

Bad Love 211

Chapter 211

THREE MONTHS AGO

AARON

A tray of food appears at my elbow, and I blearily glance up at James, who stares down at me with the same sad, sympathetic expression everyone gives me these days.

"When was the last time you slept properly?" James asks. "You look like s hit."

I try to remember when I got anything more than a short doze in between dealing with the packs, the businesses and spending every other waiting moment coming back to Leah's bedside over and over again.

My mate.

And our son, growing in her belly, getting bigger and stronger everyday.

I reach over and lightly place my hand on her swollen belly, wishing for the millionth time that Leah could be awake to witness the miracle going on within her beautiful body.

up.

We don't even know if she will wake up.

I've started thinking that night in the warehouse, with Leah already being dead, maybe her soul left her body, and when I claimed her and unbound her wolf, that was enough to keep her body alive, but the Leah I know and love is gone from this world.

I don't know what I'm supposed to do without her.

I don't know how I'm meant to raise our son without her.

I hate that she's existing in this kind of half-life and wish it would end, wonder if maybe when the baby is born, we shouldn't do the kinder thing in taking her off all the machines and letting her go.

But hope that one day she'll open her eyes and smile up at me stubbornly clings on inside my heart and soul

"I don't remember," I tell James, answering his question about when I last slept properly.

James starts to answer-probably going to tell me to go to bed for the millionth time-but an alarm starts up in the machines monitoring Leah.

my feet as Adam rushes in.

"What's happening?" I demand, fearful of what this could mean.

At first, Adam also seems to be in a panic, but then I see the apprehension change to something else.

He grins at me as he starts making adjustments to the machine and switches off the alarm.

"Leah is having contractions," Adam says, and for a second, my tired mind doesn't connect all the dots.

"You mean-" I stutter out.

Adam nods. "Leah is going into labor."

I'm both excited and utterly terrified all in the same instance.

"But it's too early! She's only seven and a half months!"

Adam shrugs. "It's not ideal, but the baby is thirty-one weeks, he can survive in the NICU. I've given her some doses of steroids to make sure the baby's lungs are more fully developed, to increase his chance of survival. We knew this

was a probability, Aaron. It's rare for women in comas to successfully carry pregnancies to term. Quite frankly, we're lucky she made it this far."

Okay, so my unconscious wife is in labor.

My son is about to enter the world.

"What do we do?" I ask Adam.

"We need to transfer her to my hospital for a start. They're expecting us. A medivac helicopter can be here within twenty minutes."

Adam comes over and stops in front of me.

"You're about to become a father, Alpha Rathborn. Congratulations." Chapter 212

PRESENT DAY

The hours since I left Leah sleeping in our bed have dragged. I didn't want to leave her, but there are loose ends I need to tie up and I still haven't completely figured out how I'm going to make everything work.

I'm determined, if nothing else.

The door across the room opens and Lillian steps out.

When I see her walking toward me, I can't help but smile, and my day improves by about a million percent.

I hold out my arms, and she passes Ethan to me.

My son.

He's just woken up from a nap, so he's all smiles and baby gurgles, his little legs kicking and his arms waving excitedly in the air.

When everything else in this world feels terrible, all I have to do is look at him and remember why I'm putting myself-and my mate-through hell.

I know Leah is going to be hurt and angry when she discovers the truth.

The fact that our son survived was never a truth I planned to keep from her at all, and I know with each passing day, the lie becomes bigger and more terrible for all involved.

But I hope once she comes to understand everything, she'll agree with what I did.

Maybe even be grateful for it.

Lillian goes to make Ethan a bottle, and feeding him is one of my favorite things to do.

The way he stares up at me with those big eyes-identical to his mother-I fall in love with him over and over again.

Right now, this world is a dangerous place for all of us, but I'm getting closer to ending the threat once and for all.

Being a father has put so many things into different perspectives.

It's the most amazing thing I could have ever imagined.

And after last night with Leah, I'm even starting to think about the possibility of Ethan having little brothers or sisters.

Maybe even sometime soon.

But I refuse to allow my children to live under a cloud of threat.

I have the power of three Alphas now.

Whoever has been striking against me has no idea of the wrath they've ignited in my soul.

I will take down my enemies.

Even if I have to start a war and destroy the Council to do it. Chapter 213

LEAH

The kind of pain and sense of betrayal I've never felt in my entire life overcomes my whole body in a devastating wave and it's like I completely lose it.

I grab onto Adam's computer and wrench it off the desk, throwing it into the opposite wall where it smashes to pieces and leaves a dent in the drywall. After that, I become a whirlwind of destruction, ripping and tearing and destroying anything I can get my hands on.

"Leah!" Adam has arrived in the doorway and is staring at me with shock and confusion. "What the hell has gotten into you?"

I'm so upset, I can't even answer him, the only thing that comes out is a sound that's part pain, part growl. My wolf is close to bursting out, and her agony is just as potent as mine.

I don't know what to say to Adam.

He injected me with my father's blood without telling me.

He's been keeping track of me for years.

He knew my baby was born and kept the truth from me.

He's betrayed me and invaded my privacy and right now, I don't know how I'm ever going to look at him again without feeling the pain of those betrayals, let alone ever forgive him.

I realize I'm partially shifted, barely keeping control of my wolf. She wants to tear the world apart...she wants us to hurt

Adam.

And while yes, he holds some responsibility, I can't overlook that the decision to hide the truth about my son from me... that would've come from my baby's father. I let out a scream that's half howl, releasing some of the pain both myself and my wolf are feeling.

Just when I think maybe my wolf is going to burst out and shred anyone in sight regardless of whether they deserve it or not, someone arrives, shouting my name and pulling me back from destroying more of the equipment in the office that hasn't already been trashed.

I turn with a snarl, however I pull back at the last second when

I see it's James and he's looking kind of freaked out, like he thinks I've gone rogue or something.

"Leah," he says, as I wrench out of his hold, this terrible pain still bubbling like acid inside me.

Who knows, maybe I am on the verge of completely losing it and going rogue.

But could anyone blame me if I did after all the truths I just found out?

James holds up his hands.

"Leah, just calm down and tell me what's wrong," he says in a low, soothing voice.

But nothing he can say or do is going to make me feel better.

I'm breaking apart.

I don't know how I'm supposed to deal with a grief this deep and this vast.

In that moment, I want Aaron so badly, my entire body hurts and I can't breathe.

Oh god, I can't breathe.

I collapse to my knees, gasping, the grief pushing up and tearing at my lungs like it's going to kill me.

James rushes over, but when he tries to touch me, I flinch away from him, making a sound like a

wounded animal.

"Leah," he whispers, sounding stricken. "Please, tell me how I can help you. You're scaring me."

"My baby," is all I can force out through a raw throat.

Saying the words snaps the last thread of anything reasonable or rational I'm holding onto.

My wolf takes over, drawing my consciousness back and down to protect me.

Once I've shifted, she lets out a long, mournful howl that makes James wince and look away.

But that's the last thing I'm aware of as my wolf takes off and bounds out of the medical annex, and I let my sense of self float away into oblivion. Chapter 214

I wake up again as I'm shifting back. I can feel that my wolf is exhausted, and I think maybe she ran and ran and ran until she couldn't run anymore.

Tears immediately wet my eyes, and I blink at the streaks of lavender and pink painting the sky with dawn.

"Leah?"

I roll over to see James a few steps away. He's panting and looks completely wiped out. Did he chase us the whole night?

For a split second I feel bad, but then everything comes flooding back and it eclipses anything else I might have felt in that moment.

I've never felt so lost and broken, and all my wolf wants is her mate.

All I want is Aaron.

And even though I know nothing is ever going to ease the grief or fill the hole left in the very center of my being over losing my baby, at least being in Aaron's arms will bring me a small measure of comfort. James closes the distance between us and I let him pull me into an embrace.

It doesn't really help, but it also doesn't make me feel worse.

"Leah, what happened?" James whispers to me.

I shiver, though it's not really because it's a cold morning.

It's the horror of everything.

The cold is radiating deep from within my soul, and I think maybe I won't feel warm ever again.

"I saw Adam's notes, his file. He's been stalking me, keeping all these notes and records on me for years. And for some reason, he injected me with my father's blood the same day Brian took me into the woods to steal my family's Alpha powers. And my baby-" I can't say anything else as I start sobbing, and James curses.

"I had no idea Adam was doing any of that, and I'm sure Aaron doesn't either, otherwise Adam would have already answered for it," James says, a note of anger in his voice that tells me Adam will definitely still answer for it.

But I think that's something I need to deal with myself.

I don't need James or Aaron fighting my battles-or dealing with betrayals of friendship-for me.

"As for your baby, I'm sorry, Leah. Especially that we kept the truth from you. But believe me when I say, no one wanted you to have to bear this pain," he says, and his voice is rough, like he's trying not to cry himself.

"What happened to him?" I manage to hiccup out.

"He was born early, but healthy," James starts in a halting voice, and I can tell he wishes he didn't have

to be the one to tell me this. "We had you both in hospital then, because the baby needed to be in the NICU and Aaron didn't want to have to split his time between you both. He insisted on keeping you both close and in the same place. Then..."

James pauses, takes a breath, and it's like he's bracing himself. for the worst and for a second I wonder if I can really hear this, if I really want to know, or if it'll only make things worse than they already are.

However, before I can make a decision or say anything, James continues.

"There was an attack. We don't know who was behind it or why. At first, Aaron thought they were coming for him or even you. He never imagined they'd attack-"

"No," I moan, curling tighter on myself. "No, please, no-"

"I'm sorry, Leah," James can barely get the words out. "Nothing could be more evil than taking a new, innocent life, and I wish I could tell you we found out who was behind it and Aaron got his revenge. He's been searching ever since. He'll find whoever it was eventually, and they will pay. But since then..."

It all makes sense now.

Why Aaron isolated himself and has been doing everything remotely.

Why he doesn't want to be around me.

If he feels even a fraction of what I feel right now, then maybe seeing me reminds me of everything he lost. His failure to

protect the fragile, innocent life of our son.

But I need to see him.

I need to hold him and have him hold me in return.

I know he's probably punishing himself and I refuse to stand by and let him do it any longer.

This changes everything.

Now that I know the truth, I think we need each other more than ever. Chapter 215

I don't know how long James and I stay out in the forest, but the sun slowly moves across the sky overhead.

I'm in this weird state where I know once I get up

once I get up and go back to the mansion, life is going to come rushing back in and somehow I have to be fine.

I have the packs to oversee and businesses to run-countless people relying on me.

Yet somehow it's also like I'm holding onto the last threads of my child's life-the fact that he was born and breathed this world's air and we existed in some of the same moments that I'm never going to remember.

I wonder if Aaron ever brought him to see me.

To lay him next to me.

Curled my arm around his tiny body and rested my hand on his chest so I could feel his tiny, fragile heartbeat.

I may have touched my son, and I'll never remember it.

That seems like the biggest cruelty of all.

I need to see Aaron with a desperation that makes my entire body ache.

There are so many things I need to ask him.

And maybe he won't want to answer. Maybe it'll be opening

old wounds for him that he wants to keep covered up, but I have to hear him tell me about every moment of every day our

son was alive that I missed.

That's what eventually gets me to my feet-the driving desire to see Aaron.

And it's not only me, my wolf wants the comfort of her mate.

James and I both shift-its easier when navigating the forest-

and we start trotting back toward the Rathborn mansion.

It takes almost the rest of the day.

I arrive back to find James left orders for Adam to be held and watched until we got back.

I don't want to even look at him.

None of his actions make sense.

But I need to face up to him and deal with whatever he did.

He's still in the medical annex, under the watchful eye of

several of Aaron's highest-ranking wolves-the ones he hasn't got with him wherever he is, anyway.

"Leah!" he says, jumping up from the gurney he was sitting on as soon as he sees me. "Are you okay?"

I scoff in cynical amusement that he's asking me that.

"I don't know, Adam. You can probably tell me that, since apparently you've been monitoring me for years!

At this, Adam goes pale, while I hear James growling-low and threatening-from somewhere behind me.

The other wolves who were keeping an eye on Adam all start bristling.

I could step back right now, and I know these wolves would happily tear Adam apart for his transgressions against their Luna.

However, hold up one hand to keep the situation under control.

"Just tell me why, Adam."

His expression closes up. "You don't understand."

"No, I don't," I snap, crossing my arms. "So explain!"

Adam glances away from me. "There was so much more

going on than you ever realized. Your father. Liam. The Alpha power for the Roberts pack. Tobin-

Adam abruptly snaps his mouth shut, like he said something he didn't mean to.

"What about Tobin?" I demand.

Just how much does Adam know?

About the AI tech?

And whose side was he even on in all this?

"I think I've said more than enough," Adam says, crossing his arms, expression becoming mulish. "And it won't make a difference now anyway."

"So that's it?" I demand, now starting to feel angry that he won't even explain why or how he could betray our life-long friendship like that. "You're not even going to do me the decency of giving me an actual explanation?"

"Like I said, it won't make a difference," Adam repeats, avoiding my gaze.

"Fine," I snap.

Short of torturing him-which I don't have the stomach for-I can't make him tell me anything.

But that doesn't mean I'm powerless.

"I'm not Alpha any longer, so I don't have the power to banish you from the pack," I say, and Adam

finally looks back at me. There's this hint of hope in his gaze that makes me sick to my stomach. "Those records...I'm not sure how you got them. Or who you worked with here at Pack Raithborn to gain access to my blood." One she-wolf comes to mind-she'd been a thorn in my side since day one. But then there's also the fact that my blood watered the dead for a decade, poured out over the gravestones each time the blood debt was collected.

It could've been anyone.

"You don't want to tell me why or offer some explanation.

Which leaves me no choice... You need to leave, Adam. Go and

find another pack. Take my advice, and make sure it's one far

far from here. Because Aaron... when he finds out, he won't be so lenient. He'll take your life." Chapter

216

AARON

I head back to the Rathborn mansion, sad to be leaving Ethan, but I know he's in good hands with Lillian, who is the pack's main nanny.

I feel bad that the rest of the Rathborn pack is being denied her services right now, but there was another wolf Lillian has been training who was happy to step up and take Lillian's place while Lillian is on 'holidays.

The need to see Leah has been like a thorn in my skin for the past few hours.

I know much of it is driven by the desire of my wolf to see his mate, but a lot of it is also the simple fact that I've finally allowed myself to fully love Leah with everything that I am.

It's almost impossible to tell where my feelings as a man who loves Leah end, and the instincts of my wolf to be with his mate begin, so I don't even try.

The fact is, we both want Leah and her wolf, and that's all that matters.

I was wrong before, thinking I was better off keeping myself detached.

That I could somehow be with her and keep her at arm's length for our entire lives.

Thinking that I could resist falling for her.

From the day she was brought to my house, I knew there was something special about her.

It was an honor to watch her grow into the woman she's become today, despite all the challenges she faced, including my own indifference at times.

Now I can see I was living this half life, existing in the shadows, punishing Leah for my own insecurities and shortcomings.

I don't want to lie to her, or keep parts of myself hidden any longer.

But of course, I'm keeping the biggest secret-have spun the biggest lie-of my entire life, keeping the existence of Leah's son from her.

And I know how wrong it is, but everytime I think of how close I came to losing him during the attack at the hospital-

It's like my entire body gets jolted by a live wire.

I've never felt absolute body-numbing fear the way I did that day.

I never imagined this tiny person-my own flesh and blood-could rip my heart out of my chest and send me to the kinds of extremes I'd faced when my son's life had been in danger.

I refuse to ever feel that way again.

So until I get to the bottom of who is trying to kill me, and who orchestrated that attack on the hospital, the lie has to stand.

I'm already vulnerable enough with my mate and the love of my life walking around.
I'm doing everything in my power to protect Leah, but if someone got to her, and she let slip the truth our son was still alive-
Not that I think she ever would, at least not without getting pushed past the breaking point through some kind of torture.
However, Leah can't confess what she doesn't know.
And anyone who sees how she's grieving-with her heart on her sleeve-it helps sell the lie.
As I park my SUV and then climb out, I see Adam being escorted out of the mansion by a couple of my guys.
They're being less than gentle, and I can tell they're both p issed.
Plus, Adam looks like he threw down with an Alpha and got his ass handed to him.
"What's going on?" I ask my guys as they march Adam to his car and then practically shove him inside of it.
"Luna Leah has banished Adam for his transgressions against her."
My blood immediately boils, and I don't know whether
Adam sees the look on my face, or it's just a coincidence, but suddenly his sedan shoots into motion, tires spinning as he leaves the circular part of the drive directly in front of the mansion and careens off down the driveway.
I debate going after him, but if something has happened to Leah, then I need to see her right away.
Depending on what's happened, I can always track down Adam later if need be.
And kill him for whatever he did that was bad enough, my wife need to banish her oldest friend.

Chapter 217

I use my heightened sense of hearing as I step through the front door of the mansion, picking up the low tones of James and Leah speaking in one of the sitting rooms.
Leah sounds upset and my steps quicken as I rush through the house to find her.
As soon as I walk into the doorway, Leah looks up.
Her hair is a mess, her eyes are red-rimmed and she's pale.
She looks terrible, but at the same time, so achingly beautiful.
But, she'll always be beautiful to me and my wolf, no matter the state that she's in.
The relief and longing that crosses her face when she sees me makes my chest ache.
She jumps up from the couch and rushes across the room, throwing herself into my arms.
I catch her up against me, my worry for her climbing even higher.
James also gets up from where he was sitting in an adjacent armchair and crosses the room as well, but clearly because he's leaving to give us some privacy.
I catch his eye with a questioning look as he draws even with me.
"She found out about the attack at the hospital," James says) which mostly explains everything and I feel my heart take on a new dimension of pain that Leah knows some of the terrible truth now.
"There's more," James adds, his expression becoming stormy. "But I'll let Leah tell you."
"Thank you, Beta," I say in a low voice
"Thank you for taking
T
such good care of my mate."

James sends me one last nod of respect, before leaving the room.

For a moment, I simply stand there and hold my mate.

I can feel her silent tears soaking the front of my shirt.

I'm angry that she found out about the attack.

Was Adam the one who told her?

But what did he even hope to achieve from that?

I'd expressly forbid anyone from talking about it.

Maybe it'd been foolish to think Leah would never learn the truth, but I'd wanted to spare her the pain of knowing this.

The pain that I could now see was tearing her up.

For a split second, I almost want to tell her the truth-that Ethan is alive and well-except if that ends in the next attempt on Ethan's life being successful, then I won't be sparing Leah anything.

She will feel this pain and more-we both would.

I have to believe that once Leah knows the full truth-and I would tell her soon, I vowed it on all of my ancestors-she will forgive me once she understands I'm doing it to save Ethan.

After a while, I take Leah over to the couch where she was sitting earlier, and we both sit down, with Leah tucked securely into my side.

"I get it now," Leah says sadly, her voice scratchy from crying so much. "Why you didn't want to be around me, why you've been doing everything remotely, keeping yourself apart from everyone. This pain... How are we supposed to live with it? Who would even do something so terrible?"

A fresh well of tears stream down her face and I hold her even tighter.

"I don't know," I tell her, because I honestly don't. "But I'm going to find them, and then they'll regret every choice they ever made."

Leah sits away from me a little to look at me.

She doesn't just look sad any longer.

No, she's burning with the kind of wrath I've never witnessed in her before.

"We are going to find them, together," she replies fiercely, and her wolf glows in her eyes for a moment.

"If I can stand strong and hold my oldest friend accountable for betraying me, then you can be sure I can make our enemies wish they'd never had the misfortune to move against us."

She's right.

When she became Alpha, I didn't fight her battles for her.

I didn't have to.

Leah is one of the strongest, bravest wolves I know.

Everything that happened the night Liam betrayed her was a travesty.

I shouldn't have ended up in possession of her Alpha powers. She is the Alpha that Roberts pack deserves.

I have no doubt that she can and will effectively take down our enemies.

Better yet, we can do it together, so this world will finally be safe for our son.

As for the other things she mentioned-

"What did Adam do?" I ask quietly.

Her expression darkens, and for a second I think if Adam was standing here in front of us, she'd probably maul him all over again.

"He was monitoring me for years," she spits out angrily.

"What?!" I demand.

Hell, I shouldn't have let him leave!

I don't just want to maul him, I want to turn his insides to his outside and make sure he feels every second of it before drowning in his own blood.

"I know," Leah says, shaking her head. "I just can't figure out why, and he obviously wasn't going to tell me. It was like he was playing all sides. My father, Liam, me... He even said something about Tobin."

"Tobin?" I repeat in confusion. "I didn't even know that they knew each other."

"Me either," Leah replies. "I didn't have the power to banish him outright, obviously," Leah says, and I wince at the hint of bitterness in her tone. "But I told him if I ever see him again, then I won't show any mercy. Oh, I also told him he probably wants to watch out for you."

I give a quick laugh. "That's an understatement."

Leah leans into my side once again, and I love how open and affectionate she's being with me.

To think we could have had this all along if I'd gotten out of my own way sooner.

But it'd taken my son coming into the world to make me see the truth of this life.

I am a little ashamed to admit it, but I vow over and over that I will do better by both of them.

Chapter 218

LEAH

I don't know how long Aaron and I sit on the couch with our arms around each other, soaking in the feel of our bodies close together, not even talking.

It was exactly what I needed after the shock of everything I found out, and I'm so relieved that Aaron and I have finally come to a place where we can share a moment like this with one another.

Six months ago, when I'd been dying of cancer, thinking Aaron was cheating on me with Jessica and that he only cared about me as a means to an end, and that my love for him was completely one-sided, I could have never imagined we would be able to come together like this.

But oh, how I'd longed for it.

I'd longed for it with a desperation that bordered on pathetic.

There'd been a million times I could have or should have left him.

Except something had kept me at his side, no matter what he'd done.

Some instinct that'd told me I was meant to stand with Aaron, be his partner in everything from the businesses, to running the packs, to life partners and true mates.

Somehow, deep down, had it been my wolf, sensing he was my mate, that we were fated to be together, even though my father had done the unthinkable and bound her without my knowledge? I'll never know.

But none of that matters anymore.
Our past brought us to today.
And despite how rocky some of it was, I think now I wouldn't change any of it.
All that hardship, it made me stronger.
And it brought me Aaron.
Maybe he hasn't said he loves me-and maybe he never will-but I believe I can feel it, that my wolf can feel it, that we
can sense it on a level that defies explanation.
And that's enough for both of us right now.
When I first learned about my baby being born and killed, I
hadn't known how I was going to live with that knowledge and
pain.
I still know that I'll never be the same again.
But with Aaron by my side-with Aaron finally accepting me and treating me like his mate, like his equal-
then I know that I
will survive it because I'm not alone.
I still feel like Aaron is keeping something from me.
Maybe not the AI tech, after all, Tobin had said it was gone the night Liam was killed.
Whatever it is, I get the sense he'll tell me when he's ready.
I'm ready to trust him without question.
Maybe it's some other detail about our son's short life and Aaron doesn't want to burden me with it
right now.
Maybe something about the funeral or where our child is buried.
And Aaron would be correct.
I can't face that right now.
Maybe one day I'll feel ready to go and visit our son's grave,
but not until Aaron and I track down whoever was responsible and make them pay for what they did.
I won't feel right, going to grieve my son and accept his loss until I know I've done everything in my
power to get justice for
him.
Even if it takes the rest of my life.
Eventually, James ducks his head into the room and asks us if we'd like a late supper, as the chef is
standing by should we need anything.
At the mention of food, my stomach rumbles loudly and I belatedly realize with everything that's
happened, I haven't eaten anything since yesterday.
Aaron gives an affectionate laugh and tells James to have the chef bring the food to the smaller,
informal dining room.
We have a bigger, more imposing grand dining hall where we entertain guests. And for a while, Jessica
used to insist we eat our meals there, and Aaron had simply gone along with it like he always did in
those days when it'd come to Jessica.
But I much prefer the smaller, more intimate and casually decorated informal dining room.
Plus, at breakfast time, the sun cuts through the garden beyond the windows at just the right angle,
lighting up all the deep red rose bushes planted out there. And when the weather is nice, you can throw
open the patio doors and the

divine scent of roses on the warm air fills the room so it almost feels magical.

Aaron stands and holds a hand out for me.

The way he's smiling at me now-dark eyes warm and an intimate affection in his expression-he's never looked at me like that before.

In fact, I don't think he's ever looked at anyone the way he's looking at me right now.

I take his hand and let him pull me to my feet, wondering if I've somehow fallen into a dream.

Chapter 219

LEAH

I'm disappointed to wake up alone to a note again, but at least this time it explains he will be back and we will face things together.

I stay in bed a little while longer than I normally would, wanting to hang onto the threads of last night's magic. Aaron made love to me and then held me in his arms all night long.

i

It was exactly what I needed after everything that happened.

Eventually, however, I get up and start my day, seeing to the million little things required of the Luna to multiple packs and

joint CEO to billion-dollar businesses.

Just after lunch time, an email lands in my inbox, and pause as I see the sender.

Tobin.

What could he possibly want after our last meeting?

He hadn't been willing to tell me anything of use before Aaron and Ryker had arrived, scaring him off.

At this point, I feel like he's just toying with me, but I open the email anyway.

Part of me thinks he's lying about the AI tech going missing

the night my brother died, but I can't prove that from gut feeling alone.

I need proof.

Which means playing the game a little longer.

With a deep breath, I open the email.

Luna Leah, if you want real answers, I'm willing to give them to you. Meet me, but come alone. You can't trust anyone in your life, especially not Aaron. He's lying to you, but maybe part of you already knows that.

There's an address and a time for later tonight underneath the body of the email.

For a second, the words about Aaron lying make me uneasy.

Aaron has lied to me in the past, it is true.

But things are different now.

We've both changed.

And I choose to believe we've changed for the better.

"What are you reading that's got you frowning like that?"

I glance up at the sound of Aaron's voice to see him leaning casually against the doorframe of the office.

"You're back!" I don't bother to hide my excitement or enthusiasm like I always have in the past when I was happy to see Aaron.

I know this time he won't rebuff me, so I jump up and go over to greet him with a hug and a kiss.

Aaron opens his arms and easily-and affectionately-returns my embrace and it finally feels like we're a real couple and true mates.

"So, what was it you were reading? The stock market report? Because I know it's dismal today." I shake my head. "Come and see for yourself, but you're not going to like it." Aaron sends me a questioning look and then goes over to my computer. As soon as he reads the email, his expression darkens. "That conniving bastard," Aaron mutters in a harsh voice. "This is obviously some kind of trap, Leah. Tobin wants to use you to get to me." "Well, I didn't think it was anything good," I say in return, crossing my arms as I realize I might have stumbled onto something else Aaron has kept me in the dark about. "But what makes you so sure?" Aaron hesitates for a moment, and I can see him fighting old habits of brushing me off and not telling me, because he somehow thinks that will protect me. We're stronger together if we stand as equals. And I know he realizes that now. "I think Tobin is the one who's been trying to kill me the past few months."

Chapter 220

AARON

Leah is immediately infuriated when I tell her my suspicions about Tobin. This only confirms my belief that Tobin is the Councilmember who is out to get me. What other possible reason could he have in Leah, besides her usefulness as a tool against me? "But why?" Leah questions, which is something I've asked myself a million times. I can only shrug in response. "Tobin is driven by his wolf more than any other member of the Council. Maybe he simply thinks because of the power I now hold, I'm a threat to him, or any other member of the Council, if I decided I wanted a seat. He simply wants to eliminate someone he sees as a true rival." "That makes sense," Leah replies with a nod. "Maybe I can find out something about his plans when I go to meet him." At these calm, yet determined words, my inner wolf growls protectively. "Leah, you are not going to meet Tobin." It should go without saying. The risk is too high, and I refuse to let my mate and the woman I love walk into certain danger. However, Leah's eyes narrow as she stares at me with a mulish expression. "This is a chance to turn the tables on Tobin and maybe get some information that could actually help us. If Tobin is the one who's been trying to kill you, then maybe he's also the one who orchestrated the attack that killed our son. I also think he knows more about the AI tech than he's letting on. Besides, if we know it's a trap, then it's not really a trap any longer, is it?" Damn my intelligent mate. I can't argue with any of what she's just said. Plus, she obviously knows how to word things in a way that will motivate me to do something about it. "Do you even have a plan?" I ask her instead of answering her question. "Or you're simply operating on stubborn determination?" At this, Leah smiles. But it's a sly smile that tells me she's about to attempt bending me to her will. I can't deny my willingness-mostly driven by my wolf wanting to please his mate-to give her whatever

she wants.

"Not yet," she answers. "But obviously I'm not going alone like Tobin says. We're a team, Aaron. In this together. So let's make our own plan. When it's you and I against the world, then nothing will stand in our way."

"Very well," I tell her, and I can see she's surprised at how easily I agreed in the end.

It's mostly because I'm more motivated than ever to see this thing finished once and for all. To eliminate any and all threats to my family.

Last night, I was given a glimpse of what my life could look like with Leah if not for the peril hanging over us, threatening to crush anything good left in our lives at any moment.

I want more nights like last night.

I want our entire life to be happy and carefree, the way Leah and Ethan deserve.

And I know Leah is more than capable of standing in this fight with me as an equal.

It's part of why she's my mate, after all.

So we start planning, eventually calling in James to consult with him about how to utilize our men effectively.

It's going to look like Leah is going to the meeting alone, just like Tobin instructed.

But in reality, myself and a contingent of Rathborn and Roberts wolves will be waiting in the wings to protect her and take down Tobin the second he tries anything.

Once the plan is fully fleshed out, and everyone knows the part they're going to play, James leaves again, and then I hold my hand out to Leah.

We've got some time before we have to leave for the address Tobin provided somewhere in the city, and I know the perfect way to spend that time.

Leah sends me a questioning look as she trustingly places her hand in mine.

"Where are we going?" she asks, a smile chasing over her beautiful features.

"Shift with me. Let's run together."