

Bad Love 191

Chapter 191

LEAH

I can tell the second I've pushed Aaron too far, but instead of being fearful or wary like I was with Tobin a few minutes ago, now I'm buzzing with anticipation, thrilling in how I can drive my mate to extremes.

I know I shouldn't be doing this.

I should simply walk away instead of letting Aaron insult me-implying I'm sleeping with both James and Tobin-but my need for him has reached boiling point.

My wolf is demanding her mate, and she won't be deterred this time.

And truthfully, I want it just as much.

All these raw things I feel-most of them caused by Aaron-it's like a powder keg and now I think the only way it's going to start feeling any better is if it explodes first.

Aaron is poised above me, arousal in every line of his body, on the edge of detonating, and some reckless part of me wants to find out what happens when I tip my mate over into madness.

My dress is already rucked most of the way up from how Aaron has shoved me onto the desk and pushed my legs wide.

I hold his gaze defiantly as I bring my hand down and tug my skirt the rest of the way up, exposing the sheer red lace panties I'm wearing.

I continue holding his gaze as I slide my hand into my underwear, biting my lip over a moan the instant my fingers touch my wet, oversensitized flesh.

Aaron curses, his voice a harsh growl, and before I've barely done anything other than stroke myself once, he's flipped me over on the desk.

His fingers rake my panties down my legs and I glance over my shoulder in time to watch another pair disappear into his pocket.

Then he's jerking at his own belt with one hand, while his other large hand is splayed across my lower back, pinning me in place

He draws himself out, huge and hard, and just knowing what he's about to do makes me moan again.

He uses his knee to force my legs further apart as he tilts my hips up, between him and the desk.

But I wouldn't escape right now for anything.

Not when I'm about to get exactly what I want.

What I need.

What I've been craving, even though I wouldn't let myself admit it.

Aaron doesn't give me any warning or quarter, simply lines himself up and thrusts hard into me.

I cry out, an immediate wave of pleasure surging through me.

Aaron leans down. His breath is hot on the back of my neck.

But instead of things intensifying like I expect, suddenly his hands are gentle on my skin, as if he's worshipping my flesh, savoring the feel of me against him.

His hips roll into me over and over, the pace sensual and languid, as if we have all the time in the world. I swear I can feel wave after wave of love rolling over me in time with the rhythm of his body, and dazedly wonder if I'm imagining it, or I'm feeling what he's feeling through the mating bond.

"Do you have any clue what you do to me?" he whispers in a rough voice as he treats my body with reverence, drawing pleasure out of me in slow-building waves. "Do you know what you make me feel? Do you have any idea what I would do for you? I would burn this entire world for you, Leah, my mate. You are mine."

Instead of answering, I can only moan.

All I want to do is melt into a puddle at the way he is tenderly taking me apart right now.

His words have torn down the last of my resistance.

There is a raw truth in them and I know he wouldn't have ever told me any other way.

Aaron's hands mold to my hips, keeping me lightly in place as he picks up the pace.

The legs of the desk creak like the whole thing is going to collapse beneath us, but I don't care, I don't try to stop or slow him down.

I squirm as the pressure and pleasure building up within me is almost unbearable. It's never been like this before and I

wonder how I will withstand it without completely coming apart at the seams.

My movements only seem to urge Aaron on, as if he wants me to go limp and pliant with absolute bliss beneath him.

I push back against him-even though I don't have much leverage-wanting him deeper still, chasing that ultimate euphoria that hovers just out of my grasp.

Aaron groans and leans down over me, the angle sending him deeper, just like I wanted.

I feel his lips skim between my shoulder blades and then all I can think about is his teeth sinking into my neck, claiming me again, marking me.

As if he can read my mind, he shifts higher and suddenly his fangs sink into the back of my neck and I'm screaming, my entire body going limp even as I explode into a climax that whitewashes all of my senses, leaving me in an oblivion of indescribable pleasure.

sink boneless against the desk as Aaron shouts and comes deep inside me, sending another shuddering wave of pleasure through me, but I'm too weak to do much more than tremble.

Although we are already mated, the way Aaron claimed me just now, I swear the bond between us has just grown

exponentially stronger, cementing it further in place between us.

Is it possible to be mated to your Alpha a second time?

My whole body is vibrating with this intense feeling of love and connection that I never want to end. Aaron's arms wrap around me, holding me close, and for the first time since I woke up, I wonder if there is ever a chance of fixing all the broken things between us.

However, then Aaron suddenly pulls away from me, and I feel the skirt of my red dress pulled down to cover my naked butt and thighs.

Aaron moves right away from me, and I immediately feel cold.

The warm feelings-all that love-it evaporates into nothingness.

"Aaron?"

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Though my limbs feel all weak and are trembling, I push myself up and turn.

The first thing I see is that the door has been left wide open and James is standing in the hallway. His gaze is locked onto me, eyes glowing fiercely.

How much of that did he see?

Aaron hasn't noticed, he's moved over to the window and is tucking himself away and straightening his still immaculate suit.

I'm surprised neither Aaron nor I scented him, but we were so caught up in each other, it was like the rest of the world didn't even exist.

When James realizes I've seen him, he quickly turns and strides away, leaving me shocked and embarrassed at what he might have witnessed just now.

My mind is a jumble of confused thoughts.

My wolf wants nothing more than to cuddle up to our mate and is upset and bewildered about why he's treating us so coldly.

My human mind understands all too well.

The mating bond is drawing us inextricably together, but that doesn't negate all that's passed between us.

All the things Aaron has purposefully done to hurt and manipulate me.

"This doesn't change anything," Aaron says in an imperiously detached voice.

As if I need to be told that.

"What makes you think I believed it would? I reply bitterly, trying to conceal the hurt. "You think I can forget for even a second that our son is dead because of you? But it's not like you care how I'm managing to cope with that."

Guilt cuts across Aaron's face, but it's quickly replaced by rage, and we're right back to where we were before he fucked me over Tobin's desk.

"You dare accuse me of not caring?" Aaron demands. "You, the woman who stole from me, lied about your family and

what they were up to, and then denied me the truth about my own son? I might be a lot of things, Leah, but uncaring is not one of them. That's half the problem. I care too damn much." Aaron doesn't give me the chance to answer, but spins furiously on his heel and stalks out of the room, leaving me staring after him in even deeper confusion. How can he claim to care and still do all these things that hurt me? None of it makes sense! Maybe I made some bad choices, but none of those decisions were designed to hurt Aaron on purpose. I was only trying to protect myself. Protect myself from him, most of the time. He had to know that using me to get to my father, and then selfishly saving me and sacrificing our child would hurt me more than almost anything. Why did he even bother to mate me and save me if he doesn't even want me? Unbidden, the words he spoke in the heat of the moment return to me, and I realize that wanting has never been a problem between us. But it leaves me questioning how he truly feels about me. I would burn this entire world for you, mine.

Chapter 193

AARON

All I want to do is drag Leah back to Rathborn mansion and spend the night holding her in my arms. Now that I've slipped, now that my wolf and I have gotten a taste of how good it can be claiming our mate, I can barely think of anything except taking more. And by forcing myself to walk away from her, all I'm doing is upsetting my wolf further. But he doesn't understand this is the only way I know how to keep her safe until the threat has passed. It almost killed me to walk away from her like that just now. When I'd been inside her-when our mating bond had been fully realized in that moment-I'd been able to feel exactly how much she loved me beneath all the hurt and confusion. It made me euphoric, even as my fear that someone could use her against me increased exponentially. I refuse to let that happen. If nothing else, our time together has only strengthened my resolve to protect her at all cost. As for tonight, I still have this damn Council meeting to get through. And it's time I reminded my Beta of his place. I stride outside, and see James pacing over near the SUVs, his agitation obvious, but it only serves to fan the flames of my

anger.

I stalk over, and he's so distracted, he doesn't even see or scent me coming until the last second.

But I scented him.

His arousal, to be exact, and I've never been closer to slaughtering one of my own than I am at this moment.

I grab him by the back of the neck and fling him into the side of the SUV, then use my body and superior Alpha strength to keep him pinned there.

After the way Leah responded to me, I no longer think she's been sleeping with anyone else. She was too hypersensitive, too desperate for release.

All that aside, the intense way my mate loves me, I know she's not stirred by anyone else. For her, other men pale in comparison when held up against me.

As for James, I know the signs of unsated wanting.

"Did you enjoy the show?" I demand in a low, dangerous growl. I know he didn't see much, but what he did see when he arrived just after we'd finished was more than enough. Although, I know it's partially my own fault for not making sure the door was shut. "If you ever so much as glance at my mate with lust again, I will claw out your eyes and feed them to you. Do you understand?"

He jerks a nod, but I can feel defiance in every line of his body.

I yank his head back, exposing his neck, leaving it open if I wanted to slash my claws through his flesh and end his life right here and now.

"Do you understand?" I repeat furiously.

"Yes, Alpha," James mutters, and I finally feel the fight go out of him.

I shove myself away from him in disgust.

James has been loyal to me since we were kids.

Despite these rough patches between us, I still trust him more than anyone else in my life, which is what makes his apparent mooning over my mate all the more infuriating.

Right now, however, I have to put that out of my mind and somehow get in the right headspace for the Council meeting.

The car park is filling up, and when I make my way to the foyer, Alphas and their Lunas dressed in all their luxurious finery are arriving and mingling.

I'm not in the mood for small talk, so I go straight into the hall to find a seat and wait for the meeting to begin.

I sense the moment Leah slips into the room, only minutes before the meeting is due to start. She finds my gaze across the large space, like we're magnets drawn together, and she knows where I am at any given moment, just like I know with her.

She sits as far away from me as she possibly can, and while my wolf is disappointed, I am glad for it. I'm sure she's

drenched in the smell of sex, arousal and love, and I doubt I could sit through this meeting if I were able to catch even a hint of her scent.

The meeting starts at last, and there are several formalities, before the mood of the Council members shifts slightly.

I'm expecting it, but I can't help a small swell of apprehension as Karolina announces, "Alpha Rathborn, report to the floor. Immediately."

Chapter 194

LEAH

It feels like every person in the meeting hall is holding their breath as Aaron gets to his feet.

This doesn't last long, however, as a low swell of speculative whispers rushes through the room.

Is this why the Council called a special meeting?

To deal with something Aaron has done?

It's been six months since he took on my own Alpha powers and survived, and I think I am only just now realizing what that really means.

I'd been so caught up in the shock of surviving and losing my baby, and being mated to an Alpha who wants me even less than he did before, that I haven't really taken the time to think about the fact that Aaron is the only Alpha in centuries to absorb the abilities of three Alphas and live to talk about it.

Which technically makes him more powerful than any other wolf currently sitting on the Council.

And

"Councilmembers," Aaron greets, polite but reserved as he stops in front of the stage. "How may I be of service?"

"We are here to address your management of three separate packs," Karolina begins.

"Or more pointedly, your lack of management, since you have been handling all of them remotely,"

Tobin puts in snidely.

"The packs are doing just fine," Aaron reassures in a calm voice.

"Are they?" Tobin asks. "What if we told you we've had some complaints?"

Aaron arches an imperious brow. "From whom?"

"The details are unimportant," Karolina says with a dismissive wave. "You must see that your current standing, Alpha Rathborn, is potentially problematic for the Council."

Aaron inclines his head, but I can see anger in the line of his shoulders. "I have no design on any Council seats, if that's your worry."

"Then you won't mind signing a legal document to that effect," one of the other Elders demands.

"My loyalty is to the Council and the prosperity as always," Aaron replies diplomatically, answering without answering.

"Have the documents brought out," Tobin orders one of the aids standing off to the side of the stage. "So that Alpha Rathborn can sign in the presence of his fellow wolves."

The Council have planned this so Aaron can only agree. Any refusal to do so would be seen as a slight and disloyalty to the

Council.

"Luna Leah."

I start as Karolina calls my name.

"You will join your mate and husband!"

Chapter 195

My heart is tattooing against the inside of my chest as I make my way down to the stage.

The weight of all the other wolves staring at me feels like a noose around my neck.

What could they want with me?

Do they need me to sign some kind of binding document as well, because Aaron made me Luna to all three packs?

When I arrive at the foot of the stage, I leave a decent sized distance between myself and Aaron. I remember the last time I was here.

Going down on my knees to offer myself in place of my father.

Aaron's plans and manipulations coming to light and his fury in the way I tried to thwart them. In the end, it hadn't made a difference. My father had killed himself, and things had spiraled from there.

But then... he didn't kill himself, did he?

My brother's duplicity had been to

And he'd killed my father.

Liam would've killed me.

Aaron was the enemy to my pack all these years, and yet he was the one person to staunchly protect and defend me.

"Luna Leah," Karolina says. "You petitioned this Council to grant a divorce from your husband, however at the time, you neither had your wolf, nor were mated."

Out of everything I expect the Council to bring up, this is not one of them.

It seems like a million years ago now since I told Aaron and the Council that I wanted a divorce.

"Do you still desire a divorce, or are we right in assuming your change in circumstances has also changed your mind?" Karolina finishes, looking at me expectantly.

My thoughts race, and I'm unable to answer right away.

Part of me immediately wants to say yes, I still want to dissolve the marriage between me and Aaron that has proven

meaningless over and over.

But a larger part of me—mostly driven by my

for a real relationship with her mate, underscored by the way Aaron made love to me earlier—balks at the idea, and I can't bring myself to confirm or deny what the Council has said to me.

However, before I can reply, Aaron speaks up.

"It no longer matters whether Leah wants a divorce," he announces, immediately sparking my temper.

It's just like him to talk for me, think he knows what I want, decide he can control me and dictate what I do.

I won't stand for it!

"This is for me to decide, Aaron, not you," I tell him in a low voice, trying to keep it between us.

But there's no point.

We're standing in a hall full of wolves who have heightened hearing and are clearly hanging on every word we're saying.

"Actually, this time I'm the one who's going to decide," Aaron tells me, barely sparing me a glance before returning his attention to the Council members. "I wish to petition the Council to grant me a divorce from my wife, Leah Roberts Rathborn."

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After Aaron's announcement, everything becomes a blur. There's a swell of astonished voices, but I'm so shocked, hurt

and embarrassed, I don't even think.

I turn and rush out of the hall, unmindful that it was rude to walk away from the sitting Council without first being dismissed.

I just keep walking until I'm outside and the night air finally starts clearing my senses.

Then the tears start falling.

How could he?

After everything.

"Your mate is becoming unstable, you know."

Karolina's voice startles me and I whirl to face her, even as I quickly wipe the tears away.

She must have followed me straight out here, leaving behind the chaos in the meeting hall.

part wants me to scream who cares, Aaron doesn't want me anyway!

"Keep any Alpha away from his mate long enough and he starts to unravel. But your mate? With the power of three Alphas coursing through that hot blood? He needs a stable mating bond more than anyone."

"You saw what happened in there. Are you trying to say whatever's going on with Aaron is my fault?"

Karolina crosses her arms and regards me thoughtfully. "No, not in the least. I admire you, Leah, for putting up with him for this long, especially after all he's done to you."

I wonder how much she knows-everything, or just snippets of gossip that have done the rounds through the various packs.

"You're powerful, Leah, you have potential," Karolina continues when I don't respond right away.

"Potential?" I repeat, not understanding what she's talking about now.

"Haven't you ever given any thought to your future, beyond being Aaron's Luna?" The way Karolina asks isn't mean, but it makes me feel abashed nonetheless.

And it's kind of funny, her asking that. Six months ago-time spent in a coma that makes it feel like those events happened last week-I thought I was going to die.

Of course I haven't thought about my future.

"No matter," Karolina assures me. "You're young yet. But you can be more than Aaron lets you be. You could even be in my shoes one day, leading our species into a bright new future."

“You mean have a seat on the Council?” I ask, stunned, because the idea has never even crossed my mind. Karolina nods sagely. “You could have it all. But it requires sacrifice. Though, sometimes, something that seems like a sacrifice is actually cutting away the dead weight.”

I don’t like how Karolina talks in riddles.

“What are you trying to say, Karolina?” I dare to boldly ask.

“Mating bonds can be broken,” Karolina responds, and a wave of shock goes through my system.

Despite being at odds with

Aaron, the idea of breaking our mating bond is abhorrent, especially to my wolf.

“It’s rare, and it’s not without risk,” Karolina continues, either

not noticing or not caring about my shock. “But the way Aaron’s going right now, he’s going to turn rogue, there’s no

doubt about it. Do you really want to stand by and watch that happen? If any part of you still cares for Aaron, then maybe breaking the mating bond and setting him free is the best thing you can do for him.”

Chapter 197

AARON

The commotion my words cause would be laughable under any other circumstances.

Right now, however, I’m not laughing.

It’s all I can do to remain still as Tobin and the other Elders call for order.

Every fiber of my being wants to chase after Leah.

To explain why I’m doing this, to make her understand this is the only way I can protect her.

I don’t plan to actually go through with the divorce.

I just need Tobin-or whoever it is on the Council trying to kill me-to believe I don’t care about Leah in the slightest and keep her off their radar.

If anything happened to Leah, I know I would snap.

And like I told her earlier, I would burn the world down.

Eventually the Council brings the Powd

and by then, the aid has brought out the legal documents apparently stating that I will not make any move against the Council to claim any seats for myself.

Really, I should get my team of lawyers to look over this.

Who knows what else they could have hidden amongst the legal jargon?

But the Council and every other wolf in the hall is watching as I’m handed a fountain pen.

If I don’t sign it, that would be tantamount to treason.

They would be within their rights to kill me or bind my wolf here and now.

I take the pen and slash my signature across the bottom of the page, then stare up at the Council definitely.

If they think a piece of paper is going to stop me, then they’re sorely mistaken.

Someone sitting up there has tried numerous times to have

me killed.

One of those faces peering down from that stage has transgressed me in a way that cannot be forgiven. And when I find out who it was, no contract is going to prevent me from taking the revenge I deserve.

“Is there anything else you require of me?” I drawl, as if they’re beneath me and I have far better things to do with my time

than pander to them.

Most of them scowl, probably because they see the truth of it.

I am superior and more powerful than them, and I do have better things to do with my time than kiss their asses.

“You are dismissed,” Tobin says with a wave of his hand. “But Alpha Rathborn, know that we are keeping a close eye on you.”

I pause as I take in the way Tobin is looking at me, the way he said those words.

Is there some other threat layered underneath?

Is he flaunting the fact that he is the one who is out to get me?

Or am I simply reading too much into things?

I sketch a barely polite half-bow, and then return to my seat, ignoring the way other wolves are gaping at me.

The Council finishes up with some other formalities, and at some point Karolina returns from where she followed Leah, looking smug and I wonder what that’s about.

What could she have possibly talked to Leah about that would leave her looking so satisfied?

As one of the other Elders is talking, she leans over to whisper with Tobin.

Tobin is harder to read. He nods several times, but otherwise doesn’t seem to react much, and I wonder if she’s even mentioning Leah at all, or if they’re talking about something

else altogether.

The meeting finishes and other wolves avoid me like the plague.

Usually I can’t get out of one of these meetings without other Alphas stopping me to curry favor or ask for business advice.

Tonight, everyone knows I’m in the bad books with the Council and no one wants to be associated with me.

It suits my dark mood just fine.

I make my way out to the parking lot, not bothering with the valet service when I have my contingent of men waiting.

Leah, James and the other Rathborn SUVs are gone, and part of me is disappointed that I didn’t get to see my mate one last

time.

Although, in the mood she was probably in, the best I could have expected of her would have been a slap across the face.

I put my mate from my mind for the time being.

At least for tonight, I know she is safe, even if she hates me more than ever.

Chapter 198

I'm relieved to make it back to the cabin that night.

Lillian has a delicious pot roast waiting for me, and an open bottle of my favorite red wine.

Her gentle attention to detail is exactly the escape I need.

I enjoy the meal and listen to her chatter about the day, enwrapped by everything she tells me and wishing I'd been here instead.

Eventually, however, I have to deal with business.

The first thing I do is call the Leithrow pack Beta, David.

Tobin had alluded that they've had some complaints about me being Alpha and running my packs remotely. My first suspicion is the least familiar pack.

A quick conversation with David reveals there is a particular young upstart wolf who is trying to stir up trouble. His father

was cousins with the old Leithrow Alpha-the one Brian killed to assume his powers-and this young wolf is making claims it means he should be Alpha.

The idea is laughable, and David promises to take care of OT IT,

but I file it away in my mind, in case this young wolf needs a visit from his Alpha to remind him of his place.

After that, I turn to my own business and Roberts Corp matters.

Mostly, the pressing issue of tracking down missing multi-billion dollar AI tech that was meant to be handed off to the military.

I'm still fuming about the position this has put me in as I call in favors from across business, government and military, trying to find any clue as to its whereabouts without alerting anyone that Roberts Corp has lost track of a weapon that could potentially destroy entire civilizations.

Frustratingly, I don't get very far, which leaves me even more worried about what could have happened to it.

Something like that doesn't just disappear without a trace off the face of the earth.

"Are you still working?" Lillian asks over a yawn as she walks out of the bedroom and into the kitchen. She goes to the fridge and takes out the milk, before setting it on the bench.

I blink at the nearby clock on my desk, not realizing how late it's become.

Lillian comes over and sits on a nearby chair.

"You need to rest more, Aaron. Working yourself to death won't do you or anyone else any good."

I shove a hand through my hair, feeling tired and restless. "It's not like I have much of a choice. There's always something demanding my attention."

Lillian sends me a sympathetic look. "You've taken on the weight of the world, Aaron, and I understand

why. But I can

also see how much you miss her.”

“Who?” I demand stubbornly, even though I know the answer.

“Your mate,” Lillian replies gently. “You can’t keep going like this, it’s not healthy. Have you ever considered...”

She trails off, maybe second guessing whatever she was about to say.

The last few months, she’s the only one I’ve let see the real me.

The only one who knows the full truth of my situation.

“Considered what?” I ask, because I do respect Lillian’s opinion.

Chapter 199

LEAH

It’s late at night and I can’t sleep.

Not after everything that happened at the council meeting.

My thoughts had been spinning after I’d finished talking to Karolina. I’d hurried straight over to one of the Rathborn SUVs and jumped in behind the wheel. One of Aaron’s guys-luckily not James, because I couldn’t have faced him then-had seen me and quickly climbed into the passenger seat before I’d gone tearing out of the parking lot.

The other SUV’s we’d arrived with hadn’t take long to catch up, and everytime I’d glanced in the mirror, I’d seen James behind the wheel of the vehicle directly behind me the whole way back to Rathborn pack lands.

I’d rushed inside before James could climb out of the other vehicle and then shut myself in my bedroom.

Now, however, I’m roaming the halls like a lonely ghost.

I think about shifting and running, but my appetite for that has been curtailed after the incident on Roberts pack lands.

Arguably, I know Rathborn lands are much more secure, but it’s getting to the point where I don’t feel safe leaving the house, especially without Aaron’s larger than life presence looming protectively over me at every turn.

My wandering brings me to the library, and I step in to find a cheery fire roaring in the hearth, and soft candle light illuminating the space.

Outside the window, new snow is falling in the light of a half-moon.

The room is cozy and inviting, and I wonder who left it this way...until I step further into the room and find James lounging on the rug in front of the fire, reading a book of poetry.

He straightens when he sees me, snapping the book shut.

“Leah! Is everything okay? Why are you still awake?”

I think about fleeing, but I know I can’t avoid James forever, not when his one sole duty is to protect me.

“I couldn’t sleep,” I admit, crossing my arms.

James climbs to his feet, unfolding his large form and then stepping closer to me.

“Is there anything I can do?” he asks in a low pleasant voice.

And I can tell he means it.

James isn't trying to hide that he cares about me any longer. I know I could ask anything of him right now, and he would do it for me.

When exactly did things between us change so dramatically?

All these thoughts collide in my mind. Everything Aaron has done to this point, ending with him asking for a divorce.

Karolina telling me how Aaron is swiftly losing control, and if I care about him even a little, then maybe I should reject him and break the mating bond.

I look up to find James has drifted closer still, and there's barely any distance between us any longer.

I've never wanted anyone else except Aaron.

Not since I grew from a child, into a teenager, and then a woman, and I came to understand what it is for a woman to want a man.

But for the first time, I seriously wonder what else-who else-might be attractive to me, if not for Aaron being a sun that eclipsed my entire life.

And then I can't help but wonder exactly what James saw earlier when I was with Aaron.

"How much did you see?" I ask, feeling my body warm, knowing I'm treading into dangerous territory.

"Earlier, at the Council Meeting offices. How much of me did you see?"

James' cheeks redden a little, and I wish I could take back the question and pretend like the whole thing didn't happen.

"Barely anything," James assures me. "But Leah, you should know, my feelings for you-"

I hold up a hand to cut him off, not wanting to hear the words, but at the same time, part of me is curious, though my wolf doesn't like what's happening here.

But I need to know.

Once and for all, I need to know the truth of everything.

I place my hand in the middle of James's chest and gently lean up toward him.

Shock crosses his face, but he doesn't pull away from me as I kiss him.

I can sense he's holding back.

He doesn't want to overwhelm me.

Aaron never cared about that. Aaron never held back when we were together. I realize now that I prefer that. I don't want tempered passion or restraint.

The kiss is nice, but it's kind of all detached.

There are no fireworks.

There's no overwhelming desire crashing through my body and making me forget my own name.

All I feel right now is kind of empty.

I know now, Aaron is the only answer I'll ever need to anything.

So I break the kiss and step back from James, sending him an apologetic look.

But he just smiles back at me, as if he already knows.

"I'm sorry," I tell him anyway. "I can't."

"I know," James confirms. He takes my hand and lifts it to kiss my knuckles. "You love Aaron. You've always loved Aaron. I just hope in the end, it doesn't ruin you."

With that, he turns and leaves the room, abandoning me to my churning thoughts.

That moment with James, it's like it jolted something loose in my brain, and for the first time since I woke up to the shock of losing my baby, I think I'm seeing things clearly.

Aaron has been doing everything in his power to push me away, but as Karolina rightly pointed out tonight, keeping himself apart from me-his mate-is adversely affecting Aaron,

and it's only going to get worse.

Why would he do that? After mating me to save my life?

Why save me and mate me, only to punish us both?

Yet tonight, when I'd pushed him over the edge and he'd lost control, only to sensuously make love to me, he'd told me

I would burn this entire world for you, Leah, my mate. You are mine. After he'd also told me I care too damn much right before he'd walked out.

None of it makes any sense.

And everything he's been doing-running the packs and business remotely-is totally out of character for him.

So what is he even doing?

Then, abruptly I realize I'm asking the wrong question.

The question I should be asking is actually what the hell is he hiding from me?

Chapter 200

The next morning I'm a bundle of energy, even though I sat up most of the night mulling things over.

I came to the conclusion that I don't want to reject Aaron and break the mating bond.

But that means I need answers.

And then I need to try fixing things between us.

I down several cups of coffee and James makes a comment about how buzzed I am.

After last night, he and I have come to a new understanding with each other.

We can both admit that we've become closer, but nothing else will ever come of that.

As for now, however, I have a plot to put in place that will hopefully kill two birds with one stone.

Ferret out what Tobin does or doesn't know about my brother and the missing AI weapon, and see how Aaron reacts to my plan to meet with Tobin.

Because there was one thing I kept circling back around to during the dark hours of last night.

Aaron is definitely hiding something from me.

The AI weapons Roberts Corp was meant to hand over to the military is missing.

Aaron was the only one running Roberts Corp for months while I was in a coma.

In all that time, did he really not figure out what was going on?

Now, I realize it was foolish for me to take his word at face value that he didn't know about the tech until I told him.

I don't know why-whether it's simply the money or the tech itself he's interested in-but now I think Aaron is the one who has the missing weapons system, with the possibility of Tobin being in possession of it coming in at a distant second.

One way or another, I'm going to prove it.

I think about tricking James to ditch him-once, that was the typical way I would have dealt with him, like that fateful day I went to the clinic and found out about the cancer-but then I realize I don't want to do that, and he deserves better.

Instead, I pour him a coffee and then lay out every detail of my plan.

He doesn't like it, and reiterates that I can't trust Tobin, but since Aaron will be there if all goes as it should, then he can't exactly say I'm putting myself in undue amounts of danger.

"Just be careful, please," he says in a serious voice as he walks me out to the waiting SUVs.

We've decided James and a couple of guys are going to follow at a distance in another vehicle, and James gets someone to put a tracking device in the SUV just in case.

To anyone watching, it's going to look like I've foolishly ventured out on my own without any protection.

Though I don't like being bait, I also came to realize that hiding won't help me find who was behind the attack against

me on Roberts pack lands, and why they want me dead.

With everything in place, all that's left to do is climb into the SUV and drive myself away from the safety of Rathborn territory.

A little while later, I find a random place to pull over and get out my phone.

With butterflies in my stomach, I call Aaron, like I'm a lovesick teenager all over again, hoping against hope that he'll answer and give me some of that attention I always craved.

Aaron doesn't answer, so I type a text message instead.

I'm positive Tobin knows where the project is after what he said last night. I'm going to meet up with him. Don't try to find me, you'll only make things worse like usual.

I'm grinning as I type the last words, knowing it'll infuriate Aaron to no end and he'll do exactly the opposite of what I've

told him.

He'll move heaven and earth to find me, no matter if I want

him to or not.

Tonight, however, I'm praying that he does find me.

Next, I call Tobin.

His voice is a purr when he answers the call, and it makes me

want to gag.

"You caught my attention last night, before Aaron interrupted and ruined our fun," I tell him coyly, all the while knowing that I'm playing a dangerous game. "I want to see you again."