

Bad Love 21

Chapter 21

LEAH

Wolves don't beg.

They don't grovel or back down,

A pack's value comes from its strength.

I tilt my chin up.

I may be on my knees, but it doesn't make me weak.

My will is strong. So is my willingness to fix this mess I've made.

1/4

If Aaron won't be reasonable then I will rely on the mercy of this Council.

"Ma'am Karolina, are we not all wolves?" I say.

Her lips purse. It's a not so subtle reminder that everyone here is a wolf-except me.

"Our numbers are low," I press on. "Our strength is tied to our unity as a species. There must be justice, yes, but also mercy

and understanding so that every member of every pack might thrive. So that we can prosper as a species."

She inclines her head encouraging me to continue.

I don't have much time left and maybe in making this sacrifice, I can give my life greater purpose and meaning. I'm dying. I can't have children. I have no close friends or family.

"For this reason-for the betterment of our collective packs-1, Leah Roberts Rathborn would make one request."

"Go ahead," Council member Karolina tells me.

"I offer myself as tribute in place of my father."

"Over my dead body!" Aaron screams.

AARON

Leah gasps.

"What the hell are you doing?" I ask her.

She stares at the Council. "Alpha Aaron is a good man, and, of

course, he would want to shield me. But I stand by my vow. Please accept me as tribute in my father's stead, and I beg you to show my father mercy." Her gaze cuts to mine. "As

my husband can attest, I sometimes make mistakes with accounting."

Ah, there it is.

3/4

She's chosen wisely. Acknowledging I'm her husband and setting aside whatever stupid ideas of divorce she may have been harboring.

Something dark and possessive washes over me upon seeing her on her knees.

Upon hearing her choose me.

I want to twist my hands in her hair and hold her there.

I want to sink my teeth into her flesh and mark her skin so that everyone in this room-in this world-will know she belongs to

1.

Not that I'll ever do such a thing.

No woman will ever be more than a partner in name only.

My father nearly led us to ruin with his obsession with my mother. A mating bond is nothing more than a liability. A

4/4

physical and mental chain that brings only hardship and suffering.

I grab Leah's arm and move to lift her up, but she wrenches her arm away from me.

She stays there on her knees and to see her laid so low, it has everyone in the room looking around nervously.

Several pack Alphas that I do business with are amused,

others are embarrassed by Leah's actions.

"Get up," I tell her.

"Promise me--"

"You first," I cut her off.

"You have my word. I'll do anything, Aaron."

Those are dangerous words to say to a man like me...

Chapter 22

LEAH

The rest of the meeting is a blur.

Aaron hauls me to my feet and starts talking over the noise in the room about 'personally conducting an investigation.' And then, out of deference to me, he offered to pay my father's bad debt so that the Regional Council would not be impacted

while he sorted through matters.

Which, of course, made everyone think he was some kind of savior.

But could you really praise a firefighter for saving a burning building if he was the one who started the fire in the first

place?

No. Of course not.

And what Aaron did is criminal and gaslighting and all kinds of twisted.

But it isn't just Aaron who came out of the meeting smelling like roses.

I made a good impression too, apparently. I struck a chord with some of the Elders. And they've granted my father a

reprieve because of it.

2/5

In the old days, loyalty was most prized because it held packs together. At least a few of the council members appreciated my display of loyalty and my willingness to sacrifice myself for my family.

In the time of the Elders, matters of treachery or broken laws would be handled internally.

They'd never turn a wolf over to humans. Not willingly,
anyway.

It's not the result I was hoping for but I've bought my father
time, and that has to count for something.

It's more than I can say for me.

I'm seething as Aaron keeps his hand on my arm and brings me out of the building to the car. He opens
the door, physically lifts me into the backseat and fastens my seatbelt before
closing the door ever so gently.

It's the kind of intentionally gentle gesture that lets me know
he wants to slam it.

He climbs in from the opposite side, slides across the bench
seat until he's sitting next to me and then barks, "Drive!"

3/5

It's not William but Cedric at the wheel this time, and I wonder what that's about. Typically, Aaron
doesn't go anywhere without James or William, so it's weird not to see one of them
in the vehicle with me.

Our two other vehicles are nowhere to be seen.

Instead of turning left Aaron instructs the driver to go right.

"Where are we going?" I ask.

He purses his lips bemusedly.

Right. I said I'd do anything. I promised. Hoping he'd save my
dad.

I guess that extends to going wherever he wants to go and not asking too many questions.

"All of this could have been avoided," he says, "If you'd trusted
me."

Now it's my turn to make a face. I stare at him for a few
seconds. "Oh. You're serious."

"Of course, I am."

4/5

"I'm supposed to trust you... the man who runs around with another she-wolf and rubs it in my face. The man who locks me in a room with no food for a week. The man who set me up to be convicted of embezzling-only to pin it on my father." I scoff. "You do realize, if my father does have to testify in court, he'll probably still end up getting me indicted."

Aaron tenses.

"You've lied, tricked and imprisoned me... but I am the one with trust issues." I shake my head. "Holy shit, you must be joking."

Aaron's eyes are gold. His hands flex and I see the ripple of his beast along his forearms, a sign that he's a hair's breadth away from shifting.

This wolf has impeccable control.

Well, most of the time.

Just not when it comes to me.

We drive for nearly an hour before he instructs Cedric to pull over.

"Move up front," he says.

I slowly get out of the vehicle. We are in the middle of nowhere. A good hundred miles or more from any major city.

Cedric gets out of the car and starts walking in the opposite direction. Aaron slides behind the wheel and drives away.

We're a long way from the packlands.

Aaron drives for another three hours. When he pulls off onto an unmarked road and starts up a steep incline, I kind of start to worry.

I'm alone with this Alpha.

In some foreign territory.

He's furious with me for the things I've done and said tonight.

"Aaron, where are you taking me?"

His smile has a dark edge to it. "You'll see soon enough..."

Chapter 23

The road winds back and forth as we gain elevation. The mountain is steep enough to ski and it's heavily wooded. The headlights cast shadows through the pines and fir.

I've never been here before.

I wonder if Aaron has.

He brings the vehicle to the mountain top and parks. "Get out,"

he tells me.

slowly unbuckle my belt. It's significantly colder here than where we'd been and I didn't think to bring a coat. I don't have my medications. My phone's about to die.

This is the type of deserted stretch of forest where you'd go hunting for the weekend.

Or where you'd bury a body.

After the things I've said tonight, I have to wonder why Aaron has brought me here.

In a battle of strength against this wolf, there would be no contest.

2/4

"Come on," he says quietly. "It's this way."

He grabs a big duffel bag from the back of the SUV and then walks through the dark to the edge of the mountain top.

I can't see with the same precision he does. And the gold flash of his wolf's eyes tells me his night vision is easily ten times better than mine. I let him lead the way.

An owl calls and there's a low hum of different insects. Gravel or stones crunch as we walk, so this roadway is maintained in some way.

Again I want to ask where we're going and more importantly, why. But this wolf won't reveal anything he isn't ready to and there is no point in arguing over it.

I just have to hope that I'm not walking to my own grave.

That would be the ultimate coup, though, wouldn't it?

Aaron kills me, pins it on my father or my pack in some way.

Hmm.

I slide on some uneven stretch of ground and in a flash, he has my arm and he's holding me in place.

"I, uh, I'm okay."

He grunts and keeps walking.

3/4

I glance up as the clouds lift, and moonlight floods this area, showing too many stars overhead to count and a valley below

that's bisected by a curving stretch of river.

"It's beautiful."

"It is," he agrees.

I hadn't intended to say that out loud.

Perhaps a mile or so down the trail, there is a flash of reflection. As my eyes adapt more, I see the straight lines of a cabin, and more glints of the moonlight on glass windows.

"Is that where we're going?"

Aaron nods and picks up the pace.

He hefts the giant bag a bit higher on his back. There's a clang and thump, sounds I'd associate with heavy objects.

I gulp.

Bad Love: An Alpha's Regret

We make it to the cabin without any incident.

Which probably sounds silly, but it's a win in my book.

I breathe a deep sigh of relief.

"Worried about falling off the trail?" he asks.

"Amongst other things."

He snickers.

"Wait here," he tells me. "Let me check out the place first."

I'm pretty sure if there was some danger, he would've sensed

it already. Also, this is Alpha Aaron Rathborn, there isn't

anything on this earth that he fears. And I know he isn't going inside to dust the place or freshen up.

But I dutifully stand outside, shivering and waiting.

After a few minutes, he reappears.

Chapter 24

2/5

When I go in, I see that he has started a fire in the hearth and he's laid out a thick blanket on the floor in front of it.

The smell of woodsmoke is both soothing and familiar.

The cabin has a bed against the opposite wall. A loft with another sleeping area and what appear to be closets on either side. Ahead of me is a kitchen. There's one couch and a table for eating.

"No running water, no bathroom. Is this a hunting camp?"

"Mostly. There's a shower and bathroom through that door.

He points to the left. It's an addition that you can't see from here."

I'll take his word for it.

"So, Aaron. Why are we here?"

His eyes are gold again and he stalks me.

But there is nowhere to run and I'm honestly more scared of what will happen if I do.

"You pledged yourself to me, or did you forget?" he says.

"We pledged ourselves to each other. Years ago. When we married."

He grunts.

"I haven't forgotten those vows, have you?"

"Not for a minute."

3/5

He holds my gaze and I want to believe him. I want to think that he hasn't impregnated some other woman. But how can I

trust this man?

He is ruthless.

He will do anything it takes to secure the wellbeing of his pack.

From killing to protect his lands. To framing an innocent-well, mostly innocent-man.

He pulls his shirt over his head.

Of all the outcomes I was anticipating-murder, punishment,
abandonment-this wasn't what I expected.

"Uhhh."

Aaron laughs.

We don't have much humor between us, at least not in recent
years, so instead of lightening the mood, his laughter makes

Chapter 24

me more nervous.

"You've seen me without clothes a few times before, Leah."

Understatement.

4/5

"Yes," I clear my throat. "I guess I was expecting us to argue or talk, not to, uhh..."

His hands go to his pants and he steps out of those.

I'm angry and hurt and I want to cut into him about what he's

done to my father, but the long drive sucked a lot of the fight out of me, and he clearly has something
altogether different on his mind.

I hold my breath as he comes close.

Naked, he walks right past me and folds his clothes. He places them on the couch.

"There's food in the bag," he tells me. "A few books."

My heart is pounding. I wonder if he can hear it.

His eyes glow in the firelight and the reflections of the flames.

dance along his skin.

"You promised to do whatever I wanted, yes?"

I "So eat. Sleep."

"That's it?"

5/5

Now he invades my space. His huge body crowding mine, his
hands on my hips. "For now..."

Chapter 25

I shift in the center of the cabin, let my wolf brush by Leah, and then I head into the valley at a full-out run.

I'm not sure even the miles I roam tonight will be enough. I may have to hunt.

My wolf is nearly feral-he's angry and volatile. A tangle of rage and passion. If I stayed in my human form, I would've done something dumb.

Like killing Leah's father.

Or taking out some of my anger on her, for what she'd done.

But most of my anger-the real depth of my rage- is aimed only at myself.

I forced us into this situation.

I called Leah's bluff and left her with no recourse other than to sell herself.

And while I wanted my wife's loyalty, no, I demanded it, there is no real bond or loyalty at all, if it is coerced.

I hate that we have come to this.

And I don't see any way to fix it.

Maybe I should've let her go and just let the chips fall where they will.

Her father's pack is vast and powerful, but in the last decade, my Alpha powers have surpassed his. Where we have thrived

and prepared, Leah's old pack has grown lax. Instead of using the peace to build, they've partied and squandered.

They've weakened their financial holdings-something I've taken advantage of.

Where once Robert had been a fierce opponent, he'd begun to spiral in the wake of his Luna's death. Sometimes, I think that's why he was so quick to get rid of Leah, so he wouldn't

have to see the disappointment in her eyes. Because Roberts didn't just drown his sorrows or party to forget, his grief pushed him out of control.

All these years later, he's a fraction of what he once was.

I've no doubt I could best Alpha Roberts one-on-one.

I should've challenged him and been done with it.

Instead of retreating here, with Leah, to let my temper cool, so I don't explode.

Even now, my men are relaying one of my messages to Leah's

father. If he wants to survive, if he wants to ensure that he

has a pack to come back to, then he'll shut his mouth, take his punishment like an Alpha, and leave Leah the fuck alone.

My wolf snarls viciously, pushing me to a corner of my mind,

where my thoughts are relegated to more immediate things.

The scent trail of a doe. Tracks from a rabbit, a squirrel.

The sounds of the river trickling over smooth stones.

The presence of Leah, waiting in that one-room cabin. Alone.

I know what my wolf wants.

He's wanted it from the first moment I brought the girl home.

But I won't give into my baser urges.

I won't bind her to me. Well, not in the true ways of our species.

So I run.

4/5 Hard and fast, up the side of the mountain until my mouth hangs open, my muscles ache, and air is burning cold in my

lungs.

It's several hours before I return.

I haven't gone far. I kept close enough that I could hear if the engine started or if she tried to leave. Not that I think she

would. She keeps her word.

Mostly.

Except when she's evading my men and sneaking off packlands.

Or when she's conspiring with her father and handing him over all her money.

And just why exactly would she do that?

Why would she give him everything?

My wolf grumbles and swings its huge body back in the direction of the camp.

If I start asking questions, I'll have to be prepared to answer some too.

But that won't work.

Because I can never tell Leah why I won't mate her.

The secrets I carry would ruin us both.

Chapter 26

LEAH

I feel something warm and soft beside me.

I roll slightly and open my eyes.

"You again," I grumble.

But I smile.

Aaron's terrifying wolf is basically a big puppy.

He gives a reprimanding growl then nudges me more. I lift my arm so he can lay beside me, and then I let my arm drape over his body, so I'm holding him.

I'm on the floor in front of the fireplace. Not too near that the heat is overwhelming but not so far that the drafts from the windows and door make it too cold.

Although with Aaron here now, I don't have to worry about that.

His wolf is so warm, and the big beast does like to cuddle.

It's a cop out-maybe even for both of us-but in his true form, I don't have to hate him, and Aaron doesn't have to pretend to

keep his distance.

We can have moments like this.

No talking. No fighting. Just close.

I drift back to sleep, wishing I could stay here forever.

In the morning, I'm warm. My skin is overly hot and I try to move away but can't.

I go to shift my legs, and realize one of them is anchored over Aaron's hip.

He's awake.

Watching me.

Growing harder by the second where he's pressed against the junction of my thighs.

I gasp.

His mouth slants over mine, his hands hold my face.

My first instinct is to fight. To say no.

Aaron won't force me.

But I made my choice in that Council chamber.

So I close my eyes and kiss him back.

Part of me hates myself. Part of me doesn't care and just craves this man's touch.

I don't know what this says about me.

Then there's no more room for thought.

Just touch and taste and the incredible friction of two bodies fighting to become one.

My pants and panties are gone, and that's no small feat considering the ridiculous padded boot on my ankle. I feel the clasp release on my bra and then that and my shirt are being drawn over my head.

And the whole time he keeps kissing me. Soft kisses. Teasing kisses. His lips are full and his tongue mimics what our bodies long to do.

His hands are in motion, trailing from my breasts to my hips and back again, each time dipping closer to that junction at the center of my thighs.

It makes me hot and wet.

Until despite my efforts not to move, my hips rock against his.

He growls against my mouth.

In the next instant, he rolls to his back, taking me with him until I straddle him. I sit up straight and rub along his thick, hard length.

The hiss of his breath pleases me.

What pleases me more is that he lets me set the pace. That I'm the one on top. Controlling this.

I've had no control over my life.

But in this, we are equal.

Even when he dominates, it's because it brings me pleasure and I encourage it.

His stomach ripples, the muscles in his arms and chest flex as he grabs my hips. His hands grip the sides of my ass and the thick part of my thighs. He squeezes. Rolls my hips against him.

Oh gods, that is good.

On the next roll, I lift up so the tip of him angles in.

Aaron groans.

1.4

I keep him there, riding only the first inch or two, letting the thick top of his co ck notch inside my body before dragging it out again.

He swears beneath his breath, but doesn't fight me.

I keep up the motion, teasing him, teasing myself, until my legs shake.

He takes that as his cue to thrust upward. The long huge length of him fills me. I shudder and collapse against his chest.

Aaron props me back up and grabs my hips, he rocks me once, twice, and then I find my own motion, where the top of my s*x and that exquisite spot inside are rubbed against him with each stroke.

He makes some rumbling sound of approval and devotes himself to my nipples.

He pulls my hair out of its tie because he prefers it down.

I slow my movements, savoring each little tremor as it builds.

My hands are on his shoulders. His dark eyes hold mine. He looks so different when we are joined like this. So real and carefree and caring.

It's why I was always willing to and wanting.

Because s*x with this Alpha is the only time he lets his guard down. And when he does, it's like I get to see a whole other side

of him.

He arches up to kiss me, his tongue thrusting in rhythm with his hips and I explode, clamping around him in pulses of ecstasy that don't want to let go.

The org*sm rolls through my body, and Aaron doesn't break the rhythm, he steadily pumps and my body keeps clenching and shuddering.

When I collapse boneless against him, he chuckles.

I smile against his chest. Then he rolls me over and props me up on my knees.

I glance over my shoulder at him as he slides in again..

In this position, Aaron goes impossibly deep, and he leans down to kiss my shoulder before shattering all of my self control.

He drags my hair back in one fist, making me arch my back and allowing him to go deeper still.

Da mn it, what this man can do to me.

I have so many reasons to resent him. But it's like my body doesn't get the memo. The way he grabs my ass turns me on. The look in his dark eyes, that flash to gold and then back again, even the sounds he makes...they excite me.

I want this man.

"Stop thinking," he tells me.

Then he slaps my ass, one, twice, three times, alternating sides, before he massages the same spots. The sensation pushes me

over.

He rides me through it.

And the next orgasm and the one after that.

"You promised me anything," he reminds me.

His thumb slides up the seam of my ass and I freeze.

Chapter 27

I make some sound.

It's not a yes or a no or even coherent I don't think.

"This ass is mine, Leah."

My brows draw together. Does he mean...

I sneak a quick glance back at him.

He nods.

I gulp.

I, uh, well, I like everything we do, but that's something we haven't tried.

"What if I don't like it?" I whisper.

He grins. "I'll make sure you do."

But he doesn't pull out or go there, he keeps thrusting. And maybe it's the dirty talk or the anticipation of what he's about to do, but I start to come.

Aaron's thumb presses just a little more and I feel it against my inner walls and the ridges of his own cock where he's buried inside me.

I clamp down hard around him, my inner muscles pulsing and clenching.

The fact that I'm so turned on sends him over the edge too.

He comes with a roar.

My breasts rub against the blanket and my body continues to pulse. It's so intense, my eyes burn.

What this wolf does to me... I don't think it can get better, and yet somehow, each time, it does.

I feel Aaron releasing inside me, and as he fills me, he leans over my body to kiss my neck and mouth.

When he collapses beside me and drags me back against him, I relish the closeness for a moment, then I force myself to stand

and to move away to get dressed.

up

He watches me warily.

I hate to get up after s*x. It's like my body goes into shutdown mode. The best sleep I ever have is after a night with Aaron, and instead I'm rushing off right now.

I drag on my shirt and pants.

Only there is nowhere to go.

I slowly spin around to face him.

"You going somewhere

SKS.

I shrug.

"You in a rush?"

I look around the cabin for a distraction.

"We can talk about it," he says quietly.

But what is he referring to—the council, Jessica, my cancer? He doesn't know about those things. And I have no intention of telling him.

I bite my lip and shake my head.

He hates that I shut him out.

And maybe that's why he brought me here, thinking a new environment with just the two of us would make me confide in him.

But I can't. I won't.

I couldn't before. And after what he did tonight to my father...

I'm done.

Panic rises in my body, it has me breathing fast and fighting tears I can't control.

Instead of the joy I'd normally feel, I find myself losing hope.

I can't have children.

I can't grow old.

I don't have a wolf.

I'm...dying.

My pack is a mess and my father...

His eyes search mine like he can see into my soul.

Maybe he can.

As an Alpha, his powers are strong and his senses so acute.

He stands and stretches. "Why don't you go and freshen up. I'll wash up out here and make breakfast."

He's letting me off the hook.

I'm a second away from a panic attack, and rather than press his advantage, he lets me go. Part of me wants to say thank you, but I don't.

I head in the direction of the one door at the left side of the kitchen.

I'm not sure what kind of rig this place has for a shower, but I'll make it work.

If nothing else, I'll just have a few minutes alone to get my emotions back under control. Because I can't afford to lose it in

front of him. I can't.

Maybe I'm afraid that finally saying the truth aloud to him will change everything.

And why do I even care about these things when everything between us is so f**ked up? Tears are leaking from the corners of my eyes, but I don't make a sound.

I reach the bathroom door and open it.

A phone starts ringing loudly.

It's my ringtone.

Aaron grabs it and checks the screen. He growls. "What the hell, Leah!?"

Chapter 28

AARON

"Why the hell is he calling you now?" I demand.

Leah hurries over and grabs the phone from my hand. She looks almost relieved. "It's just Adam, Aaron. He is a doctor. He's only checking up on me."

“Why all of a sudden?”

She blanches like she’s hiding something. We have doctors and physicians aligned with my pack and there is no cause for her to be seeking out Adam. Unless.....

“How long have you been involved with him?” I growl.

“What? It’s not like that. I’m not seeing Adam or cheating or whatever you’re implying.”

“He’s calling your phone. He showed up at my home-twice. You want to explain why he has suddenly taken interest in your well-being? And can you honestly say that he isn’t after you, or encouraging you to leave me?”

She bites her lip.

That’s what I thought. I’m going to rip Adam’s arm off.

And I’m going to make sure he can’t come within an inch of Leah again.

Leah shakes her head. “You resent that there is a person that actually cares about me and worries about me. You want to say that I’m being unfaithful. What about you, huh? What about Jessica!?”

I scoff. “This isn’t about Jessica. What aren’t you telling me, Leah?”

“Nothing.”

The phone rings again. I see Adam’s name on the screen. “Answer the call.”

“No.” She drops Adam into voicemail.

“You do realize, I can call him myself.”

She shrugs. “And what will that accomplish? He has no loyalty to you, He isn’t beholden to answer your questions. Even if there was some wolf code-which there isn’t since our packs hate each other-there is still a little thing called Doctor-Patient Confidentiality,”

So I am on the right track, she is hiding something and it ties to her health.

“Leah, I don’t want to fight. Just talk to me.”

Her big eyes fill with uncertainty.

“You are my wife. Let me be a husband to you.”

It’s the closest thing to a declaration I’ve ever made.

She sucks in a deep breath. “You don’t mean that.”

I step closer to her. “What if I did?”

She’s beautiful, this woman. Strong and fierce. Selfless.

She’s mine.

And I'm not about to let some other male take her from me.

I run my hand down the side of her face and tip up her chin. "Look at me."

She does. Her eyes search mine desperately.

"What if things were different between us, would you want that?"

Her eyes

brim with tears. "It's all I ever wanted, Aaron."

I think maybe, I've always known that.

But be it her pride or mine, we've never talked about these things.

She's never given me the words, and it compels

you love me, Leah?"

me to ask: "Do

Chapter 29

Before she can answer, her phone starts ringing again. "Da mn it. If that's Adam again..."

"It's not him."

She holds up the phone so I can see it. She swipes to answer.

"Dad?" she says.

"Leeeah." His voice is muffled and slurred.

He's drunk.

For wolves, that is an almost impossible feat.

Our metabolisms burn too high for something like alcohol to take root in our systems. If Leah's dad is this messed up, he must've gone on a real bender.

"Sorry f-for what I did."

Leah frowns. "Dad, you don't need to apologize."

Actually he does.

In fact, I had my men, both teams that came to the Council meeting, sync up with Leah's dear old deadbeat dad, to make sure he knew to make things right with his daughter.

gave

Starting with keeping his f**king mouth shut about who him any stock advice and continuing through with owning up to his own financial failings.

Bottom-line, I wouldn't have been able to send him Regional Council money if he didn't spend a solid week hounding his daughter to steal from me.

Technically, she wasn't stealing and the money was hers, but her ol' man didn't know that. If he hadn't been so desperate in the first place, my plan never would have been able to take shape.

"With those funds frozen," he tells her. "Roberts lands will go into foreclosure. The corporation is in crisis..."

I've seen this coming. It's why I've been buying up Roberts stock and the tax liens.

Leah wasn't wrong, her dad's pack really is ripe for the picking.

It's sad that he mismanaged things so horribly. But that's his problem not hers.

Leah bites her lower lip. "Dad, we'll figure it out. It is going to be okay."

"N-no, it won't. Not this time."

I hear him choking on tears through the phone.

"It would've been better if the mate bond took me when your

mother died," he says. "But I'm going to see her now. And when I'm gone, that will make sure they can't trace anything back to you."

"Dad? Dad, what are you saying?"

"I should've been a better father for you."

"You are a good father. And a great Alpha."

He makes another choking sound.

"Dad, where are you?"

He doesn't answer her and though I'm listening intently, there aren't any telltale cues for me to place where he is or how I might intervene in this situation. My phone is across the room on the kitchen counter. I can call my men—

"Dad!"

"Take care of your brother," he says.

I hear a familiar click.

The sound of a bullet entering the chamber.

Chapter 30

"Dad!!!"

The gunshot is so loud, Leah throws the phone away from her ear.

Realizing what she did, she scrambles across the room and grabs it off the floor. “Dad! Daddy!!!”

She’s screaming and wailing.

But there’s no point.

He’s dead. We both know it.

She sobs on the ground.

I’m not in shock. I can’t even say I’m all that surprised. Alpha Roberts has been declining for a decade.

Leah’s breathing begins to shudder, she’s gasping like she’s going into shock, and the way her heart is pounding, this is more than just an anxiety attack.

“Take it easy,” I tell her. “Just breathe.”

She’s going to pass out.

Sweat glistens on her forehead and tears flow down her face.

She sobs, her hand wrapped around the phone, her fingers white and the bones visible with as hard as she’s gripping it.

“Daddy!”

It’s the cries of a daughter mourning her father, of the little girl who was dropped into my possession, abandoned. She didn’t cry then, but she does now.

She’s inconsolable.

I stand here in the small cabin, a few feet from her. But I might as well be a million miles away. She’s lost to her grief.

I’m helpless to do anything.

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LEAH

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The room is silent. There’s just my crying and loud breathing.

Aaron doesn't move.

I'm filled with despair. With an almost detached sense of disbelief.

I stare at the phone.

That really didn't just happen.

My father is home and he's fine.

My hands are shaking as I try to check the call log.

I hit send on Dad's name. I call. And call again when no one answers.

Still nothing.

The shaking in my hands seems to progress into my body. I can't catch my breath, and I'm having trouble thinking clearly.

This can't be happening.

This can't be happening.

"Daddy!"

I dial again and scream.

When it goes to voicemail, I try to call my brother but my fingers don't seem to work no matter how hard I stab at the screen.

Everything is blurry.

Something big moves into my line of vision.

By shape and smell, I know it's Aaron.

His big hands hold my shoulders.

"No! No! Let me go!"

He releases me immediately, and I scramble backwards, the motion jarring my ankle and I yelp.

I keep edging away from him. Away from everything.

"Leah, I need you to calm down. You're going into shock. Sit down, honey."

Honey? Honey?

Now, he wants to treat me well and use terms of endearment? Now he wants to act like he cares and make a mockery of the fact that it's all his fault that we are here.

"Stay away from me!" I scream. "Don't you touch me!"

I blink through my tears.

Aaron doesn't move. His dark eyes are clear.

"You did this! You're the reason my dad-"

I can't say the words. And this all must be one big mistake, right? It can't be real.

I'm supposed to die. Not my father.

Aaron holds his arms out. "Breathe, Leah. Your heart is beating too fast."

The room starts to spin. There are bursts of color at the corners of my periphery.

All of a sudden I start to wretch. My stomach heaves and I cough and gag. I don't vomit, but I do spit up.

I spit blood all over the carpet.