

Bad Love 171

Chapter 171

LEAH

I arrive back at the Rathborn mansion after spending the day visiting with the Leithrow wolves. They were surprisingly welcoming, and fell over themselves with gratitude, calling me Luna at every turn, and presenting me with a lavish lunch even though I hadn't given them warning that I was showing up that day.

I'd felt a little bad about that actually, catching them off guard like that.

But I'd been so adamant about keeping busy and going to meet the pack members in person to hopefully smooth over Aaron's new habit of running things remotely, that I didn't even think about the fact it'd be polite to give the Leithrow wolves a day or two to prepare for my visit.

I keep forgetting what my role as Luna really means to some people.

Probably because I was Luna of the Rathborn pack for years, and they treated me like trash, so I never knew what it was to have real respect and deference directed at me.

I'm restless, and ever since I saw Aaron yesterday, I've had this ache in my chest like a thorn beneath my ribs.

I think maybe it's my wolf missing her mate. Like seeing him made it worse, not better.

Especially the cold way he treated us.

It's getting dark out, but I don't want to stay cooped up in the mansion, trying not to think about Aaron and everything I've lost, so I make my way to the library and pause at the french doors opening onto a patio looking over the lush lawn.

Well, it's a lush lawn in summer. Right now it's an expanse of pristine snow.

I kick off my shoes and then slowly remove my clothes, garment by garment, enjoying the drag of material over my skin and the anticipation building inside me-my inner wolf knows I'm going to let her free, and she's almost vibrating with excitement.

Just as I drop my panties onto the pile of clothes at my feet, I hear the slightest swish of movement and suddenly realize I'm not alone.

I glance over my shoulder to see James standing in the doorway, his gaze roaming over my body in a way that can only be described as hungry.

It gives me a secret thrill, one I know I shouldn't feel as a mated and married woman.

But with Aaron neglecting me the way he is, I can't help but soak up the admiration from someone else...someone else who's been looking after me so attentively since I woke up from my coma.

Eventually, James's gaze returns to my face, and his wolf is flashing in his eyes.

He reaches up and draws off his shirt, revealing an expanse of perfectly defined muscles across his chest.

So he plans to shift and run with me?

Only if he can keep up.

I throw open the doors, letting in the bite of the Montana winter air, and I'm shifting even as I step out.

By the time I reach the snow on the ground beyond the patio, my four paws leave light trails through the powder.

I bound out into the waiting world, and the night is mine.

Gifts

Chapter 172

I run for hours.

I have no way of keeping track of time in wolf form, but eventually I can somehow sense dawn is coming, and I'm exhausted, so I start heading back.

James didn't exactly try to run with me the way I thought he would, He'd come out, yes, but he'd kept his distance and seemed more inclined to run ahead, or trot circles around me to keep guard whenever I stopped to rest or tracked an animal, or frolicked in the snow.

When we arrive back at the mansion, James watches me go back in through the patio doors and shift to human form, before padding off around the outside of the house without shifting back himself.

I wonder where he's going off to. Maybe he has patrols to do or something.

I go all the way up to my old room, even though Aaron's room is closer and his bed is both larger and probably more comfortable, but I still can't think of it as anything other than Aaron's bed, even though I spent months there while I was in a coma.

I don't bother dressing or putting on pjs, I simply crawl under the blankets and thankfully fall into a deep sleep.

Several hours later, my wolf senses bring me awake when someone walks into my bedroom.

I sit up in alarm, and Adam pauses halfway across the room where he was walking toward the nightstand carrying a tray.

Belatedly, I remember my lack of clothes as Adam's gaze drops to my chest, but for some reason he's the one blushing as he looks away.

"Adam, what are you doing here?" I demand as I pull the blankets up to cover myself.

"I came first thing this morning to give you another checkup and they told me you'd been out running almost all night, after spending all day visiting the Leithrow pack, which you did right on top of getting back from California."

Adam finishes walking over and sets the tray down onto the nightstand, and I see orange juice, some slices of fruit, and toast.

He then sits on the bed next to my hip, and I barely restrain the urge to snap at him that I didn't give permission for him to be so familiar with me, let alone be in my room.

It's mostly my wolf, for some reason, she wants to bare her teeth at him.

But Adam is my oldest friend.

He was the one who was there for me through the cancer, did everything he could to help me, listened to all of my wishes.

My wolf just needs to calm down. Apparently all that running didn't do much to appease her.

An image of Aaron flashes through my mind—a moment from that damn dream I had when I was in California, of him thrusting deep and claiming my body as his own.

I silently curse my wolf, I'm sure she's behind it.

She has no sense where our mate is concerned.

She wants him no matter what,

"Leah," Adam is saying, gently admonishing. "You awoke from a six month coma less than a week ago. You need to slow down.. You might have your wolf now, but it doesn't make you invincible."

*I'm Luna of three packs now, Adam," I remind him, trying to keep the annoyance out of my voice. "What do you expect me to do? Find somewhere to hide away and manage everything remotely like Aaron is? I won't do that to the people who rely on me."

Adam reaches over and takes my hand. "And I admire you for it. But can't we make a compromise?" I squeeze his hand and then extract my fingers from his grip. "What kind of compromise?"

"You shouldn't be doing all this on your own, especially not when we don't know what the long term consequences of your unique situation might be. You died Leah. I still don't understand how Aaron even brought you back. I'd feel better if I knew someone was looking after you. Come home. At least for a few weeks. Let me monitor you, and if anything goes wrong, then at least I'll be close at hand to help you." I'm not sure about going back to Roberts pack lands, not after everything that's happened.

I don't think I belong there.

But I also don't really feel like I belong here at the Rathborn mansion without Aaron, either, not matter how familiar the rooms and land beyond the house might be.

"I'll think about it," I tell Adam, and he nods in satisfaction. "Now if you don't mind, I need to shower."

Adam stands and heads toward the door.

"Make sure you eat," he tells me before leaving.

I sit there for a few moments, using my heightened hearing to listen to him descending the stairs, as well as other familiar noises of the mansion during the day.

I've felt directionless since I woke up and Aaron walked away from me.

And I'm starting to worry it's because I'm without Aaron that I'm feeling so lost.

Chapter 173

I shower, dress and eat the food Adam brought up for me, even though I don't have much of an appetite.

I think about shifting and running again.

It's easier to be in wolf form and not have to feel all these confusing, upsetting things all the time. Not have to worry about the packs or the businesses or if this is how the rest of my life is going to look...alone in a pack full of other wolves.

But shifting and running can't be the answer every time I feel down.

I need to find other ways to cope, and hope that with time, things will get easier, because this is going to be my life now.

I have all these responsibilities, and I can't see how Aaron and I will ever get past the ways we've wronged and hurt each other.

Sure, it seems like we're going to work together temporarily to find out what happened to the AI weapons system, but after that, we might not ever have a reason to speak with each other again apart from basic formalities to do with the pack and corporations.

Being mated has only pushed Aaron further away from me, instead of bringing us together like it should have.

But it's fine, I tell myself.

Even if he wanted to have anything to do with me, I can't look at him without being reminded of...everything.

Tears threaten as I walk down the stairs, and I determinedly shake them away.

I have work to do.

I don't have time to sit around and cry about things that can't be changed.

"Sleeping Beauty emerges," a voice says from across the foyer as I reach the bottom of the stairs.

Tobin stands, buttoning his stylish jacket, a friendly smile on his face.

"Councilman," I greet with a polite nod. "What brings you to Rathborn pack lands? If you're here to see Aaron—"

"I know Aaron's not here," Tobin returns, his pale eyes intelligent and assessing. "Everyone knows Aaron hasn't been staying on Rathborn packlands for months. And please, let's dispense with the formalities. Call me Tobin."

I incline my head again. "If you'd like to come through to the sitting room, I can have some refreshments brought."

"Such a gracious host," Tobin compliments with a smile that I'm not sure what to make of. Tobin helped save me that night Brian Leithrow tried to kill me. And he's wandered on and off Roberts packlands like he's entitled to, which made me think he had some kind of agreement with Liam, but I also know he's been friends with Aaron since before I even came to the Rathborn pack. However, he's hard to read, and I'm not sure what to think of the attention he gives me. Now that I've got my wolf, I can sense how wild he is, how close to the surface of his humanity his wolf is lurking.

Once we're seated and he's got a whiskey, neat, in a crystal tumbler, I muster a smile. "Breakfast of champions," I joke.

He barely cracks a grin.

"So, what can I do for you?" I ask, striving to keep my tone pleasant and not nervous.

I get the feeling Tobin is not the kind of wolf you should ever show weakness to.

"Nothing official, this is just a social visit," he responds, leaning back against the couch cushions, those uncanny pale eyes never leaving me.

"A social visit?" I repeat, trying not to sound as confused as I sound,

"I heard you woke up from your coma, so I thought I'd come see how you are."

"I'm fine," I reply automatically.

Tobin is at me, then drains his drink and sits forward to put it on the table between us.

"You're a strong woman, Leah. You had to be, after how you were sent to the Rathborns as a blood debt. And your new wolf is fierce, I can sense that." His pale eyes focus on me intently. "But times are changing. After your father and brother were killed, and with Aaron absorbing the powers of three Alphas...well, anyone can see that there's a fight coming. The question is, will you be on the right side of things?"

My wolf bristles, and even I'm on alert now.

"Are you threatening me?" Chapter 174

Tobin laughs and sits back again.

"Whatever gave you that idea, Luna?"

His teasing tone makes me blush lightly, as I realize I've jumped to the wrong conclusion.

"Sorry, I just have a lot going on right now, and I'm still trying to figure out who my friends are."

"Friends are boring." Tobin says with a dismissive wave. "I much prefer allies, whether I like them or not."

I think it speaks a lot to Tobin's personality that he doesn't think it's worth having friends.

"And what does that make me?" I'm brave enough to ask.

"An ally, of course," Tobin says with a nod, and then his eyes glow with his wolf. "Unless you give me a reason not to be."

In that moment, I'm absolutely sure Tobin is one person I never want to make an enemy of. However, Tobin is connected, and he had something going on with Liam, that much was obvious from all the times I saw him lurking around the Roberts pack mansion.

What if Tobin knows about the AI weapons system.

What if he knows what happened to it after Liam died?

I almost ask him right then and there, but at the last second, I swallow down the words.

I think Tobin might be a viable option to discovering the truth about the missing tech and billions of dollars, but I want to think on it some more before I say anything.

My wolf wants me to run it by Aaron.

I barely refrain from rolling my eyes at her.

At this point, she's becoming predictable.

"I'm not interested in any kind of power plays, if that's what you're really curious about," I tell him, and it's the truth.

I never imagined I would be properly accepted as the Luna of the Rathborn pack, let alone end up Luna to three different packs, my own family included.

"Not even as Luna of three packs?" he asks, as if he can read my mind.

"Not even then," I reply. "Aaron is the one who is Alpha of all three, maybe you should be having this conversation with him."

"Oh, I plan to have many conversations with your errant mate when I catch up with him," Tobin says cryptically.

Before I can even think how I'm going to reply to that statement, the door abruptly swings open and James barges in.

Both Tobin and I get to our feet.

"Tobin," James greets curtly, crossing his arms. "You were just leaving, were you?"

Tobin cuts a coldly amused glance at me, before returning his attention to James,

"Of course I was, James. Wouldn't want to upset Aaron's attack dog

James gives a low growl, but Tobin simply tells me a polite goodbye, and then strides from the room as if he's got all the time in the world.

I hear James instruct one of the other guys to escort Tobin out, and then James turns to me, stepping fully into the room and closing the door behind him.

"Leah, what were you thinking?" he demands heatedly, like he's got every right to question me.

I'm starting to think maybe I've let him become a little too familiar and casual with me.

"I was thinking that as Luna of the Rathborn, Roberts and Leithrow packs that when a powerful Council member turns up, I should treat him with respect or risk untold consequences," I reply in annoyance.

"And as my Alpha's beta, it's not your place to question that, James."

James is suitably chastised, and he lowers his gaze. "My apologies Luna. It's my responsibility to keep you safe, and sometimes! forget myself."

"It's okay, James," I say, softening toward him. Who knows what Aaron ordered him to do while he was gone, but I imagine my mate and husband would have threatened some form of inventive punishment if James failed and anything happened to me. "We're both still prey to Aaron's whims, even when he's not here."

James raises his eyes to look at me, his expression earnest, and I think for the first time maybe I've been wrong about him, and he does actually care for me.

"Just be careful, Luna. Tobin can't be trusted."

“Oh, I’m well aware,” I tell James with a cynical laugh.
No, Tobin certainly cannot be trusted.
But that doesn’t mean I can’t use him for my own gain.

Chapter 175

AARON

I hang up the call from James
And then before I know it, I’ve crushed my phone in my fist.
Da mn it.

1/2

That’s the third one this month.

I toss the pieces onto the nearby table as Lillian comes in from outside, bringing a swirl of snow with her.
She looks at me in concern as she goes over to put wood on the fire in the hearth.

“Is everything okay, Aaron?” she asks.

She’s always asking after me and concerned about my welfare. I don’t think I’ve ever met anyone more selfless or sweeter.

“I need to go again,” I say, and I don’t even bother hiding the disappointment in my voice.

Lillian looks crestfallen, and I don’t blame her.

I come and go, but she’s here all the time, on this remote mountain with no one else to see or talk to. I have guys patrolling the perimeter of the property, but they’ve got their own cabin down at the bottom of the drive, and rarely come up to the main cabin. unless there’s an emergency.

“I’ll be back as soon as I can.” I reassure her. “You know I don’t want to be anywhere else. But I need to take care of this in person.”

“I understand,” she says with a nod, a note of sadness in her voice.

I’m cursing Tobin as I go pack the bag I only just unpacked earlier today after getting home.

Dam n that wolf for sniffing around my mate.

What the h ell is he up to now?

Of course, with Tobin it could be nothing except the desire to stir up trouble.

Or, it could be something deeper and far more sinister.

I don’t think he’s foo lish enough to make a move directly against me.

Nothing so blatant as attacking my wife and mate.

However, Tobin is on the list of Council wolves I suspect could be behind the murder attempts.

Only because now I’m more powerful than Tobin, and I doubt he likes it one bit.

That night in the clearing, when Leah had absorbed her father’s Alpha powers, I’d worried Tobin would slaughter her for the power himself.

And maybe if I hadn’t been there, that’s exactly what he would have done.

However, I possess the Roberts Alpha power now, along with my own and that of the Leithrow pack. If Tobin were to k ill me and absorb that on top of his own Alpha power...it would be unheard of.

And there was every chance he wouldn’t even survive it.

However, I thought Tobin was ambitious enough to try.

And even if he doesn’t want to steal my power for himself, just getting me out of the way so I don’t take a seat on the Council might be enough for him.

So now I’m heading back to see what I can turn up about Tobin’s movements and plans.

Maybe I could confront Tobin directly-and maybe I eventually will-but I want to be armed with as much information as possible first so I’m not unpleasantly surprised by anything.

Because Tobin is unpredictable, to say the least.

And the one idea that haunts me worse than Tobin simply playing his usual power games?

The possibility that Tobin's got it in his mind that maybe Leah is fair game.

That since I'm not around, my mate is available for other wolves to come sniffing around.

Yes, in rare cases, mating bonds can be broken and new ones can be formed.

However, Leah is a prized Luna.

Her new wolf is beautiful and fierce, I could sense it, even if I haven't seen her shift yet.

No other woman could ever come close to being everything I need the way Leah is.

If only she wasn't also the greatest threat to everything we value between us.

But, no matter what is or isn't between us, one thing will always remain true.

Leah is mine. Chapter 176

I drive several hours until I reach the largest town in this area, one the Council members often favor for shopping and dining and various other human pleasures. I head to a private club where only certain people with select invitations and bank accounts that number in the hundreds of millions can gain entrance.

I've had a membership for years, but I rarely come here.

It's a place for vice and sin and the kind of under-the-table business dealings that don't happen in clean, corporate boardrooms

And it just so happens to be one of Tobin's favorite haunts.

I pay one of the girls who dances on the entertainment level for information about Tobin's comings and goings, as well as that of other Council members who come here.

Tonight, however, she's working behind the bar.

She smiles when she sees me, partly because she knows me being here means a bonus for her. But also because she's offered herself to me more than once, and hopes one day I'll take her up on the offer.

But human women don't interest me.

They can't compare to my mate,

"The usual?" she asks me, leaning forward so her breasts are in danger of falling from the low-cut top she's wearing.

I nod, and she says something to one of the other girls, before coming around the bar.

She takes me by the lapel of my jacket and tugs me into one of the private rooms.

I know exactly what it looks like to anyone paying attention.

I'm getting one of the extra services they offer here.

But I don't care what other people think, and my bad-boy reputation has served me well over the years.

Inside the room, Selene drops the act, but she's still all smiles as I hand over a fat wad of hundred dollar bills that she promptly tucks down between her breasts.

"Tobin hasn't been here lately," she tells me.

I arch a brow at her.

"That's it?"

She shrugs. "What do you want me to say? I can't tell you anything if he hasn't been here."

"Okay, do you know why he hasn't been around lately? Is he busy with something?"

Could it have something to do with the missing AI tech from Roberts Corp? I'd heard that Tobin had some business dealings with Leah's father and brother, but never put much stock into it until now.

"Oh, that's easy. He got into a crazy fight with the new guy that's been hanging around," Selene replies breezily, catching my attention.

“What new guy?”

She shrugs again, the action beginning to annoy me.

Everything annoys me these days, while I’m in self-imposed exile from my mate.

“I don’t know. Some guy with an accent, Tattoos. And a weird name like Rider or something”

“Ryker?” I ask incredulously.

All this time I’ve been searching for Ryker.

Surely he wasn’t under my nose, a mere few hours drive away this whole time?

“Might be,” Selene muses, not noticing the way my temper is rising at her flakiness. “He’s here now, down in the gambling den. Why don’t you go ask him yourself?”

I have to spin away from her as my temper spikes and my wolf comes dangerously close to exploding out.

That’s all I need. To shift in front of humans and go tearing through a club so I can rip Ryker limb from limb.

The Council wouldn’t need any excuse to hunt me down like a rogue wolf if that happened.

“Are you okay?” Selene asks, sounding worried.

“Fine,” I bite out, swallowing when my voice comes out all growly, barely sounding human. “I just need a minute.”

“Okay,” Selene says, and I hear her footsteps retreating, thank god, “Let me know if you need anything else.”

Once she’s gone, I take some breaths, trying to force my wolf back down, but he’s fighting me something fierce.

We both want the same thing.

To go down there and slash claws through Ryker’s flesh until our enemy’s blood soaks the ground at our feet.

Chapter 177

Eventually, I get control of my wolf enough to leave the private room

Only because I threatened to leave and not confront Ryker if my wolf didn’t calm the hell down.

I don’t know how my wolf believes me when I barely believe myself.

I take the elevator down to the basement where the illegal gambling hall is set up.

When I arrive, I find it crowded, cigar smoke hanging heavy in the air, along with the scent of expensive liquor.

Money is changing hands.

Entire fortunes being won and lost in a single hand.

I walk slowly, carefully through the room, searching for Ryker, hoping he is still here and I haven’t missed my chance to finally exact my revenge.

Finally, I spot him, lounging against the bar, talking to another wolf who I know is involved with running some of the US arm of the Old Country Wolves’ illegal business dealings.

Ryker sees me and grins, like he’s just been waiting for me to turn up.

He excuses himself from the guy he’s talking to, then abandons his drink on the bar and walks away.

I follow him at length, not catching up with him, even though he’s strolling along like he’s not in a hurry.

We both know I can’t and won’t do anything in a room full of humans.

Ryker takes the stairs instead of the elevator, and I keep following him.

It occurs to me he could be leading me into a trap, a dozen of his guys waiting for Ryker to lead me

straight to them.

But I'm so furious, I'm practically seeing red and right now I'm so filled with restless agitation and rage that I could take on twenty of Ryker's guys at once and barely break a sweat.

Eventually, we reach ground level and Ryker walks out a side door into an alley.

Yep, definitely the sort of place to set up an ambush.

He walks to the end of the alley where the light doesn't quite reach and then turns to face me.

"I heard you were looking for me, Alpha Rathborn," he says, pulling his cuffs straight and then holding his hands wide. "Well, here I am. So what exactly do you want?"

"It's simple," I reply, letting my wolf surge up to start the shift. "I'm going to kill you."

Write your comment

Gifts

Bad Love: An Alpha's Regre

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Chapter 178

I start forward, claws and fangs ready to tear him to shreds, but Ryker laughing pulls me up short.

"You think this is funny?" I demand, my fury building to incredible heights.

"Your misdirected rage is somewhat amusing, yes," Ryker says, rocking back on his heels.

He's totally relaxed, no sign of his wolf surfacing, no indication he considers me a threat at all.

"My rage isn't misdirected," I snap at him. "You were there that night. You helped Liam screw over my wife, my mate. She almost died, and for that, you are going to pay."

"You think this stops at Liam, or at me?" Ryker asks, holding up a hand, making me pause, "What happened that night was the result of plans that run for deeper and have wider reaching consequences than just you or your wife."

"What are you talking about?" I demand, trying to figure out if this is just Ryker trying to mess with me, or he's actually telling me something of substance. Something I should be worried about.

"You really think Liam could have done all he did without help?" Ryker asks, and it's like a needle sticking into my skin.

The thought had crossed my mind-especially with Tobin somehow being involved with Liam-but I'd dismissed it, thinking surely it was too far-fetched that Liam's plans and the whole thing with the AI weapons system couldn't go all the way to the Council.

The idea that I might be wrong, and this whole thing could be much larger than I'd wanted to believe was slightly terrifying.

Especially with a missing AI weapons system on the line that had the potential to destroy entire countries or wipe out entire populations.

"What do you know?" I demand, thinking I might as well get as much information out of Ryker as I can before I spill his entrails.

Ryker shakes his head, frustration crossing his features.

"Nothing concrete, not anymore, Dorian and Michail are freezing me out."

This surprises me more than anything else.

"Why would they do that?"

Ryker returns his gaze to me. "That night in the warehouse, I didn't agree with what they were doing. Old Country Wolves, we have a strong set of traditional values we live and die by. I felt the dealings with Liam and other American wolves was crossing lines into territory that went against those traditions. Dorian and Michail disagreed. They believed what we could gain through the agreement was worth crossing a few lines. And then Leah arrived, and I saw how she was willing to sacrifice everything for her brother when she thought his life was in danger...those are the actions of a true wolf. Pack before everything else. I admired her..."

I growl, not liking the way Ryker is talking about my mate.

However, he only grins.

"So now they freeze me out," Ryker continues with a shrug. "But I know something big is coming. Something that will change the entire fate of wolves and humans alike."

"What the hell is the Council up to?" I demand.

"Like I said, I don't know anything concrete, only that it involves some kind of project Liam and his father had been working on in secret."

2/2

The AI weapons system

So the fact it's missing is wrapped up in all this.

"Also," Ryker says after a pause. "I've heard the Council aren't very fond of you these days, with all the power you've been

amassing

I cross my arms, debating what to tell him, beginning to think maybe Ryker isn't the target my rage should have been directed at all this time.

In fact, I'm starting to think the enemy of my enemy is my friend.

"Someone's been trying to kill me for the past few months," I tell him. "I have my suspicions it might be members of the Council. I just don't know if it's sanctioned, or if someone is acting independently."

Ryker nods, not surprised, and I think he probably already knew, the bastard.

"Do you know who's behind it?" I demand.

"No, but maybe I can find out," he replies casually.

"For a price," I surmise.

Ryker grins. "Maybe I'll do it out of the goodness of my heart."

"Except you don't have one," I tell him, but instead of being insulted, he simply laughs.

"Maybe I'll do it because your wife fascinates me, and I'd hate to see all that potential snuffed out by some greedy wolves who are more interested in lining their own pockets than upholding the old ways and ensuring survival for our species."

I growl again, even though it's probably pointless. Ryker is not intimidated by me at all.

"Watch what you say about my mate, Ryker," I warn.

Maybe I'm willing to play ball with him because we have a common goal, but I won't put up with him getting ideas about my wife.

Which reminds me.

"Tobin has been sniffing around Leah."

Ryker's expression darkens. "Well, we can't have that now, can we?"

Clearly, Ryker isn't a fan of Tobin, and I wonder what the pair got into a fight about when they saw each other at the club.

"Something I need to know about you and Tobin?" I ask, even though I know he probably won't answer.

"Maybe," Ryker replies with a sly grin. "If I decide you need to know, I'll tell you. Until then, how do you feel about an extra pair of eyes on your mate for heightened security?"

"Why would you offer that?"

"Because if Tobin is sniffing around her, it's definitely for a reason, Ryker answers. "And I want to know what that reason is."

Chapter 179

LEAH

I finally give into Adam's persistence and decide to visit Roberts packlands

Not to come home.

Not to stay.

Just to visit.

To show my face and reassure my family's pack that despite all the recent losses, despite the fact that I'm no longer their Alpha-that title now belongs to someone long considered an enemy of the Roberts pack-that I am still their Luna and care about their welfare.

Many of the more senior wolves had been unhappy about Aaron now being in possession of the Roberts Alpha powers, and I had to soothe many ruffled feathers, reassuring that my husband and mate wouldn't simply obliterate us.

I did have to wonder a few times, however, about how things had all played out and what Aaron's plans might be for a pack he hated. He'd made no secret of his feelings towards Roberts' wolves.

All I could do was hope that with my father and brother dead, Aaron's animosity would be appeased, and he'd leave the rest of the pack in peace.

It wasn't like I had the power to take the Alpha abilities back again.

As Luna, at least I could mitigate any friction between my family's pack and Aaron acting as their Alpha.

However, I could see that many of my father's senior wolves weren't convinced, no matter what I said. I'd been away for too long—since I was a child—and spent all that time living with the enemy. And then I'd only been Alpha for a matter of short weeks before Liam had betrayed me.

There hadn't been time to build the required trust so they knew they could rely on me when I told them Aaron didn't hold any ill will toward them.

And what did I really know of my errant mate and husband anyway?

For all I knew, Aaron was off somewhere plotting the final downfall of the Roberts pack.

Maybe that's been his ultimate goal all along.

It'd certainly seemed that way when he'd tricked me into betraying my father, and then secretly brought up land and shares of Roberts Corp.

Adam has stood with me all day, silently giving his support, but at the same time, making it clear he agrees with much of what the senior wolves are saying.

I become increasingly annoyed with him, and wonder if this is why he wanted me to come back here, just so he can show me... what? That yet again, it's Roberts against Rathborn and there'll never be any true peace between our packs?

After several long meetings in which I don't think I manage to reassure the Roberts wolves of anything at all, I head out and away from the house with no real direction in mind.

I don't get far before I realize James has followed me. He's been my constant shadow all day.

As usual since Aaron left me.

I miss him so much, it's a persistent physical ache within me.

Except at the same time, I hate that I miss him so much after everything he did.

I'm halfway across the long stretch of grass from the house, the same one I had mowed the night of the party when I'd been trying to cement my place here.

Of course, now the grass is all dead and buried under inches of snow.

A lifetime ago.

It's evening, and the shadows are growing long.

I turn to face James, walking backwards a few steps.

"I'm going for a run," I tell him.

"I know," he replies, quickening his steps to catch up with me, as if he thinks I'm going to disappear on him. "It's not the answer, you know."

That makes me pause.

"What isn't?"

"Shifting. Running. Exhausting yourself day after day. It's not going to change anything."

My heart gives a painful twist, something that happens a million times a day, any time I get even the slightest reminder of all I've

lost

"I know," I tell him. "But I'm going anyway. Don't follow me."

I spin away from him, and break into a sprint.

“Leah!” he shouts after me, but I’m throwing off clothes and shifting and then darting into the far treeline.

He could probably catch up to me easily if he wants, but I hope he doesn’t.

I just need some time and space.

Because too often these days, I feel like I’m suffocating.

Chapter 180

I run, rediscovering places I’d explored as a child, but this time on all fours in wolf form, picking up things I’d never noticed before, measuring how different things are now that so many years have gone by.

For a while, I think I’m actually alone, but then eventually I catch the slightest scent of another wolf—a wolf who is staying downwind of me so I can’t catch their scent properly—and every now and then, I pick up a sound or a sense of movement off through the trees.

So James didn’t listen and followed me after all.

I’m a little annoyed, but I can’t be too angry with him since I know he’s under orders from Aaron, and I hate to think what my mate would do to James if something did happen to me.

For a while I pick up the pace, ducking and darting and crossing back and forth across a stream, trying to see if I can lose him, but apparently he’s an expert at hunting, and easily keeps on my trail, even when I think I’ve outsmarted him.

Eventually I get sick of that, and then realize I’ve wandered far from the main house, into dense woodland. It’s late at night now, and I think we should probably head back. I didn’t plan to stay the night on Roberts pack lands, and I want to go back to my own bed at the Rathborn mansion.

Even though I don’t know where I really belong—everywhere and nowhere—the bedroom where I spent years growing through my teens into adulthood feels familiar where nothing else does.

I’m keeping up a steady pace through the woods, but I slow as I come to a clearing, something pricking at my senses.

It takes me a few moments to realize what my senses are trying to tell me, and when I figure it out, it’s almost too late.

They come slinking out of the trees, and I abruptly find myself outnumbered by eight large wolves, surrounding me, circling me, closing in, leaving me nowhere to run.

I bristle, and my wolf is lifting her lip, flattening her ears, growling in warning.

I am Luna, and they are on my pack lands.

But for all the bravado of my wolf, the human part of me is shrinking back in fear.

I’m far from the main house, and I don’t know if James is still nearby. Even if he is, that’s still four-to-one odds.

I know I’m in serious trouble.

The wolves are jostling closer, threatening to attack, but at the last second, my wolf throws her head up and lets out a long, forlorn howl that echoes into the empty night.