

Bad Love 221

Chapter 221

LEAH

My entire body tingles at Aaron's request, made in the sexy, deep timbre of his voice.

It's all I've ever wanted of him to ask me.

It's all I've ever wanted to do.

The nights when Aaron and Jessica-and any other number of pack members-had shifted and run together, I had burned with jealousy at being left out.

Especially Jessica, getting to do what I couldn't frolic and play submissive to Aaron.

I'd seen them a few times on the lawn beyond the mansion as they'd been either on their way out for a run, or just getting back.

The way Jessica had boldly rubbed her body against him, getting her scent all over him like she had any right.

The memories threaten to sour my mood, so I hastily push them away.

Those times have passed.

Here and now, Aaron is offering me the opportunity to do something else I've always dreamed of.

"Okay," I reply, breathless and not even trying to hide it.

Aaron smiles indulgently, and then leads me to the library.

There, we're afforded a little privacy as we strip and then shift, before bounding out into the crisp afternoon.

It snowed overnight, but now it's sunny and light seems to glint off every surface.

Aaron lopes a little ahead of me, then waits.

When I catch up to him, I barrel right into his side, and he flops over playfully, nipping at my ears.

It's even better than I imagined.

My wolf is in pure bliss, running and playing with her mate, and I'm happy to relax and float in the background, letting the wolves do as they will.

We cross the fields and enter the forest, and despite the freezing weather, the woods are alive with scents and sounds,

entertaining our wolves as they explore and play at hunting, though neither of us are really in the mood for a serious hunt.

After a while, Aaron brings us to a clearing, and then shifts back, so I do the same, wondering if he has something he wants to tell me.

However, I've barely straightened to my full height when Aaron catches me up against him, kissing me gently.

I wonder if something more will come of it, but eventually he tells me it's time to head back, his mood dimming a little.

I can't blame him for it, because I feel the same way.

The past twenty-four hours have been like a dream vacation from reality.

But we can't stay in our romantic bubble forever, not when outside forces are doing their best to tear us apart and destroy us once and for all.

But tonight, if all goes well, we can eliminate at least one of those bad forces.

Tobin has no idea what he instigated when he sent that email.
Tonight, the hunted shall become the hunter.

Chapter 222

The address turns out to be a large abandoned factory.

It's hard to tell what might have once been made here. The dusty, spider web covered monolithic machines cast strange shadows beyond the meager beam of my flashlight.

Tobin's appointed time comes and goes, and at first I think by making me wait, it's probably just another way he's messing with me.

But when I message Aaron, he doesn't reply.

I call him, but he doesn't answer.

I try not to worry as I call James.

He also doesn't answer.

And now I'm starting to panic.

Why isn't Tobin here like he said he'd be.

And why the hell aren't Aaron and James answering their phones?

I have this bad feeling in my gut that we missed something.

That our plan wasn't quite as watertight as we intended it to be.

Just as I am debating whether to wait a bit longer, or leave to go find Aaron, I hear a door bang somewhere toward the opposite end of the factory floor, and then brightness floods the dark space as the overhead lights are turned on.

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I begin backing up as I hear multiple footsteps coming toward me—and the scent of many wolves, not just Tobin.

But the footsteps are also coming from behind me, and just as

I think about running, I scent blood.

Aaron's blood.

My heart trips over itself and then races frantically as I hold my ground, waiting for Tobin to show himself.

What the hell has happened?

How did Tobin know Aaron even came along, and what the

hell did he do to my mate?

That last question ignites a protective, blazing fury within me, and it's all I can do to keep my wolf from shifting us and viciously attacking Tobin the moment we lay eyes on him.

The first thing I see is a menacing group of rogue wolves. /

How has Tobin convinced them to be loyal to him?

They surround me, farthing blocking any means of escape.

A moment later, Tobin finally appears, dragging an injured, barely conscious Aaron with him.

Aaron is in bad shape.

He's bleeding from multiple places, and for some reason, he's not healing or shifting to save himself.

I stay where I am, even though every instinct within me wants to race over to Aaron, to help him anyway that I can.

"Luna Leah, so nice of you to wait, even though I'm running late." Tobin leers at me as he tosses Aaron

to the ground at his feet.

Tobin is also a mess, but he doesn't seem to be seriously injured. Not the same way Aaron clearly is. "Your mate and his men put up quite an invigorating fight," Tobin continues in a pleasant tone, like we're discussing the weather, not the fact that my mate is seriously wounded.

"What did you do to him?" I demand, and my voice is a growl, my wolf pushing up, threatening to explode out of me. She wants to claw Tobin's cold eyes from his face.

I'm tempted to let her, but I know Tobin's men would be on me in a second, and I'm seriously outnumbered.

Where the hell are the rest of the guys Aaron brought with us?

What's happened to James...surely they're not all dead?

"Aaron?" Tobin says, as if he doesn't even know who I'm referring to. "Oh, I tipped my claws in wolfsbane before I savaged him."

I didn't even know such a thing was possible without a wolf making itself sick from handling the poison.

"I've built up a tolerance for it, you see," Tobin continues, and his gaze seems even more feral than usual. "So my enemies can't use it to harm me."

Is that part of why his wolf is so primal? Tobin has been self-medicating with poison for who-knows how many years?

"And then," Tobin continues, picking up one of Aaron's limp arms to show the cuffs and chains wrapped around his wrists, arms and body. "I had these specially crafted. Pure silver infused with wolfsbane. Nothing else like it exists in the world.

They're stopping him from healing, shifting, and shortly, they'll stop him from living."

Tobin laughs like he's made some brilliant joke.

"You bastard!" I scream, my emotions-and my wolf getting the better of me-as I partially shift and lunge toward him.

However, just as I predicted, his men crowd in and stop me before I can reach him.

Tobin only laughs harder.

Then, while two of his men hold my arms, keeping me immobile, Tobin strolls up to me, his dead-eyes gleaming in a way that makes me sick to my stomach.

He reaches out and touches me, and I think about throwing up on his shoes.

"I always did admire the fight in you, Leah," he murmurs, leaning closer as his hands roam and my stomach roils. "I never thought I would meet a woman who had an inner wolf as vicious as my own, but I think yours almost is. She has potential, you know, to be even more fierce and deadly."

"Get away from me!" I snarl, but Tobin isn't the least deterred.

"When Aaron is dead, if you survive the death of your mating bond, I'm going to claim you as my own, Leah, whether you like it or not."

Chapter 223

I struggle against Tobin's two men holding me, but it's no use.

I look past Tobin to where Aaron is lying motionless on the floor, barely conscious, his skin sizzling and practically melting

from the wolfsbane-infused silver.

Who even ever heard of something so diabolical?

I can't imagine the Council have approved or are even aware Tobin has such horrific tools to use against other wolves. And what about the fact that Tobin apparently has a whole army worth of rogue wolves at his beck and call, besides his own large pack?

Aaron's belief that Tobin is the one who's been trying to kill him seems more and more plausible.

Tobin must be acting without the Council's knowledge.

I think if there was some way to alert Karolina or another Elder, then Aaron and I could get official backup from the Council to deal with Tobin and everything he's done once and for all.

But that doesn't help me in this moment when I have no idea how to get myself and my mate out of this alive.

Especially as Aaron's very life is slipping away before my very eyes.

More than that, I can feel it through the mating bond, how he's growing weaker and weaker. How I'm beginning to feel his actual pain, making me sweat and grow dizzy.

Making my wolf almost crazed with the need to save him, to save both of us.

"Why are you doing this?!" I yell at Tobin, realizing my cheeks are wet with tears streaming unchecked down my face.

Tobin returns to Aaron and reaches down to grab a handful of his hair, before yanking his head back.

"It's simple, I'm taking back what's mine."

Tobin inhales deeply, as if taking in Aaron's very life force.

"Not long now," he says gleefully.

"What are you even talking about?" I scream desperately.

This can't be happening.

There must be something I can do.

I can't lose Aaron now.

Not like this.

Not after everything.

Tobin releases Aaron, leaving him to fall in a bloody heap.

"You even need to ask?" Tobin says angrily as he stalks back toward me. "Those Roberts Alpha powers? They were supposed to be mine. The Leithrow Alpha powers? Mine!

I'm meant to be the wolf with the power of three Alphas, not Aaron!"

Tobin paces, his eyes glowing and muscle rippling, like he's fighting his own wolf for dominance.

"That night Brian took you, I had it all planned," Tobin continues, his steps short and his movements agitated. "Convincing your father to name you as heir, then arranging for Liam to kill him, making sure Brian managed to nab you and bring you to that clearing at exactly the right time."

At this point, it seems more like Tobin is talking to himself.

Meanwhile, I can barely believe what I'm hearing.

I didn't understand how or why so many things had happened-like what my father and brother had been trying to achieve-but now it seems they were simply caught in Tobin's machinations.

"And Karolina?" I demand. "Was she in on it too?"

Tobin makes a dismissive gesture. "Karolina is insignificant. She interferes in things she should leave well enough alone."

So did that mean she wasn't helping Tobin, and had been there to stop him instead?

"It was meant to be straightforward, seamless," Tobin continues, becoming angry now. "But then Aaron showed up and ruined everything. Everyone knew he didn't ever plan to mate you. He barely tolerated you as his wife. He wasn't meant to get involved. But he did, and he ended up with Brian's Alpha powers, and then protected you, letting the Roberts Alpha powers transfer to you, a mere human who had no wolf. It was laughable!"

Tobin pivots to face me and ice cold dread goes through me from the way he's staring at me.

"Obviously I couldn't let that stand," continues in a dangerous tone. "It was bad enough that Aaron had the Leithrow Alpha powers on top of his own. But then Liam had to go and try to play his own game, leaving Aaron with the power of three Alphas-powers that should have been mine. I've been training my mind and body for years to take on those abilities, and Aaron just survives them out of nowhere! It should have been me!"

By the end of that rant, Tobin is shouting.

However then he takes a breath to settle himself.

"None of it matters now," he says, grinning down at Aaron. "Soon, I'll have everything I was meant to get."

My heart is pounding so hard and fast, it's making me dizzy. I can't even tell if he's breathing any longer.

What if I can't help him in time?

What if I lose him just like I lost my child?

I know I won't survive.

But I'm not giving up until the last breath has left my body.

I'll fight for us.

I'll fight for Aaron.

I just have to figure out how.

Chapter 224

I don't know what I'm going to do, or how I'm going to do it, I just know I need to get to Aaron and get those chains off him.

I don't care about the risk to me, or that I might be killed.

I just know if I can get Aaron free, he'll heal quicker than any other wolf has ever been able to because of all those Alpha powers Tobin wanted for himself.

I'm just getting ready to shift, figuring I might be able to rip through at least a couple of Tobin's goons and get to Aaron

before they can stop me-or kill me-when there's a commotion at the doors.

I jerk myself away from the two wolves holding me, and they don't seem to care, distracted as a whole bunch of new faces arrive on scene.

These guys look like they just stepped out of a mafia movie-tattoos and gold jewelry and dressed slick, but like bad-assed. Ryker strides confidently ahead of them, and I wonder if this is his pack, or just a contingent of Old Country Wolves who do his bidding.

Whoever they are, there's no denying they're intimidating.

Apparently even to a wolf as feral as Tobin, because he becomes even more infuriated when he sees

Ryker, but the stench of fear underneath his anger is unmistakable. I'm relieved to see James and most of Aaron's men are also among the Old Country Wolves. They look like they've been in a bad fight, but since I was worried they might have already been killed, appearing a little roughed up isn't so bad. James looks worried when his gaze lands on Aaron, but my mate's Beta sends me a confident nod, as if he's already sure I'll be able to save Aaron. "What are you doing here, Ryker?" Tobin demands, motioning his men nearer, getting them to close ranks around him. I start edging closer to where Aaron is lying on the floor while no one's paying attention to me. "I told you, Tobin," Ryker says mildly, examining his fingernails like he's bored and this is just a minor inconvenience to him. "Alpha Aaron and Luna Leah are friends of mine. And that's not even mentioning how you tried to screw me out of a business deal we agreed on in good faith. I think I'm done with you!" "You can't do anything to me!" Tobin shouts furiously. "The Council will—" "I am above the Council," Ryker growls, his eyes glowing. "And if killing you reminds them of that, then all the better." Ryker flicks his hand and chaos erupts. Wolves start attacking each other—some fully shifting, some only partially—while a few of the Old Country Wolves pull out wicked-looking silver knives and start stabbing Tobin's wolves at startling speeds. I dive for Aaron, relieved to find him still breathing and partly conscious. Despite how it burns my hands, I grab the silver wolfsbane-infused chains and yank, using my supernatural strength until some of the links give enough that I can drag them all off him. My hands burn, the flesh sizzling and blistering. As soon as he's free, Aaron shifts. I shift as well, standing over him as he heals, growling menacingly and baring my fangs at anyone who comes too close. With so much power in his veins, Aaron heals in no time, and within moments, he's on his feet, shaking out his gray fur. He growls, and it's so low and powerful, I swear I feel the earth trembling beneath my paws. Aaron's head swings around and I know he's looking for Tobin. I am as well, but in the chaos of all the fighting, I can't see him. Suddenly a couple of Tobin's wolves lunge at us, and my wolf viciously snaps back, surprising our opponent with her ferocity. In a matter of seconds, the enemy wolf is down and bleeding. That's when I realize that Aaron is gone.

Chapter 225

AARON

I tear my way through Tobin's wolves, no matter if they challenge me, or simply stand in my way. My wolf and I have never been angrier, or more murderous than we are right now. Well, one other time, when our son was threatened. But now I know Tobin was behind everything that happened—even if he hasn't directly admitted to all of it—just to steal my combined Alpha powers, the unfocused rage I've been feeling the past few months and the pain the past few weeks of keeping myself away from Leah and lying to her about Ethan to protect her all fuses together into one furious,

violent drive to kill Tobin.

He's not making it easy, however, putting his wolves in between us, hoping they'll overwhelm me by sheer number or brute strength, but they all underestimate how much rage and savagery is burning through my veins.

I lose count of how many wolves I rip apart, before finally realizing that Tobin has run.

Go forward.

I take off after him.

He's long gone, but I've got his scent, and I'm not going to let him get away.

I race through the factory, weaving through old machines and abandoned stacks of pallets.

His scent is getting stronger, and I think I must almost be on top of him.

A net drops from somewhere above me and I stumble into a roll, my legs getting caught up and then I yelp at the burning sensation of silver.

The silver net has wrapped itself all the way around me because of how I rolled once it fell on me. But this one is only silver, it's not infused with wolfsbane like the chains were.

Despite the pain, I know it's not going to hold me for long.

"This is the only warning I'm giving you," Tobin says from above me.

I glance up—even as I'm struggling to free myself—to see him standing on the gangway.

"If you come after me, there will be consequences, Aaron."

I growl, since I haven't shifted back, I can't tell him where he can shove his warning.

"Oh, you think I'm acting alone?" Tobin continues with a deranged laugh. "How very short-sighted of you. Of course

I didn't do all this alone. There are Councils within Councils.

And we are going to lead wolves into a bright new future. A future where we don't have to hide from humans. A future where we are the dominant species, just like we always should have been."

I'm close to getting myself free, but as I watch, Tobin shifts and sprints away, into the darkness.

With renewed determination not to let him get away, I finally drag myself free of the net.

I don't care what Tobin says.

Even if he is backed by some of the Council, even if there are consequences for my actions, I'll deal with them later.

After Tobin is dead and buried.

Chapter 226

LEAH

It takes me a while to fight free from the warring wolves, and then I rush off after Aaron, following his scent. I also pick up Tobin's scent and realize what must have happened.

Tobin must have ran.

And Aaron went after him.

I can't blame my mate for not wanting to let Tobin get away after everything he's done, but I also think it was foolish of Aaron to go off on his own like that.

What if Tobin led him into yet another trap we can't see coming?

I track them right through the entire factory, bypassing a silver net on the ground that had Aaron's scent

all over it.

Seems like Tobin tried to stop Aaron or slow him down and it wasn't very effective.

Eventually, I come to a roller door that's partially lifted with trash strewn under it like it got stuck that way at some stage

and nobody bothered to try closing it again.

Out in the parking lot, there's only one or two lights that haven't been broken. I jog through shadows and patches of light until I find Aaron.

He's on the far side of the weed-choked lot, under a singular lamppost, shifted back to human.

Tobin is lying at his feet, throat slashed, dead from bleeding out in what was probably a matter of moments after having his major arteries completely severed.

I shift back and stop just inside the pool of light.

"You shouldn't have run off on your own like that, Aaron," I say, trying not to sound like a nagging wife, when truly, I was just worried for his safety. "But at least you killed him and we can put this behind us now."

"Except I didn't," Aaron says in an angry, thwarted voice.

"Didn't what?" I ask in confusion.

"I didn't kill him," Aaron kicks Tobin's corpse in frustration and then stalks toward me, fury still visible in every line of his body. "Someone else got to him before I did!"

"What? But how?" I say in shock.

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"I don't know," Aaron replies. "I got waylaid by that stupid

silver net, and Tobin got ahead of me. By the time I freed

myself and followed his scent trail out here, someone else had already slashed his throat and was long gone. The weirdest

thing, however, was that I couldn't pick up even a hint of scent from another wolf. I arrived just to watch Tobin gasp his last breath. At least I got that satisfaction."

"Who the hell could have been waiting out here to kill him like that?"

And how was it even possible that they didn't leave any trace of scent behind?

Aaron snorts at my question. "Make a list and take your pick. Tobin had plenty of enemies. And that's not all."

Aaron looks troubled and I almost hesitate to ask him what he means.

"Tobin said he wasn't working alone," Aaron explains. "He said there was a Council within the Council. One that's going to lead wolves into a new golden age where we are the superior species and we don't have to worry about humans any more."

A deep sense of unease unfurls within me. "What does that even mean?"

"I have no idea," Aaron says in a low voice, glancing at Tobin's

dead body one more time before taking my hand and leading me away. "But this means that someone else might have

helped orchestrate the attack at the hospital. Tobin might be dead, but we haven't eliminated the threat to my life."

Chapter 227

Aaron leads me away from Tobin's body, back toward the factory where we left James and Aaron's men fighting with Ryker and his Old Country Wolves.

However, before we step back inside, I pull Aaron to a stop.

"Are you okay?" I ask him when he turns to me with a questioning look.

Aaron nods as he pulls me into his arms. "It's amazing, the strength and resilience I get from the power of three Alphas. No wonder Tobin wanted it so badly for himself."

I slip my arms around Aaron's waist and we stand there holding each other.

"This whole thing-Tobin sending me that cryptic message to meet him-it was just a trap so he could kill you and take your powers," I say as the night's events finally start making sense in my mind.

"It looks that way," Aaron agrees,

I feel him tense with anger.

"I thought we were finally going to end our problems, but now we have a bigger one," he continues after a moment.

"The Council," I reply, apprehension trickling through me.

"Whoever was helping Tobin-maybe more than one person-won't stop coming after me just because Tobin is dead. They either want my power, or think I'm a threat to the sanctity of the Council itself," Aaron says in a grim voice. "But it's worse than that, because the night of the special Council Meeting, after you left, they made me sign a legally binding document stating that I wouldn't move against any Member or attempt to gain a seat for myself"

Sharp worry for Aaron and this new, dangerous situation cuts through me.

"What's that going to mean for you, for us?" I tighten my hold on him, fearful of what the Council are going to do when they find out. Tobin is dead.

"They're going to see this as a strike against them-treason," Aaron replied, and my stomach drops with anxiety. "The punishment for that is binding my wolf, or death"

"But you didn't even kill him!" I protest, even though obviously Aaron is the last person I need to convince of this

However, we have no proof and no witnesses to attest to Aaron's innocence

"It won't matter," Aaron says, his hands rubbing up and down my back, as if to comfort me

But how can I take any comfort from him at a time like this?

"It's all politics, Leah. It won't matter if I did it or not. The point is, I look guilty, and they've got the excuse they needed to railroad

me

"Well I'm not going to let that happen!" I tell him stubbornly.

I pull back slightly so I can look up at him.

His dark eyes are warm with affection as he stares down at me

But I can also see sadness in his gaze

We both know, even after everything that's happened to us, this is one problem that won't easily be solved.

Not with the Council against Aaron, wanting to see him taken down.

"No matter what happens," I tell him, making sure he can see how serious I am, how I'm vowing this as adamantly as the day we exchanged vows at our wedding "I will stand with you, no matter if it's against the entire Council I'm your wife, and your mate, and I will fight your battles as if they are my own-because they are my own. You are everything to me."

Aaron smiles, then tenderly

up

“Leah...” He murmurs my name, and I wonder if he’s ever said it exactly like that before, like a prayer and salvation and a benediction. all rolled into one. “There’s something I need to tell you...”

Chapter 228

AARON

My heart is pounding and exhilaration is rushing through me like I’m fifteen years old with t
Leah makes me giddy.

It’s ridiculous.

I’m an Alpha, feared by both other wolves and humans alike in the business world.

my first crush.

I’m known to be ruthless and cutthroat and the last person anyone should ever consider crossing

My revenge has been known to be inventive and served with malicious flair.

No one would believe that my wife, my mate-the love of my life and mother of my son-could so easily
bring me to my knees.

I don’t think even Leah knows the extent of her own power over me

But it was proven that night in the warehouse when Liam tried to steal her from me.

I didn’t even know until that very moment the lengths I would go to for this woman.

How I would and will continue to put her above my own life and welfare.

How I will do absolutely anything she asks, if only she lets me love her the way she deserves.

But I don’t say any of that.

At least not right now.

Maybe one day I will, when this is all over and our lives are no longer in danger. There’s so many things I
want to tell her and share

with her.

However, in this very moment, something else is on my mind,

Something that’s been weighing heavily on me since the moment she awoke and I realized I had to make
a choice.

I realized I had to walk away from her-hurt her-to save her.

How I needed to keep the existence of her very own child from her, because the lie had already grown
so huge, and the danger had only increased in the weeks following the attack on the hospital, and I was
almost paralyzed with fear about what could happen to both of them just because someone way trying
to get to me.

No, not someone.

Tobin

Tobin and some other members of the Council who I’ll need to find before they can make their next
move-maybe their final move-to take me out of the equation.

The stakes have never been higher.

But I’ve never been more sure of anything else in my life.

I love Leah.

She is my everything,

And i

it’s time I told her that.

Part of me wonder

why I’ve waited this long. But I know it’s never been as simple as saying the words.

Words can be empty if they’re not said at the right time in the right way, and I didn’t want the things I

feel for her to be diminished.

Plus, there's also the issue of our son.

Our very alive son, whom she currently believes is dead.

I think it's time I told her about that as well.

Because she's right-as she almost always is, my clever mate-we're stronger together.

And now more than ever is the time to stand united.

But after holding everything inside for so long, I suddenly don't know how to get the words out.

She must see something in my expression because she frowns a little, clearly concerned.

"Aaron, are you okay? Are you sure there's nothing wrong with you after Tobin had you in those silver wolfsbane chains?"

"I'm fine, Leal," I reassure her, pulling my mate closer still, enjoying the feel of her body against mine.

"But like I said, there's something I need to tell you."

She nods, but her frown deepens, like she thinks I'm about to tell her something bad.

Considering our history-the way I used to treat her-I think it's probably not unreasonable for her to think I'm about to say something that will hurt or upset her.

And she won't be completely wrong

When she finds out the truth about Ethan, she's probably going to be furious and rightfully hurt. But I'm prepared for that.

I also believe she'll see reason, after she gets over the initial shock, she might even agree that I did the right thing. That any sacrifice was worth saving and protecting the fragile life of our infant son.

"Leah," I say, bringing her closer still, until everything of ourselves is attuned with the other. "I should have said this the minute you woke up. Because that night in the warehouse, I thought it was too late when I realized. I thought I wouldn't ever get the chance to tell you. I thought I'd lost you forever."

I blink as I feel my e

her.

growing wet, but I don't care if she sees my tears. She needs to understand the magnitude of what I'm telling

Words I told myself I would never utter to a woman, let alone my actual mate.

Her eyes a

wide now as she stares up at me, and I can see my own feelings reflected in her heart and soul.

Which suddenly makes it all easier.

"Leah, I love you," I tell her watching the beautiful amazement cross her face like dawn on a summer morning. "I think I've loved you since the day I married you, but I was foolish, and I hurt both of us by denying that love."

Leah reaches up and wraps her arms around my neck "Aaron, I love you, too. I've always loved you, but I think you already knew that."

Instead of answering, I tug her in for a kiss, like sealing a promise between us

After a moment, she pulls back again to stare up at me with adoration

"None of that matters anymore," she says. "It's in the past, and we get to make a new beginning

Together, the way we're destined to be"

I think she's right

There is an element of destiny to us

How else could we have come to love each other-two wolves from warring packs who've hated each

other for generations, Leah sent to me as a token of peace that had been sabotaged by her own father from the start in binding her wolf....

So many things have kept us apart.

But we overcame them.

And now we are stronger for it.

Together, we can do anything. Including defeating our enemies and keeping our son safe

But first.

"Leah, I need you to know-"

I've barely started saying the words when my cell phone begins to ring I take it out, cursing the interruption.

I think about not answering, but it's James and he probably needs to know we're alive.

"James, make it quick," I tell him when I answer

Then my Beta replies, "There's been an attack at the cabin."

Chapter 229

LEAH

One moment Aaron is loving and open with me, the next I see him totally shut down when he gets a phone call from James.

It's like watching him become a completely different person.

He becomes cold and indifferent, just like he used to be with me.

It feels like getting a bucket of ice water dumped over me.

I don't understand what could have caused such a reaction from him.

But it must be something bad.

Something really bad.

"Aaron, what's wrong?" I ask reaching for him, but he evades my touch.

"I have to go," he replies, slipping his cell phone away and avoiding my gaze.

"Aaron, wait" I say, trying to keep the confusion and desperation out of my voice as he starts to walk away from me.

"Go find James and Ryker, they'll make sure you get home safe," he tells me, tossing the words carelessly over his shoulder, before disappearing into the shadows

"Dam n it, Aaron" I shout after him, frustrated that after everything. we've come right back around to this.

But I'm not putting up with it any longer.

I think about following his scent trail, but that won't do me any good once he gets into his SUV and drives away.

Instead, I hurry into the abandoned factory to find James.

He called Aaron, so he must know what's happening.

And one way or another, I'm going to find out for myself.

I refuse to simply sit by and let Aaron dictate the terms of my life any longer.

Now I know he can do better than that. We can work as a team, and it's so much better than the back-and-forth, unbalanced power dynamic we had going on before.

When I reach the main factory floor, I find James and Ryker talking, while their men are gathering up the bodies of Tobin's pack to be dealt with. They're tossing them in a pile, and I know from other skirmishes, their bodies will be taken to a remote clearing and burned

The few wolves of our own who were killed are being handled gently, taken out to a van to be

transported back to pack lands for the pack death observances.

I feel terrible that some of our men-and Ryker's men-lost their lives defending Aaron and myself, all because Tobin was making some power-crazed grab for more Alpha abilities.

And it's not even over after tonight.

Someone was working with Tobin, and we still don't know what happened to the AI weapons tech

It seems like everytime we're going to solve a problem, it somehow ends up being ten times bigger.

But splitting up and running off the way Aaron did just now-isn't the answer to our issues.

I just need to remind him of that when I catch up to him.

"James!" I say as I hurry up to the Beta.

"Leah," he greets, his gaze running over me as if he's checking I'm not injured. "We should get you home. There's no need for you to stay here any longer. Our guys are taking care of the bodies--"

"I'm not going home," I tell him stubbornly, which he is obviously not impressed about. "You're taking me to wherever Aaron has gone."

Ryker arches an eyebrow, whether from my imperious tone, or my refusal to agree with James's plan to go home, I'm not sure,

"I'll leave you to sort out Lama Leah's wishes," Ryker says, sending me a nod of polite respect, before walking away.

"Leah," James says in an overly patient tone as he turns to me. "Aaron gave me strict instructions to take you home."

I cross my arms. "I'm fully aware of Aaron's penchant for giving orders that he thinks are for my own good. But haven't I proven time and again that I'm capable of far more than anyone has ever given me credit for? I'm Aaron's Luna. I've been an Alpha myself. Things are different now, and I think you know that."

James shoves a hand through his hair.

I can see he's torn.

He agrees with what I'm saying, but at the same time, he clearly feels bound by Aaron's orders as his Alpha.

His loyalty is admirable, and I know it's one of the things Aaron respects about him. I hate that I'm having to put him in a position where he's stuck between the different things Aaron and I both want.

"You don't have to take me yourself," I tell James in a quiet voice. "You only need to tell me where he went. When I get there, I'll just tell him I overheard you talking to someone else. I won't let him put the blame on you."

James sighs, and I can see I've won him over.

"It's my duty to protect you," James says. "More than that, it's my personal choice because I care about you. So no, I'm not going to let you go off by yourself."

"Thank you." Impulsively, I step forward and hug him, realizing James has become my best friend, and I didn't even realize it.

He's there for me exactly the way I need-in a purely platonic sense-and I don't need to worry he doesn't see my worth or won't listen to me rant about my husband and mate, and then gently offer surprisingly insightful advice.

He's done that for me a million times already, and I'm so grateful he's in my life.

"So, what happened, and where did Aaron go?" I ask once I step back again.

James looks at me, and I can tell whatever is coming, it isn't going to be pleasant.

"There was an attack on one of Aaron's properties," James says, leaving me confused.

“Which property? And why would that upset him so much?”

“Because it’s where Aaron’s been living the past few months. It’s not up to me to tell you anymore, you’ll understand when we arrive.”

James starts leading me out of the factory to where the SUVs are waiting

I feel a sense of foreboding, and wonder if I shouldn’t heed Aaron’s warning, and just go home to wait for him.

“James, where are we going?”

Chapter 230

AARON

The slaughter I find at the cabin is worse than the carnage I left behind at the factory where we fought Tobin and his men.

All of the guys I left behind to protect the property are dead.

Every single one of them.

Starting with the guys manning the gate and outer perimeter, all the way up the mountain to the cabin itself.

I can’t even imagine the number of wolves it must have taken to overwhelm and defeat my most highly-trained men.

My heart feels like it’s being slowly torn out of my chest as I desperately run into the cabin, only to find more of the same.

My dead men, and their last line of defense.

Worse, Lillian wasn’t spared.

I know in my heart she would have done everything to protect Ethan right up to her last dying breath.

I stagger a little as I walk through the cabin

I don’t know if I can bring myself to walk into Ethan’s nursery.

I know if I see the broken

body of my infant son in his crib, it will ruin me.

I will be broken, and nothing in the world will be able to pull me back from the madness.

But I have to know, so I force my legs to carry me the rest of the way until I’m standing in the doorway.

Weirdly enough, the room is pristine and completely untouched, as if the tide of violence didn’t quite reach this far.

Ethan’s crib is empty, and there’s no sign of blood or other trauma left behind.

And then I start noticing a few odd things,

His baby bag, car capsule, teddies, a blanket that’s usually on the rocking chair and a number of other items are missing.

I go back out into the main room of the cabin, forcing myself to ignore the carnage for the moment.

In the kitchen, while Ethan’s bottles of milk are made up for the day, labeled and still stored in the fridge, some of his spare bottles and the tin of baby formula are gone, along with all his pacifiers.

Hope sparks to life inside me, and my relief is so acute, I have to drop to my knees right there in the middle of the kitchen.

Whoever took Ethan, they also took a whole bunch of stuff with the clear intention to look after him.

It doesn’t make it any better or easier, but at least now I know he’s not dead, and maybe they don’t intend to kill him.

Faced with our missing son and the immediate need to get him back as soon as possible, I know I have to tell Leah as soon as possible

I should have told her sooner, I regret that I didn't..

Maybe none of this would've happened if I'd told Leah

Or then again, maybe Tobin would have used Ethan as bait today at the factory instead of my mate, and my son could have been hurt.

But that makes me wonder if Tobin somehow had something to do with Ethan's abduction. That he thought I would be dead by now, and had organized to have my son snatched at the very same moment he was killing me.

But to what end?

And where would he have instructed his men to take my son?

Tobin's pack lands and the Council chambers seem like the obvious places to start, and I vow I'm going to rip apart every possible location from foundations to ceilings until I've found my son, or someone tells me where he is.

I can't imagine the Council would condone child abduction, no matter how worried they are about me making a play for a seat at their table.

If I have to appeal to them-even hand myself over for crimes I didn't commit-and it helps me find Ethan that much faster, I don't care.

My life is nothing compared to the life of my only son.

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I get to my feet, planning to go to the Council chambers first.

I'll have to instruct James to send some more pack members to take care of the grim task in attending to all the bodies of our dead. men and Lillian.

It feels like our pack is at war all over again, and the loss of my sister and my parents is an acute pain, like it happened yesterday, not years ago.

As I cross the cabin, I hear the sound of a car engine.

I doubt it's my enemies. There's nothing left here except death.

And the mood I'm in right now, my enemies would be foolish to face me because I would slaughter them where they stand without mercy.

I think James has anticipated my needs as always, and already sent some of the guys up here to take care of things.

However, as I reach the threshold and step out of the cabin, the first person I spot is Leah.