

Bad Love 101

Chapter 101

I debate carrying the books back to my room. Given that I broke the door handle, there isn't a way for me to close and lock it for privacy. Not that a locked door is all that much of a deterrent. A wolf could easily break one down-as Aaron has done on more than one occasion-and if I could break in....

Yeah, the locked door probably isn't stopping anybody.

My best bet is to grab whatever information is available and then return to my room or to have Adam transfer the security information to the lab to me.

I make a mental note to require him to do just that.

As Alpha, there shouldn't be a single inch of territory on these lands that is denied to me.

I grab the first book and flip through the pages. It's Hemingway. And one of my father's favorites. I hold the book by each cover and fan the pages upside down. An envelope drops out.

Happy 13th Birthday Leah.

It's the same with the next book, a collection of poems by Walt Whitman.

Happy 14th Birthday Leah.

And the one after that. And after that.

Ten letters drop to the ground. One for each year I've been pledged to Aaron Rathborn.

But it's the last book on the shelf. The one set alone that grabs

my attention. Unlike these tomes of classic literature, this last

one is a children's book. The Giving Tree.

There is no envelope inside. Just a hastily written letter that is folded haphazardly.

I'm pretty sure this is the last note my father had ever written.

It's his deathnote to me.

Something falls out of the folded paper and my hands shake as I reach for the lock of light brown hair that's tied with a pink bow. It's mine. From when I was a baby. My mother had kept this in an old photo album with handprints and footprints and a slew of pictures taken of me up until about age three.

I place his letter and the soft lock of hair at the bottom of the envelopes that I gather up.

slide them into the waistband of my pants and pull my blouse over to cover them. I want to rush back to my room, slam the door and read each word my father left for me.

But that could take hours and I'm not the most stoic of individuals. Chances are I'll be bawling my eyes out the minute I open one of these.

And like it or not, there are a couple hundred wolves here.

It kills me to delay, but I have to head back downstairs to finish out the party.

When I reach the bottom of the stairs, Aaron is waiting for me.

His brows draw together.

"I'm fine," I tell him.

He nods and doesn't ask questions.

Liam is leaning against the opposite bannister. "There are a few other wolves I'd like to introduce you to," he says.

"Of course," I reply.

But then there is some commotion at the front of the great

hall and we freeze.

Karolina. Tobin.

The Elder Samsen.

The Elder Petyr.

Oh my goodness, I don't think Elder Aleksei has made an appearance in years.

And they are all here. On Pack Roberts lands.

Presumably to see me.

"F**k," Aaron mutters.

My thoughts exactly.

Chapter 102

I plaster on my most gracious smile. "Honored members of the Council, welcome!"

I step forward and shake hands in the order that they position themselves and pray I'm not committing some terrible faux pas by not starting with Petyr or Aleksei. But they are to the back of the others, so if I bypass everyone else...

Aaron and Liam flank me and make their own hellos.

Karolina grips my hand hard. I lock eyes with her and wonder what it is she is trying to convey. A warning perhaps?

“There is food spread throughout the main floor and additional buffet tables outside. Please. Eat. Have a drink.”

Elder Aleksei comes from the Old World and he looks it. He

wears a suit but no tie. His silver hair is styled back. His eyes are light and taking in every detail. There’s a preternatural stillness to him that gives off a different energy than Karolina or even Tobin-and he’s probably the most intense wolf I’ve

ever come across.

“We did not come here to mingle,” Samsen says. He’s big and tawny. Aaron angles so he is in front of me. Liam too shifts his

body to protect me.

Karolina laughs. “Look at this wolf! Always so ready to fight. Relax, Alpha Rathborn. We come here to talk.”

Aarom smiles easily. “Of course.” He glances at me. “Where would you like to entertain our guests, Alpha Leah?”

I appreciate how he’s handling this. Part of me worried that

he’d already be resorting to violence, and part of me worried if he did keep his temper in check, that he’d be speaking on my behalf or doing something to relegate me to the background.

But Aaron isn’t doing any of those things. He’s deferring to me.

“Let’s bring our guests into the dining room.” I turn to my

brother. “Liam, perhaps you can ask any of our packmates to clear that area so we might speak more privately. Yes?”

Liam nods and moves quickly.

Now I just have to hope nobody wrecked the place in the time

I was upstairs.

“It’s just this way,” I say. I lead our group through the center of the main hall, thinking that they can take a minute to interact

or at the very least to allow some of our pack to show their respects-and many do.

When we reach the main stairwell that would take us upstairs,

I turn left to branch into the corridor that can take us to the

dining room and formal living room.

“It’s just this way,” I say, glancing over my shoulder and extending my arm to the left.

Most of the wolves move off in that direction.

Except for Tobin.

He hangs back.

Aaron does too. His eyes narrowing.

Tobin pauses by me at the foot of the stairs. He sniffs the air and says: “I smell death...”

Chapter 103

“Oh dear.” I laugh lightly, as if he’s mistaken. “I guess we’ll need to change cleaning companies.”

It’s a lame attempt at a joke.

Liam chuckles-bless him.

Tobin just blinks at me.

Inside, I’m dying.

Does Tobin mean me? Or is he sniffing out Marla. Upstairs. In a trunk???

The other wolves all pause and look at us questioningly.

Aaron drops a hand on Tobin’s shoulder. “We slaughtered two steers for the event, and my chef roasted a whole pig. Always thinking with your gut, huh?”

He doesn’t rescind his comment. Just looks at me, then up the stairs, then back at me again.

Sh it.

“It’s this way,” I say.

The others continue walking and the moment Tobin falls into step, I move to catch up to Karolina, not wanting to risk any more interactions with Tobin or him sniffing out any more information about me-or any dead bodies on our property.

Once within the dining room, the Elders position themselves at the long table.

Liam has instructed some of his wolves to move the serving.

platters and dishes to the opposite end to allow everyone to sit comfortably.

Aleksei sits at the head of the table. Samsen and Petyr on either side of him.

Karolina sits next, on the far side, so her back faces the wall.

Tobin remains standing.

Aaron guides him in and sits next to him.

Liam next, on the other side by Karolina.

Leaving me furthest from the group of them. And next to Aaron.

Thank goodness.

I can feel myself sweating.

I've done nothing wrong, but the presence of so many Council members signifies something of importance. I can only

imagine what that might be.

"Alpha Aaron," Samsen begins. "You accrued the powers

of Pack Leithrow when Alpha Brian Clemson né Leithrow attacked your Luna in the Grove on the night of the 18th."

Aaron nods. "That is correct."

Wait. What? Aaron absorbed more power!?

I didn't know that. But then...I was too busy trying not to die as I absorbed my father's lineage to really get a good grip on

what else was going on.

Just how strong is Aaron that he could absorb power like that and barely flinch? I'd been thrashing and convulsing and on the verge of biting off my own tongue. I thought my bones were going to break from the force of it.

Aaron didn't complain. Not once.

He bore the transition of power and when it was all over, he escorted me out of that Grove and took care of me, when he had to be hurting and exhausted too.

Da mn.

I touch his thigh and he squeezes my hand for a second.

Then another thought occurs to me and I wonder if this is why he didn't make such a big deal about letting me stay here or

why he didn't insist on being in the same room. Because he was off taking control of a whole other pack.

'Busy week for you,' I whisper.

More than a few lips twitch. Karolina nods like she agrees with me. But I should've known. He should've told me. Not that we've been talking all that much, but...still.

He gives the slightest shrug.

And I have my answer.

I should've known.

It is a basic pack principle in the succession of power.

An Alpha wills their strength to the person who will claim it

next. This can be done at any time with blood or a bit of hair, some 'marker' so the power flows into that specific person.

Thinking of the lock of my baby hair, I have a pretty good idea of how my dad managed to leave his powers to me. And then he did go and notify his pack and that word got back to the Council. Or at least, I'm assuming that's how it happened.

Liam never said, but somehow in the course of that night, it became clear that I was set to inherit, not my brother.

Maybe there was another note.

I'm not sure where my father pulled the trigger and I haven't had the courage to ask. I don't know much about the details surrounding his death or how it played out with Liam or the other wolves in this community.

Liam had been groomed since we were kids to follow in my father's footsteps and become the next Alpha.

Before my father took his own life, anyone could have challenged him. And that's what transpired with Aaron in the Grove. Brian attacked me...and Aaron challenged him.

There was an old movie my dad made me watch with him as a

kid called Highlander. The premise was that these immortals had to fight and kill each other to absorb their powers, because 'there could be only one.'

Wolves aren't so different from that.

It's why only the strongest can rule-

And... likely why these Council members are here right now.

Because I'm not strong.

Not in the slightest.

I'm human.

Aaron leans toward the center of the table so he can address

the Council members present.

"I've been to the lands and have let the inhabitants of Pack

Leithrow know that they are welcome to remain on their

lands or to join us on Rathborn properties. We believe in

accommodating all wolves. And I have a team of wolves already in place, with my Beta, James, personally overseeing the merge of our packs. I will divide my time accordingly, to

ensure all of my packmates have the support and attention they deserve."

Samsen grunts. "While Pack Leithrow is not sizable, the lands

and resources are."

"I've yet to complete a full assessment," Aaron says. "But I anticipate an accounting by the next meeting, which I will

目

present to the Council, and, of course, factor in for our

monthly donations and Pack taxes."

Karolina snorts.

Tobin watches the room with eyes that are full wolf. I don't even want to breathe for fear he'll scent me-my baby. My body dying. Marla's scent on me. Or-da mn it-the scent of Aaron. We'd had s*x scarcely an hour ago.

I lean back from the table a bit, but that has an adverse effect.

His gaze cuts to me, like my tiny movement to retreat triggered his wolf.

Aleksei steeples his hands on the table. "Let's get to the heart of it, shall we, Alpha Rathborn? You rule Pack Rathborn and

now hold claim to the former Pack Leithrow. By marriage and merger-for-peace you have a direct line to Pack Roberts. Will

you assume control of this pack too?"

Chapter 104

Holy sh it.

You can hear a pin drop in this room.

Aaron is silent.

And I find myself getting angry-and anxious-is that what his support of me is all about? Maneuvering himself into position

to take control?

I start to shove back from the table, and his hand whips out to catch my leg.

Aaron stands slowly. "Esteemed Council Members, you honor me with your confidence, and while I am an Alpha of great ambitions, Pack Roberts already has the leader it needs. And

she's right here next to me."

"She's human," Samsen says.

"That's correct."

"We do not approve of an Alpha controlling a pack this size

Brian Leithrow's assault on Leah, she is too vulnerable."

"What are you proposing?" Aaron asks.

"Stop" I say. "If you have a problem with me, direct your questions to me."

Karolina nods approvingly.

Tobin continues to watch me through the eyes of his wolf.

The other Council members glance at each other briefly.

"You need to transition," Petyr says.

He's a wide wolf with a nearly all-wh ite head of hair, yet not a line marks his face. He could be forty or eighty.

Transition? As in, undergo the ceremony to be bitten and 'changed' in an attempt to bring my wolf to the surface.

"No," Aaron says succinctly.

"As your Luna suggested," Petry says, "questions pertaining to her shall be directed to her."

Aaron turns to me.

This isn't just me I have to think about now. Undergoing the

transition will surely have effects on my unborn baby. And the can cer... being weak from it, would the transition cure or kill me?"

I clear my throat. "I have expansive plans to help solidify the finances and infrastructure of Pack Roberts that I would like to implement prior to making this decision or performing the transition."

The Elders seem to consider this.

Liam shakes his head subtly. He doesn't think I'll survive.

I probably wouldn't.

Aleksei stands. "You have until the Fall Equinox. Embrace your heritage fully or we'll appoint an Alpha in your stead."

Liam snarls.

Aaron growls.

"Now wait one second," I demand. "My father appointed me, and he was within his rights-and Pack Law-to do so."

"Yes, that may be. But these are difficult times and we cannot empower leaders that lack the strength to best govern our species."

I sputter in indignation.

"This is my Pack," my brother growls.

Aleksei nods. "Yes. Your father should've considered that before bequeathing everything to a human."

"She has to choose," Aaron says. "Whether or not to become a wolf, that is up to Leah."

All heads turn to me. Karolina grins. "So what's it going to be be?"

Chapter 105

AARON

This is a shitshow.

Liam's about to shift and attack an Elder.

Karolina's eyes are sparkling like she hopes he's dumb enough to do such a thing.

And Tobin's waiting to see who will attack first so he can jump

into the melee.

Leah still hasn't replied about whether or not she wants to transition and I realize that I put her on the spot.

I shoot to my feet. "This is a celebration, and we would be wise to remember that Leah Roberts Rathborn comes from a distinguished family. My Luna has the full support of Pack Rathborn and Pack Roberts. Isn't that right, Liam?"

He nods angrily. "Absolutely!"

"The Roberts Pack was once a force to be reckoned with, but many things have changed in recent years." Samsen looks at Leah and then stares pointedly at her brother.

Liam backs down instantly.

Huh. Interesting.

I make a mental note to flush out whatever secrets Liam is

hiding. Though I doubt it's anything more than money or crime. Like father, like son. That apple didn't fall far from the

tree.

But whatever, we have more pressing concerns.

I get that the Elders don't want me necessarily ruling three packs in this region, that will collectively make me more powerful than any one of them.

But they technically can't stop me.

And they know that.

Getting Leah to embrace her wolf and keep the balance as a "Roberts" is their solution. Okay. Seems flimsy to me. But they last heard that Leah wanted a divorce and that she refused to stay with me. So maybe their hope is to divide us.

But that's not happening.

As far as the rest of this bullshit goes, I can handle the politics. These Elders are strong, but I have other allies on the Council,

and I'm not opposed to calling in the favors owed to me.

I hold my hand out to Leah.

We need to present a unified front and I hope she understands that.

She clasps my hand and I feel f**king triumphant.

"You want me to decide by the Fall Equinox, yes?" Leah says.

The Elders nod.

“Fine,” she agrees. “Now, if it is all the same to you, I’d like to return to my guests. I am the Alpha here, and you are welcome to partake of the party.”

Leah stands.

The others do too. It’ll be interesting to see who stays and who leaves.

“I’m hungry,” Tobin proclaims. He stalks off toward the outside buffet.

Karolina lingers. As Samsen exits the dining room, he turns Heft. Nosy ba stard. If he’s sticking around, it is to assess this

pack and its resources. Aleksei and Petyr turn right.

I’m not surprised that they’re heading out.

Snobbish ba stards, they don’t spend much time in the thick of things. They talk a good game about ‘pack’ and being connected to our people, but they’re elitists.

Just like they proved with that straight-up prejudice they dished at Leah.

Like it’s her fault her wolf hasn’t manifested.

Liam storms off and I’m sure he’s furious. The Elders basically alluded that if Leah doesn’t turn, then they’ll bring in someone

else to lead.

I’m not sure that’s legal, but when it comes to the Council, they’re a law unto themselves, and neither Liam nor his father has formed strong alliances among the Elders.

They’d been preoccupied with other things.

“You never did answer the question,” Karolina says as she pauses at the door. She ignores Leah and stares pointedly at me. “Will you-now or at some point in the foreseeable future-use your influence to claim control of this pack too?”

Leah gasps beside me.

Chapter 106

“Karolina, look at you trying to stir up trouble. I have the same answer for you as I did for the Elders. This is my wife’s pack.”

She purses her lips, but wisely stops prodding.

She isn’t going to get an answer.

If and when I do claim pack Roberts, I'm not giving any warning.

I would assume power, unify the pack and then deal with the Council. I am aligned by marriage and have acted in accordance with all Pack Laws.

These mot herf**kers got nothing on me.

"Now, if you'll excuse me," I say to her, "I hear the string quartet warming up, and my Luna promised me a dance. Isn't that right, honey?"

If looks could ki ll... But Leah stops snarling and smiles prettily. She accepts the hand I hold out to her again. "How can I say no, when you ask so politely?"

I escort Leah back into the main hall. Karolina follows and after I take up position in the center of the room for a formal waltz, Karolina continues to watch from the sidelines. A server presents her with a brandy and she sips slowly.

"You okay?" I ask Leah.

She practically growls at me.

Yeah. Kind of expected that.

"Those rude, antiquated ba stards! Can you believe the nerve of them? And the way they talked about me as if I wasn't sitting right there, and then acting like my brother has no claim to his own pack!?"

That came from how her father handled things. But I don't say that.

In picking a human. A female. And the Luna of his enemy...

Old Man Roberts made it abundantly clear that he didn't want Liam being Alpha.

Now, I'm not saying that Roberts didn't have a good reason, but to the rest of the world, for Roberts to do such a thing, that could only mean that Liam was a very poor alternative.

I twirl Leah out and then bring her in. Her head rests on my chest. If I dip my head I can smell her hair. My arm around her

waist guides her and she moves effortlessly. I don't think she

knows the steps, but she follows my lead as if we'd danced like this many times already.

"You didn't tell me about Leithrow," she says quietly.

I sigh and it blows the curls atop her head. "It's been hectic. I should've mentioned it sooner. It's not like I set out to expand

my Pack. When I challenged him in the clearing, it was just to save you, I wasn't thinking any further than that."

And that's the God's honest truth.

He was trying to hurt Leah. I had one thought-to kill him.

James will lock things down up there. He's smart and strong. A natural leader.

If the Council is going to balk, I'll install James as Alpha there and he can swear fealty to me. It would still be 'mine' but that should mollify the Council enough.

Because Roberts Pack is the real prize.

The wolves are lethal. Several hundred strong.

And the land and corporation have value. If managed properly.

Leah expels a deep breath that I feel through my shirt. "Everyone is out to get me."

"Naw. It just seems that way."

She lifts her head and quirks a brow at me.

Alright. There was a murder attempt made a few hours ago and she just got an ultimatum from the High Council to gain her wolf by the Fall Equinox which is only a few months away-or ... what exactly?

Leah didn't say that she would transition, only that she would 'decide' by then.

Smart girl, she was to buy herself time.

"Well, at least your party wasn't boring," I say.

She snorts.

"You want to get out of here for a while?" I ask her.

She looks around the room. The party is winding down. "You think that's okay?"

"You're the Alpha."

"Give it an hour until the Council members leave. Then, can you take me somewhere...safe?"

Her eyes are so innocent and trusting. My arms unconsciously tighten around her. "Yeah, princess. Leave everything to me."

Chapter 107

LEAH

Selene brings me a bottle of water.

“Thank you.”

I’m surprised she didn’t bring me a cocktail or something.

“I noticed that you don’t eat anything or drink anything unless it comes from the stash of food you’re hoarding in your

bedroom.”

“You’ve been in my room?” I ask her.

“No. But I overheard when your mate-”

“Aaron is not my mate.”

“Your husband,” she corrects, “when he brought in all those trunks and boxes.” She shrugs. “I don’t blame you. Poison is easy enough to use, and, no offense, not everyone is happy to have you as Alpha.”

Gee thanks. But... “I appreciate you not sugar-coating things.”

She waves an elegant hand as if lying to me would be too much effort.

Selene holds a glass in her hand, a highball of-I sniff-whiskey I think. It’s amber and smells pleasant.

“Who’s that?” she asks.

She inclines her glass toward the man at the opposite end of the hall, leaning negligently against the wall. But for as carefree as Tobin is supposed to look, it does nothing to disguise his true nature.

“Tobin Hilsdon.”

“From the Council?”

“Yes. He’s on special committees. An Enforcer of sorts, I think.” Selene looks smitten. “I’d be careful with that one,” I warn her.

“Now what fun would that be?”

She drains her drink then hands the empty glass to me.

I watch as she glides across the main hall directly toward

Tobin.

He stands abruptly as she nears.

Selene is tall and elegant. Curvy. She has a walk that would

make a dead man wake up and take notice.

Tobin is no exception.

She says something to him and then walks off.

And he trails behind her like a puppy.

“You ready?” Aaron asks.

He follows my gaze. “Oh, good. A distraction.”

It’s not like it was planned, but I suppose Selene’s attraction did work in our favor.

“I’m sending my men up to carry down the trunks.”

“You think it’s okay? There are still a decent amount of people mulling around.”

“I’m thinking your brother might appreciate leading your packmates on a run tonight.”

I nod. “That’s a good idea.” After the way the Council treated him, I know he’s angry. Running in his true form will help with that, so will solidifying his position with our packmates. They still look up to him.

Liam is across the room and I wave to him. He’s pissed but after I share the idea of a run, he perks up.

“Yeah, I can do that,” he tells me. “It’s normally part of the ceremony, anyway.”

“Yes. And if I was a real wolf, I’d be leading them. But I’m not. You are, brother. And I’m relying on you to support our pack in this way and for you to lead them when I cannot.”

“Yeah. Of course.”

He hugs me.

Tears mist in my eyes. “Thank you for supporting me, Liam.”

He squeezes me tighter. “We’ll figure this out together,” he tells

“Yes.” I draw back. “I’m going to go and get some of my things back from Aaron’s.”

“Now?”

“I could really use a few minutes out of the spotlight... and trust me, no one in Pack Rathborn is looking at me twice.”

His smile is wry.

Liam walks off, calling to the pack to muster for a run and I watch them go.

I'm hit so hard with a pang of jealousy.

Then Aaron takes my hand. "Come with me."

Chapter 108

Going back to Aaron's pack after this time apart feels strange.

And a lot like coming home.

We're quiet for most of the ride.

It's pitch black save for the headlights on the vehicles and these backcountry roads are virtually deserted. We've nearly

hit a few deer already, and I know Cedric is hoping we do. He

loves fresh venison.

"Take a run when you get home if you're that hungry," Aaron warns him. "But don't dent another truck."

The guys chuckle. William glances at us in the backseat. "I offered to drive."

"No. You're slow as f**k," Cedric argues. "We wouldn't make it home til next week."

They continue to rib each other goodnaturedly.

There is an ease among them, and even I feel more comfortable amid Aaron's guys, which is surprising to say the least. They never really welcomed me in the past. I've always

felt like an outsider.

Maybe it's the way Aaron has changed toward me.

Maybe it's just that these wolves are a 'known' evil.

Or it could just be that I am a bigger threat to my own pack than theirs, comparatively.

But whatever the reason, I feel lighter than I have in a week.

Cedric glances in the rearview. "Lucas is slow too."

The other vehicles are behind us, but I can see their headlights in the distance. "Seeing as those SUVs have the trunks," I say, "maybe it's not such a bad thing that they're obeying the speed limit."

Cedric considers that. "Fair point," he tells me.

I wasn't expecting Aaron to have the two other SUVs escort us. For the event, I expected some show of force, so I wasn't surprised when he came with a contingency of wolves, but I get the impression that he's been more cautious as of late.

“Are the extra security measures just for my benefit?” I ask. “Or are there other things you aren’t telling me?”

He stares straight ahead. “Better safe than sorry,” he tells me.

Which doesn’t answer my question.

I roll my eyes and then glance out the window.

I’ve got enough problems on my plate, I probably shouldn’t court any extras anyway. But there is a pang of hurt. It’s brief but sharp.

At the core of ...whatever our relationship is...there has never been trust.

Power and privilege.

Motives and agendas.

Passion and pain.

I wonder if this is all we are capable of.

It might be nice to live in mediocrity, to have some boring existence without the drama or extremes. It doesn’t suit Aaron. He’s made for bigger things. But me...I wouldn’t mind a quiet home. A family.

I could live without the fighting and drama.

I try to make sense of everything that happened tonight, but it drags me into the kind of mental gymnastics that give me a headache and make me want to curl up in a ball and sleep.

I want to live.

I want my child to survive.

But now it’s not just my own body out to end me, but the Council, any number of wolves that covet my pack, and the proposition of trying to transition.

I rub my eyes.

‘Relax Leah,’ he whispers. “Sleep.”

He slings his arm around me and though I’ve done a good job of keeping the distance between us, I let him draw me in.

My head finds his shoulder and I close my eyes. “We still have to talk about all of this.”

“I know.” Then he says softly, “I don’t want to fight, honey.”

But a fight is likely going to be inevitable. Because what I want. What I plan to do...Aaron will never agree.

Chapter 109

When I open my eyes, Aaron is carrying me.

He shoulders open the door to his room and puts me down on the bed.

I'm still mostly asleep so when he slides off my shoes and unbuttons my pants, I'm slow to react. When he draws them down, the letters from my dad spill onto the mattress.

"Were you carrying those the whole time?"

I'm wide awake now. "Yes. It's partly why I was sweating so much with the Council members."

"Have you read them?" Aaron asks.

"Not yet."

"I'll leave you to it then," he says

I wasn't expecting that. I thought I'd have to demand some privacy.

"Thanks."

He nods and closes the door behind him.

The sheets are cool and smell like him. His pillows are fluffy and I stack them behind me. Then I cross my legs and open the first letter.

Dear Leah,

You're leaving today. I'm still not sure I made the right decision and part of me

knows your mama would skin me alive for what I'm doing,

but I don't see another alternative. We're losing wolves at an alarming rate. We're killing a great number of Rathborn pack

too, but this is a matter of wills. He proposed it on a dare, thinking I'd never give you up. And I don't want to.

The very thought of it kills me.

But if I don't, more packmates will die.

I doubt you'll ever understand how hard this decision was to

make, and I pray

when you have pups of your own, you do a better job of it
than me.

I love you. If you remember nothing else, remember that. And please, try to
forgive me.

My hands shake and I set the note aside.

Can I really handle ten more of these?

I take a deep breath and then another.

The door opens. It's Aaron in his true form.

His wolf tilts his head.

I move the pillow next to me out of the way, and it's all the
invitation he needs.

The big beast bounds into the room and up on the bed. He curls up right next to me, dropping his head
in my lap.

A therapy dog that's a couple hundred pounds and with ferocious teeth.

I stroke his soft fur. "Thanks bud."

He doesn't say anything. Just nuzzles closer.

I open the second letter.

Dear Leah,

You've called and sent letters and I haven't replied. It's not that I don't want to, but I can't bear to hear
you cry. You've begged to come home and just knowing that you are trapped-because of me-fills me
with guilt that I can't get past. I can't break the treaty without rekindling this war, and I know that
sounds awful, but I had to make a choice. A hard one. For the good of our pack.

A father should never have to sacrifice his daughter.

Maybe it'd be better if I just turned the pack over to him. But given all the bad blood, I can't believe that
he'd show mercy.

You're fourteen today.

I hope that things get better. I hope that if you can let go of your old life that you can embrace your new
one.

I love you. If you remember nothing else, remember that. And please, try to
forgive me.

And so the notes go.

Guilt. A profession of love. And a plea for forgiveness.

I stop at sixteen.

I don't want to read anymore.

I'm not sure what I was expecting. Something deeper, maybe? Something that showed more love and less of an "oops, sorry you were the sacrifice, but, hey, it had to happen."

The worst part... at thirteen, I'd wanted so badly to help. To fight. To contribute to my pack in some way, if my dad had just talked to me, he wouldn't have had to apologize.

He wouldn't have had to throw me away to his enemy.

Dumb girl that I'd been, I would've volunteered.

Chapter 110

I get through the rest of the letters. By the last one, I'm numb.

The tone changed, and I could mark the spiral my father took in his latter years, perhaps an extension of the guilt he couldn't come to terms with.

Maybe I could've been sweeter when I visited. Maybe I could've been braver. Less needy.

I don't know.

My hand drops to my stomach and I think of my own child.

No. Never.

Never would I do to my child what had been done to me.

Is it any wonder I'm so happy to curl up with Aaron's big wolf? I am pretty friggin' traumatized. And now that my father is dead, I'll never have the closure I need.

Aaron howls long and low.

Oh, I'm crying again.

A steady stream of silent tears.

This wolf doesn't like it when I do that. I stroke his fur and snuggle closer. "I'm okay. I just have to process it all, so I can let it go."

He seems to accept that because he lays his head back down.

I pick up the last letter. The one that I've been dreading most.

Leah,

It's hard to see how far you veered off the road until you're at the end of it and look back. I've made mistakes. So many where you are concerned. I've gambled with our company too many times, and those decisions that should've paid off set us back so far, we're close to being declared insolvent.

I've made you a martyr and relied on you far beyond what any packmember could ever owe.

You've bled for us. Your financial contributions have supported us. Your sacrifice as wife to our enemy kept the peace for us.

I've never prioritized your happiness or your wellbeing. I've left you to fend for yourself.

I'd beg forgiveness but in this last letter I'll ever write, I know that I don't deserve it.

It's wrong of me to even ask.

So here it is. The whole truth. Of who you are. And why I'm leaving Pack Roberts for you to control.

I read the last lines and the letter falls from my hand.

Then I start screaming.