feel sick and anxious. "There's something different about you Lenora...when I'm around you, I feel..."

I threaded my hands, and then my arms up between his, and brought my elbows down hard and fast, breaking his hold on my shoulders, and then I ducked out of his reach and bolted down the hallway. If he chased me, I knew he would catch me within seconds, so I dived into the kitchen doorway instead.

The kitchen staff looked up at me, some of their expressions merely curious, but a few of them were downright hostile.

"Oh there you are," the head omega, Sabine said, looking at me with open scorn in her expression. "You've caused quite a stir, Missy. Alpha River has been looking everywhere for you. Why are you dawdling in here? He's in the dining room!"

I gulped, and turned to go, but I could feel her glaring daggers into my back.

"So vulgar," I heard her hiss to one of the other omegas. "She has twigs and burrs in her hair. What do you think she was doing out in those woods? Can you imagine a luna behaving so brazenly?" Sabine wasn't trying to keep her voice down; she wanted me to hear her.

I had no idea what I had done to earn this woman's hatred, but she left no doubt that she did indeed despise me. At some point I would have to gather my courage and confront the woman, but this wasn't the time. I was more concerned with finding River and putting his mind at ease. I poked my head back out into the passageway, and checked both directions, but there was no sign of Asher. I breathed out a sigh of relief and hurried down the hall to the formal dining room.

I pushed open the door and found the whole family already seated at the table.

I blinked, because the seating arrangements had changed. Darian had moved over to sit beside his wife, and River had resumed his place at the head of the table. The chair immediately to River's right was vacant, and next to that, Asher was leaning lazily, eyeing me like a snake, coiled and ready to strike at any moment.

As soon as his eyes landed on me, River jumped from his chair. "Lenora!" He rushed to me, not caring at all about his family seated around the table, and crushed me against his

chest. I let myself sink into the feeling of safety and security that I always felt in his arms. “Oh thank Goddess, I was so worried about you!”

He pulled back and plucked a stick out of my hair. “Where have you been? Gayle said you went for a run hours ago!”

He pressed his nose against my hair, exactly how his brother had done just minutes before, and I tensed. But then I realized, without his wolf, he couldn’t smell his brother’s scent on my body. I didn’t know whether I should be thankful or frustrated. A part of me wanted to tell him that Asher had manhandled me in the hallway. Again. Another part of me shied away from it. I would look like a drama queen, stirring up trouble in the family.

He rubbed my back like he was reassuring himself that I was really there, and really fine.

“I’m sorry,” I said, trying to smile, “I did go out for a run. I haven’t let my wolf out in so long, and I guess I got a little carried away.”

A sad, mournful look crossed his face, and I immediately felt horrible. He squeezed his eyes shut for a moment, and I knew he was thinking of his lost wolf. When he opened his eyes again, he had schooled his face into a pleasant, passive mask. “It’s okay, I understand.” He forced his lips into a smile that didn’t reach his eyes. “Please, sit down, dinner is ready.”

He turned and pulled me with him, steering me toward the table, and directing me to the empty seat between him and his brother. I ignored Asher and as I sat, I discreetly scooted my chair closer to River. And why shouldn’t I? He was my husband, after all. Naturally, I wanted to be close to him.

I was really going to miss having our meals together in his suite. I would rather share a tray on his over-the-bed table any day than sit down here under the harsh judgemental stare of his step-mother and feel the disturbing energy that radiated off his brother. His father, Darian leaned back in his chair, seemingly oblivious to the tension in the room.

The servers began to arrive, carrying the soup course on silver-toned trays. Out of the corner of my eye, I saw the way Asher smiled seductively at Sabine. As she leaned over him slightly to place the hot, steaming bowl of soup in front of him, he ran a finger down her forearm, making her jerk and almost slosh his soup on the tablecloth.

No one else at the table seemed to notice the interchange.

“Thank you, Sabine, thank you, Rachel,” River said, courteously dismissing them. He nodded to the table. “Let’s eat.”

Chapter 37 – Healing the Broken Alpha

I had dreamed of finding my Luna since I was a teenager. Back then I was certain I would find my fated mate, and that we would come together as a passionate, powerful, devoted partnership to lead and to guide the Blackstone pack. She would be my queen, and the entire pack would be awed by her beauty and her presence. They would treat her with awe and respect, just as they did their Alpha.

I never pictured it coming about in such a convoluted, backward manner. Lenora wasn't my fated, and although she possessed a unique, earthy kind of beauty, she was not the strong, elegant woman I had once envisioned standing at my side. My people regarded her with a certain amount of disdain and suspicion. Rumors had already spread like wildfire that Lenora was nothing more than the weak daughter of a dead Alpha. Some thought she wasn't fit to be Luna, and others said that she was the only woman who would agree to be mated to a wolfless alpha such as myself.

The rumors infuriated me, but I don't know if it was because they were false, or because they were true. I was wolfless and weak, and I doubt many powerful women could have agreed to be tied to me. And Lenora was an all-but forgotten daughter in a low-ranking pack. She was never meant to take the helm as an official Luna, she was just a front, a figure head. An actress in an elaborate play I was staging.

But she didn't know that. And I saw her struggling day after day to play her part. She put up with endless meetings with my step mother. She endured dress fittings and special tastings from the catering company. I could see she was smiling until her face looked brittle. At night when she fell into bed next to me, her eyes had deep shadows of self-doubt, irritation, and exhaustion. But she never complained.

Instead she would run her small hands over my body, as though touching my cold human skin brought her some measure of calm and comfort. She would press her heated body against mine, and in very short order, I found myself reaching for her. She was a temptation I could not resist.

That wasn't supposed to happen. Although I had teased her from the beginning that she was expected to fulfill all the duties of a mate, I had never intended to bed her. Now, she was like an addiction, and each time I tasted her, each time I drank from her, I only grew thirstier, I only craved more. In some strange way, whenever we made love, I felt stronger. Physically, mentally, even spiritually.

It was easy to forget that she wasn't really my mate. She was just a young woman I was using for my own purposes. I was beginning to have a sense that I was doing her a great disservice. It wouldn't matter how well I compensated her when this game was over, she was going to be hurt, in more ways than one.

Maybe that's why I let it continually slip from my mind. Maybe that's why when day of our ceremony dawned, my belly was full of butterflies, and I felt like a young groom about to face his bride, instead of a broken alpha putting on a show for his people.

I was wearing a black tuxedo, with a turquoise cummerbund to match the unusual dress she had chosen for the occasion. I stood on the podium at the end of the training grounds, facing rows upon rows of werewolves seated in folding chairs. It was an open event, anyone in the pack was welcome to attend, plus we had sent invitations to several of our allied packs, inviting their alpha's and upper ranking members to join us for this auspicious occasion.

There were photographers present whom I had hired, not only to take pictures to preserve the memory, but to make sure those pictures were leaked all over social media, as well as the local papers and news stations. I clasped my sweaty hands behind my back and waited for my little mate to make an appearance.

Her grandfather and her brother had come for the ceremony. Jensen was slouched in one of the front-row seats, looking bored and maybe a little stoned. The old Alpha, Stanley Moore, would be escorting his granddaughter to the podium. On some silent signal, suddenly everyone stood, and I knew.

My luna had arrived.

I was mesmerized the moment I caught sight of her. The dress she wore was simple, and yet... the rich color made her honey-gold skin glow. Her long black hair had been curled and left to hang down around her back and her shoulders. A circlet of flowers graced her head like a crown. For once, she did not shrink or cower, but she stood straight, her shoulders back, her chin up, her eyes fixed upon me like...

Like I was the only man in the world.

I swallowed hard.

I didn't deserve her.

She held tight to her grandfather's elbow as she walked down the aisle between the seats that lined the field. There were so many visitors that it was a very long march to reach the podium where I stood. My father was seated on the podium, just off to the side, with my step mother and half brother beside him. A single, empty chair was waiting for Alpha Moore on the other side. An elder stood behind me, wearing a very outdated, traditional robe, ready to conduct the ceremony.

I held out my hand as she carefully climbed the stairs. She gave me a shaky smile and took hold of my fingers with a fierce grip. Her grandfather patted her shoulder and then took his seat. We faced each other, and I found myself staring down into her soft, doe-like, chocolate brown eyes. Strangely, the huge crowd, the cameras, the visiting alphas all faded away, and it seemed like it was just me and Lenora standing alone together.

Why did my heart slow down? Why did my skin grow warmer, just from our clasped hands?

The elder stepped up and began spouting the words, asking the Moon Goddess to bless this chosen union. I blocked him out. I doubted very much that the Moon Goddess would approve of what I was doing. In fact, I doubted the Moon Goddess gave a damn about her creatures at all. She left us to fight for our own survival, day in and day out. She let terrible things happen, and never once had I seen her step in and intervene on our behalf. If she ever was, she was little more than a myth now.

The elder produced the knife. It was a very simple dagger, made with a stone blade and a wooden handle that had been in the Blackstone family from time immemorial. It looked primitive, but the blade was still as sharp as a razor, and I had only to slide it gently across my palm, and a line of crimson blood immediately welled up. I made a fist and allowed my blood to drip down the heel of my hand and into the chalice that the elder held. I then passed the knife to Lenora.

She took it with a hand that was steady, opened her palm, and drew the stone knife across her delicate skin. She then turned her hand over and squeezed, letting her blood mingle with mine, symbolizing the union of our spirits.

I had a sick feeling in the pit of my stomach. I was mocking a sacred ritual. It was fine for me, my heart was cold and I had little, if any faith in the old ways, but I saw the way that Lenora's face was shining. She had not just poured her blood into that cup, she had poured her heart and her soul.

I was handed the linen wrapping that I was supposed to coil around Lenora's hand to protect her wound, but when she opened her fingers and presented her hand... the skin was smooth. There was some dried flecks of blood in the lines of her palm, but there was no wound.

Wolves heal at an accelerated rate, but not even a werewolf could mend a cut that fast. However, now was not the time to question her. I wrapped the bandage around her hand and tied it tightly, so that no one present could guess that anything was amiss. She then took her piece of cloth and gently wrapped it around mine, which was still oozing blood. With my human capacity, it would take hours before it dried up and scabbed over.

But she was already healed. I looked into her eyes with a silent question, but she only smiled at me happily, looking for all the world like she was delighted to be with me, excited to be my luna.

“Blackstone Pack! All of our distinguished visitors, I am proud to present to you, Alpha River Blackstone, and our new blessed Luna, Lenora Blackstone!”

A cheer went up from the crowd, but even to my insensitive ears, it seemed rather forced and under enthusiastic. They clapped and whistled and shouted, but only because it was expected of the occasion. There might have been some among them that were truly happy, that were really overjoyed to have a Luna after so many long years, but I dare say there was a silent tension throughout the crowd.

They were going through the motions, but it was as though they were all waiting... all waiting for something terrible to happen. It was inevitable. A human couldn't lead a pack, especially not a pack as prominent and prosperous as Blackstone.

Lenora slipped a hand behind my back, slipping under my jacket as she usually did, so that her hand could find the skin of my back. I looked down at her and forced myself to smile, reminding myself that this was supposed to be a happy occasion. This was supposed to be a special day for Lenora, and I at least owed her that much. "Well, little Luna," I whispered, for her ears only, "Shall we go greet our pack?"

Chapter 38 – Healing the Broken Alpha

The Blackstone pack house had a big, beautiful ballroom, as was befitting the castle-like structure. However, the ballroom was not large enough to accommodate the overwhelming flood of pack members who had come to attend the Luna ceremony. Instead, event tents had been set up all along the training grounds, with a buffet style banquet and rows upon rows of long tables. Once the ceremony was over, staff members came and whisked away the folding chairs, positioning them along the dining tables instead.

I clung to River's arm as he moved through the crowd, greeting his guests, occasionally stopping to make official introductions.

It soon became apparent that the crowds hadn't really come to celebrate a new Luna. They had come for the chance to see with their own eyes that Alpha River Blackstone was alive and well.

But I didn't mind it. In fact I quite preferred to step back and let River be the center of attention. Bottles of honey mead and blackberry wine were flowing freely, and musicians had set up their instruments on the podium we had just vacated. The atmosphere was festive, and yet, there was a slight undercurrent of tension, that feeling that not all was well.

Out of the corner of my eye, I caught sight of my grandfather slipping into one of the tents at the far end of the field. At least I thought it was my grandfather. There were so many men wearing dark colored suits that they were all starting to look the same.

"I'm just going to—" I realized that River was deep in conversation with another Alpha, a man with big bushy sideburns and auburn hair that reminded me of the Wolverine. My mate wasn't listening to a word I said, and it seemed rude to interrupt, so I tugged my hand out of his and slipped away, weaving my way through the little clusters of people to the tent I had seen my grandfather slip into.

But when I stood at the entrance and scanned the people sitting along the table, I didn't see my grandfather anywhere. I didn't recognize anyone there. A few people acknowledged me, and called out greetings. "Hello Luna! Congratulations!"

Luna... I couldn't get used to that. I smiled and thanked them and then turned to go. How would I find my grandfather among all these people? He needed an antenna with a ribbon tied to it or something, the way people did so they could find their vehicles in crowded parking lots.

As I pivoted, I found myself face to face with an unfamiliar woman. She was tall, and she wore a simple brown dress. It looked old and worn, and somewhat out of fashion, and yet she exuded grace and elegance. Her hair was dark, and coiled artfully at the base of her neck. She wore a small hat with a veil that partially obscured her face. I could only make out her mouth, and the slightest curve of a pale cheek. I couldn't really gauge her age, since I couldn't see her eyes, but I had the feeling that she was neither young, nor old. The hand that reached out and grasped mine was work-worn and strong.

"Congratulations Lenora..." her voice was so soft, it tickled my ears. She continued to hold my hand as she assessed me. "You are a beautiful young lady, aren't you? And such a sweet, gentle spirit, I can feel it! I think you are a good match for River. Please..." her hand tightened around my fingers almost painfully. "Take good care of him."

It seemed like a weird request, coming from a stranger, but somehow she didn't seem like a stranger. Her scent was a bit fruity, like strawberries and cream, with the slightest hint of vanilla. I found myself leaning closer to her, mesmerized. "I'm sorry, have we met?"

She said she could feel my gentle spirit. Well, I felt like I could feel something around her too. Something sad and dark. I desperately wanted to look under that veil and see her eyes.

She dropped my hand quickly, like touching my skin had suddenly burned her. "No. No, we've never met." She denied quickly, almost fearfully. Her gaze traveled over me, and then up and beyond, like she was watching someone over my shoulder. I saw her lips pull tight. "I have to go now. Maybe... we'll meet again."

I turned to see who she was looking at. I saw two figures approaching, the former alpha, Darius, and his son, the current alpha. My River. He really was mine now! They looked very dashing standing side by side, both of them tall and broad shouldered. When I turned back, the lady in the brown dress was gone.

I scanned the surrounding crowd, but it was like she had vanished into thin air.

"Lenora!" River approached me, opening his arms, and I happily stepped into them. He clutched me against his chest like we had been separated for days instead of mere minutes. "Don't wander off like that!" He lowered his voice for my ears only. "It could be dangerous."

I took a deep breath, loving the way his scent made me feel peaceful and grounded, and more than a little bit turned on. “I don’t think anyone can do anything today,” I said against his shirt. “There are too many people.” I pulled back and looked up into his face. “Speaking of, I was just taking to a woman in a brown dress, did you see her?”

He loosened his arms and allowed me to step back. He scanned the throngs of people around us with a curious frown. “No, I didn’t see her. Who was she?”

I shrugged. “I don’t know, she didn’t tell me her name. I was hoping you would recognize her but... she’s gone I guess.” I circled one arm behind his back. “She seemed so familiar though.”

Chapter 39 – Healing the Broken Alpha

I sat behind my massive pine desk in the study that I hadn’t occupied in more than a year. This room had been the official office of every Blackstone alpha since my great, great grandfather had constructed this packhouse in the 1800s. I found a certain comfort in the shelves of books, the old Tiffany lamps, the leather chairs that had century-old butt prints pressed into their upholstery.

I was mentally giving credit to the familiar room, but in fact, that feeling of comfort was coming from the small woman who was curled up on the couch with her dark head bent over a book. I had no idea what she was reading; it didn’t seem possible that the shelves of antiquarian books could possibly hold anything that interesting, but she hadn’t looked up in forever.

And I wanted her to look up. I wanted her to turn her attention toward me. I wanted to see her dark, fathomless eyes, I wanted her smile. So much so that I was feeling a stirring of resentment against that book. How dare an inanimate object hold my little mate’s attention?

What on earth was wrong with me? I was like a needy little boy demanding center stage. But I didn’t want all eyes on me, only hers.

Which was making it entirely difficult to focus on the papers that were spread across my desk. They were the account statements for the last twelve months, as well as several reports and spreadsheets. The Blackstone Pack and my responsibilities as an alpha were distinctly separate and independent from Blackstone Innovations. And for the last year, my younger half-brother Asher had been running the pack.

In some respects, he had done better than I expected. He had peacefully resolved several disputes and had tendered a few lucrative trade agreements. I couldn’t help but wonder if he had done those deals on his own, or if he had acted under the guidance of my father. If Asher had followed my father’s advice, that was actually another point in his favor.

Asher wasn't known to take advice from anyone. Especially not me or our father. He believed he already had all the answers. It was a stubborn trait that made him a very poor leader.

I made a mental note to ask my father about it later.

Aside from the positive developments, however, there were some areas of concern that I needed to address. Including the reallocation of a substantial amount of pack funds into several risky investment ventures. One of which was a million dollar capital equity investment in my uncle Richard's demolition company. Investing pack funds into a family-owned business was a clear conflict of interest.

I picked up my phone and scrolled through the numbers until I came upon my uncle Richard. He used to be my father's beta, until I took over the pack at age twenty one. He then retired and started his demolition company, saying it had always been his boyhood fantasy to "blow s.hit up."

As far as I knew, Richard's company was doing well.

So why had Asher put a million dollars into it?

Of course, I would be sitting down with Asher to discuss all of these situations, both the good and the bad. But when it came to my uncle's business, I really wanted to hear from both sides. "Hello, Uncle Richie?" I said, using the familiar nickname that I had used since I was a child.

"River my boy! So good to hear from you, sorry I didn't get a chance to shake your hand at the ceremony! Congratulations! I couldn't be happier for you!" I held the phone to my ear, but my eyes shifted to Lenora.

Yes, indeed, I should be congratulated. She was perfect.

"So happy and relieved that you've returned to us!"

"Yes, thanks, but about that... I was just auditing the pack funds for the past year, and I noticed that Asher has invested a considerable amount of money into RB Demolitions."

"Yes! Yes, I expected there would be questions about that!" He sounded completely unperturbed. In fact, his tone was jovial and confident.

"Perhaps we could arrange a meeting, to discuss it in detail?" I suggested.

"Sure, sure! Why don't you and your lovely new mate come join us for dinner tomorrow? I'm sure your Aunt Maggie would love a chance to get to know the new luna!"

I pursed my lips together. That was not the formal business meeting I had envisioned. But maybe it would be good to introduce Lenora to the rest of the family. Although I had issues with my cousin Zachary, I had always gotten along well with my aunt and uncle. Aunt Maggie was a warm, caring woman, and would be a far better role model for Lenora than my cold, snobbish stepmother.

“That sounds like a lovely idea,” I said, twiddling my pen between my fingers. “Should we bring anything?”

“Well, if you happened to snag a bottle of that blackberry wine that you were serving at your ceremony, I wouldn’t complain!”

I smiled and nodded, even though Richard couldn’t see the motion of my head. “Alright, so, tomorrow night, at six?”

“Better make it six-thirty!”

“Okay, we’ll see you then. Tell Aunt Maggie I said hello.”

I cut the call and sighed. “Looks like we have a dinner engagement tomorrow.”

Lenora finally raised her head from the book, and she had that worried, anxious look on her face. “I’d like you to meet my aunt and uncle, and I have some business to discuss with them.”

“O-okay.” She lowered her eyes.

I hated it when she did that.

I picked up the phone again, this time dialling my brother. “Asher? We need to sit down and discuss the audit...”

Across the room, at the mention of my brother, Lenora snapped her book shut and lurched to her feet.

On the phone, my brother was already snappish and defensive. “I’d really appreciate it if you could make the time,” I said, cutting off the flow of excuses. “This afternoon, preferably.”

Lenora walked stiffly to the shelf and replaced the book she had been reading, and then she turned, and headed purposefully to the door. I quickly cut the call.

“Nora,” I felt an unreasonable sense of panic, as I realized she was leaving. “Where are you going?”

“Bathroom,” she mumbled, without looking back at me.

Chapter 40 – Healing the Broken Alpha

The home of the former beta was some distance from the grand Blackstone packhouse. Although it was a very large house, almost a mansion, it had a different feel to it. Where the packhouse was cold and imposing, the beta's house seemed to imply a warm, friendly, family environment. There were planters on every window spilling over with random flowers, a tricycle tipped over in the front yard, and a flagstone walkway that led to the front door.

A door which was immediately pulled over by a tall, plump, red-headed woman. She was absolutely beautiful, with white milky skin and startling green eyes. Her hair was deep auburn-red with just the slightest streaks of white beginning at the temple. "River!" She cried, like she was welcoming a long lost son, and immediately she folded him into a hug. "It's been too, too long! I'm so happy to see you, and-!"

She turned to me, and I took an uneasy step back. "Your beautiful mate! Hello my dear, I'm Marguerite, but that's Aunt Maggie to you. Welcome, welcome, please come inside!"

The inside of the house, like the outside, was warm and inviting. Although it was clean, it had that "lived in" feel. There was a bit of clutter on the table in the entry hall, a mish-mash of sweaters and jackets draped over the coat rack, and an umbrella with one broken spoke leaning in the corner. Maggie ushered us into a big, spacious living room, filled with cozy, well worn couches and overstuffed chairs. The floral wallpaper was probably a little too bright to be fashionable, but it matched well with the sapphire drapes. Again there was scattered evidence of a child, from a doll that was left on the arm of one loveseat, to a little parking lot of tiny cars on the hearth of the fireplace.

"Oh don't mind the toys," Maggie said with an easy grin, as she scooped up the doll and tossed it into a large bin of children's playthings in the corner. "My grandchildren are here nearly every day! Twins, you know! Ohhh, they do keep me busy!"

I smiled because it was so apparent that she adored her grandchildren.

"Sit! Sit! Make yourself at home! Your uncle Richie will be right in, he was just on the phone in his office. The company..." She pulled a face, as though she didn't approve of him working after-hours.

We obediently took our seats on one of the couches that faced the beautiful marble fireplace.

Maggie continued bustling around the room, scooping up a children's book and a random little sock. "And I think Zach will be joining us later..."

At the mention of his cousin, I felt River stiffen beside me. He reached for my hand and squeezed it. I had the feeling that he was trying to reassure himself, more than me.

A moment later, River's uncle breezed into the room.

The family resemblance was strong. Richard Blackstone was tall and broad shouldered, like his brother Darian. Unlike Darian, however, his hair was thinning on top. Although I understood he was the younger brother, his receding hairline and barely-there comb-over made him seem much older than the former alpha.

The man was dressed casually, in a pair of khaki slacks and a black t-shirt. He smiled warmly and shook River's hand with enthusiasm. "Finally! Finally, so good to see you! And you too, young lady!" He pumped my hand up and down like he was priming a well pump. "Welcome to our home! Let's move to the dining room, shall we? Dinner is almost ready!"

I felt a bit dazed as I followed River into the dining room. It had a big table that could have seated twelve, but it was set only at one end. A rosy-cheeked maid was just filling the water glasses as we entered. "Thank you, Carla. You can let Sammy know we are ready," Maggie said to the woman before she gestured to the empty chairs.

River slid into a chair to the left of the head, and I sat next to him, folding my hands in my lap and once again feeling horribly out of place. But at least in his uncle's home, there was none of the strange, heavy hostility that I encountered on a daily basis in the pack house.

The serving staff put a lovely meal on the table, but I hardly had any appetite, especially once River's cousin joined the table.

From the first day I met the man, Zachary Blackstone had made me uncomfortable. There was something about the way he looked at me that made me want to take two steps backward. Unlike River's half-brother, Asher, whose gaze always seemed lascivious and sexual, there was something darkly aggressive about Zachary, like he was scanning me for any weakness he could possibly exploit.

And, since River had confessed to me how his cousin had betrayed him while he was in a coma, I had an intense dislike for the man. We may not have marked each other, but River and I were now a mated pair. If Zachary wronged my mate, then he also wronged me.

I might not be strong or beautiful, but at least I was loyal.

Before the dessert course was served, the business discussions were beginning to get heated around the table.

"And I'm telling you, there could be serious legal ramifications," River insisted. "If your business needed a loan, Uncle, you should have gone through Blackstone Innovations, and used the normal channels and processes. Taking a loan from the pack looks very suspicious."

Richard looked confused. “But I did take a loan from Blackstone Innovations. Didn’t Zachary tell you? Well, it was while you were in the hospital, but I assure you we went through all the proper procedures.”

It was River’s turn to look puzzled. “But if you were approved through the business, why did you also go through the pack?”

“We needed more funds to expand and upgrade all of our equipment,” Richard explained, shifting in his seat. “The new crane alone cost us half a million dollars. But I assure you, River, it’s a safe and secure capital investment. We have three demolition projects in the works right now, and we are bidding on six more major contracts. And Blackstone Innovations holds three of those new contracts!”

River scowled, “We do?”

“Sorry Cuz,” Zachary looked anything but repentant. “We haven’t had time to bring you up to speed on all of our dealings. We have bought out all of the former White Pine Pack’s lands, and we will be demolishing their packhouse next week.”

“Why wasn’t I informed?” River’s voice was growing louder. “I have been working from home for months, there is no reason not to include me in these contracts.”

“Well,” Zachary sat back, folding his arms across his chest. “I didn’t feel it was necessary to burden you with inconsequential details while you were still in recovery...”

I felt myself sliding down in my chair, wishing I could get away from all the testosterone in the room. Aunt Maggie must have sensed my unease. She put her napkin down on the table and stood up. “Lenora, dear, would you like to join me for a walk in the garden before we take dessert? I feel like I could use some fresh air.”

Smiling gratefully, I pushed my chair back quickly. “Yes, please. That sounds like a very good idea.”

Maggie circled the table and looped her arm through mine, leading me toward an exit in the rear of the house. “It’s not that I think that business should be left to the men,” she told me in a hushed, conspiratorial tone. “But I have no desire to be a witness to a pissing contest.”