

Bad Love 251

Chapter 251

AARON

It's been days down in this damp, dim cell with only Axel Sawyer as company across the corridor, apart from the silent, stone-faced Enforcers who bring our meals and won't answer any of our questions.

Within ten minutes of me being brought back down here after finally seeing Leah, Samsen and Petyr brought a couple of other Councilmembers down to act as witnesses while they questioned me and tried to make me incriminate myself.

But it's a bit hard to incriminate myself when I haven't actually done anything wrong.

Still, I've got no doubt they'll find some way to twist things I said to use as 'evidence' of my apparent nefarious plotting to gain a seat on the Council and overthrow the current regime simply because I have the power of three Alphas.

They can't conceive of me not doing that.

They can't fathom the idea that I just want to run my packs and live my life quietly with my mate and our son.

Because I know every **single power**-hungry member of the Council would overthrow their fellow Councilmembers if they had even a fraction of the power I've got, **so** it's impossible for them to imagine in their tiny selfish brains that someone might not want that.

Despite my initial reluctance, Axel and I have chatted quite a bit back and forth.

It's the only way to keep my sanity when I'm down here and I don't know what's happening with Leah.

I don't know how Axel has managed to stay sane after spending months here alone.

Of course, he's not mated and he's apparently already rogue, so maybe he's got no sanity left to lose.

However, he's proven to be pretty smart and level-headed for a rogue wolf.

He told me that the rumors about what he did in Texas weren't

true, that he was forced into that position, but won't explain anything else, and when I ask outright if he's really rogue or not, he refuses to directly answer.

We've just finished breakfast on what I've calculated is the fifth day when the doors open and a whole contingent of Enforcer wolves march in, led by Samsen.

I get to my feet, both uneasy and hopeful that something is finally going to change.

The problem is, I know that change is probably going to be a

death sentence for me.

“What’s going on?” I ask as Samsen stops in front of my cell.

One of the Enforcer guards steps in and hands me a new suit on a hanger, one of my own that I recognize. I assume I have

James to thank for picking it out.

“Get changed,” Samsen tells me. “Your trial starts in an hour.”

I

Of course, they don’t bother giving me any privacy, so I quickly

changed into the freshly pressed suit and then allow them the illusion of control by clicking cuffs around my wrists—obviously having forgotten what happened last time they put me in cuffs—before they march me from the cell.

“Good luck, partner,” Axel calls out as I step out into the corridor.

I send him a confident nod.

The only thing I’m confident about right now is the fact

that the Council wants to get rid of me in a way that looks legitimate so it won’t cause unease or unrest with the other

packs, but will serve as a warning to any other Alpha who ever considers taking on the power of more than one Alpha.

As I’m taken up to the ground floor, I find the Council building packed.

There are Alphas and Lunas and Betas and regular wolves everywhere. It’s like some sort of meeting has been called or election event is taking place.

I’m led to the main hall that’s been set up to more resemble a courtroom, it becomes apparent that everyone is here to watch the trial unfold, because they all start filling all the rows of seats.

The Enforcers sit me down in a specially designed seat inside this kind of open booth. It’s like an open frame of silver around

me so I can see out and everyone can see me like I’m a sideshow attraction, but supposedly it should stop me trying to escape.

Any other wolf, yes, but that silver isn’t going to slow me down

if I decided I want out.

After a few minutes, Leah is led in and I’m glad to see she’s not

cuffed.

She gets sat in another specially designated seat on the opposite side of the hall, but at least she's not trapped behind

silver and being treated like a criminal.

She sends me an apprehensive look, and I send her a small smile of reassurance in return. She'll be okay. She'll make it home to Ethan.

I'm going to make damn sure of that.

Another fifteen minutes or so goes by, in which the rest of the seats in the hall fill up.

A senior Enforcer wolf steps up to the microphone and orders quiet, before announcing the arrival of the Council.

The hall is silent as the Council pompously file onto stage and take their seats at the long bench.

Samsen, as one of the most senior Elders, picks up a gavel and bangs it down.

"The Council Court will now come to order. The trial of Alpha

Aaron Rathborn for the charge of high treason will now

begin."

Chapter 252

LEAH

All I want to do is rush across the hall and pull Aaron out of that silver dock they've sat him in. To hold him, to know everything is going to be okay.

All I can do is sit there and tell myself that justice will be done, and Aaron will be found innocent.

It's been days, and I never heard anything else from Karolina.

I don't know what she's been doing, or if she's managed to help Aaron in anyway.

I had hoped she would be able to stop this trial altogether, but maybe that wasn't within her power.

Still, since I was brought into the hall and forced to sit as far away from Aaron as possible, I've been trying to catch Karolina's eye, but she's been keeping her attention split

between Aaron and whichever Councilmember is talking at any given time and the longer it goes on, the colder my blood

starts to run.

Eventually I have to wonder if she tried to help us at all.

What if she was just humoring me the day we spoke?

The trial itself quickly becomes a blur.

The Council have brought together witnesses who have to be false, testifying that they knew Aaron had plans to kill Tobin for his power and a seat on the Council.

They play a tape that's recorded from Aaron's interview in the cells, and it's clear to anyone with half a brain that they've edited it heavily and spliced it together to make Aaron appear guilty, threatening and almost unhinged, like he's already half

gone rogue.

I keep waiting to be called to give my testimony, so I can start clearing up all these falsehoods, but it doesn't happen.

They don't even put Aaron on the stand or ask him to defend himself.

Aaron sits there with a look of stony detachment on his face and doesn't say anything as the evidence builds and builds against him.

I find myself willing him to say something, anything.

A few times he looks across at me, as if he can feel my mental nudging—who knows, with our mating bond going both ways

now, maybe he can. I can certainly feel the quiet fury building within him. But he knows exploding or interjecting at this point will only make him look worse.

When I realize things seem to be wrapping up, I can't take it any longer.

"This is a travesty!" I shout, jumping to my feet. "Aaron is innocent. All of this so called evidence has been concocted to make him look guilty."

"Leah," Aaron says, and even though he doesn't say it very loud, and there's this swell of murmurs that ripple through the crowd, I still hear him loud and clear, like he's standing

right next to me and talking directly to me. "This won't help. Remember what I told you."

“I’m not just going to stand here while my mate, an innocent man, gets condemned for crimes he didn’t commit just because the Council are scared of him!”

At this, the swell of voices gets louder, and I can tell I’ve pissed off most of the Council.

“That is enough, Luna Leah!” Samsen shouts, banging the gavel. “Compose yourself, or you will be removed from this hall.”

I want to argue some more, desperation and fear for what is going to happen to Aaron are surging through me like acid.

“Leah,” Aaron says in a commanding Alpha voice. “Do as he says.”

I don’t want to be taken away, I need to be here to see what happens, so I relent, even though my instincts—my inner wolf -is telling me it’s the wrong thing to do.

That I should be fighting for my mate with every single atom of my being.

“The Council will now take a short recess to deliberate,”

Samsen announces, before the Councilmembers all get up and file off stage to the back area where they can have some

privacy.

Loud chatter immediately erupts through the hall, but

everyone stays seated, as if they expect the Council to come right back and they don’t want to miss a second of the unfolding drama.

I don’t care that we have an audience, I get up and dodge the Enforcers standing nearby to rush across the space between me and Aaron.

He stands when I reach him and extends his arms through the silver frame.

“Be careful of the silver, love, I don’t want you to get burned,” he tells me as he catches my hands.

“I don’t care about the silver, Aaron!” I cry, resisting the urge to tear the booth apart, even if it burns me down to the bones.

“How can you be so calm about this?”

He gives a brittle laugh. “I’m anything but calm, Leah. Telling myself that I need to get you home to Ethan is the only thing keeping me from losing it.”

“We have to do something!”

“Like what?” Aaron asks in a gentle voice, looking at me in a way that breaks my heart. “If we run, they punish our packs. And they never stop coming for us. They’ll hunt us down and

won’t show any mercy. At least this way, you’ll live, Leah. You’ll live for Ethan, and that’s the most important thing right now.”

Tears are streaming down my face again.

I’ve cried so much recently, I have no idea how I have any tears left.

“I can’t live without you,” I tell him, trying to hold back a sob.

“You’ll find a way,” he says confidently, but no less gently. “I know you will, Leah. You’ll live for Ethan.”

He’s right, but I still can’t accept this is happening right now.

Before I can say anything else, the Councilmembers are returning, and the Enforcers pull me away from Aaron and force me back across the hall to my seat.

Samsen bangs the gavel to settle the crowd. “The verdict will now be read.”

Chapter 253

I hold my breath, not sure I can hear this, but certain I can’t not hear it at the same time.

“By majority vote,” Samsen announces. “We find Alpha Aaron Rathborn guilty on all charges.”

Noise erupts through the hall, some people exclaiming in shock, others protesting, some even cheering.

It’s chaos.

But I’m stuck on the words he said.

By majority.

Does that mean not all of the Council believes Aaron is guilty?

If some Councilmembers don’t agree with the verdict, then surely they can’t go ahead with this.

There must be some sort of appeal process, some way to get this reversed.

I’m frozen and dizzy and feel sick, but also not surprised.

Aaron kept telling me how this was going to play out, but I didn't want to believe him.

"The hall will come to order!" Samsen shouts over the chaos.

Eventually everyone settles down and it becomes silent again.

My breathing sounds unusually loud, and I realize I'm on the verge of panic.

"Alpha Rathborn," Samsen says. "By virtue of a guilty verdict from this Council, you are sentenced to death under the next

full moon."

It's getting harder and harder to breathe.

I look over at Aaron, but he's closed his eyes and dropped his chin, and I can see the grief settling over him, as if maybe he didn't fully believe it until this moment either.

"Luna Leah, you will approach the stage," Samsen then says.

I don't react right away.

My legs are weak, and I don't think I can walk.

Eventually, however, one of the Enforcers steps over and grabs my arm, pulling me to my feet and then ushering me toward the stage.

Once I'm there, he releases me and I lock my knees, trying not to **sway**.

"Luna Leah," Samsen says, looking down on me. "The court is allowing you a choice in your fate. You may remain mated to Alpha Rathborn and risk your own death through the mating bond upon his execution, or you may choose to break the mating bond and possibly save yourself that fate. But,

be aware that

breaking the mating bond can in itself cause death, depending on how deeply you and Alpha Rathborn are

mated."

I want to glance at Aaron, but it's like I somehow locked all my

muscles, not just my knees.

Aaron and I are more deeply bonded than either of us could have ever imagined. And now it goes both ways because last time we were together, I claimed him just as he had claimed

1. me.

The chances of me surviving if we break the mating bond are probably slim.

But somehow, I know in my bones that if I don't break the mating bond, I won't survive Aaron's execution.

Our bond transcends death.

Aaron proved that when he brought me back from beyond death that night Liam betrayed me.

I close my eyes for a moment, forcing myself to breathe through the increasing panic and dizziness.

This is what Aaron wants, I remind myself.

This is what I need to do to have even a chance of getting home to Ethan.

"Luna Leah, we need a decision," Samsen pushes, clearly impatient to have this all over with.

"I—I choose," I managed to get out, though my tongue feels thick in my mouth. "I choose to break the bond."

There's another roar from the crowd.

They think I've betrayed Aaron by doing this.

They think I'm being dishonorable, being selfish.

No honorable wolf would choose themselves over their bond with their mate.

But I'm far beyond caring what anyone else thinks of me.

Right at this moment, it's all I can do to keep myself upright, since it feels like I'm drowning.

Samsen brings the crowd under control and this time when he looks at me, his expression is filled with disdain.

"So be it," he says. "Your mating bond will be broken."

It's the last thing I hear before the panic finally wins, stealing the last of my breath and making everything go black.

Chapter 254

AARON

Leah is pale and shaky standing in front of the stage. I can tell everything is taking its toll on her.

There's been so many shocks in such a short amount of time.

Finding out Ethan was alive, but then having him kidnapped by Adam.

Tobin luring her to that factory where he tried to kill me.

Leah unwittingly becoming the Havelock Alpha.

And now this.

Leah is strong, but a person can only take so much.

When Samsen announces the mating bond will be broken,

Leah crumples, collapsing to the floor and my heart slams into my ribcage.

"Leah!" I shout desperately.

I claw my way through the silver frame, shredding it like it's

paper. A couple of Enforcers start toward me, but I fling them out of the way as I rush across the space to where Leah is lying on the floor.

Once there, I go down to my knees and gather her into my arms.

Absolute chaos has broken out in the hall.

Apparently people are actually scared of me, because the second I broke free from that silver booth, both the audience and many of the Councilmembers immediately fled, as if I'm some rogue wolf who was going to indiscriminately slaughter my way through them all.

I don't care about anything except my wife.

"Leah," I murmur gently, brushing her hair back from her pale face.

Luckily, she's already coming around.

I glance up at the stage, where only Karolina and a handful of other Councilmembers I consider friends and allies have

remained. Samsen and Petyr are long gone, I note bitterly.

“Someone get a doctor!” I shout at them.

Karolina motions to one of the Enforcers, who rushes off to do her bidding.

“Bring your mate through this way,” Councilwoman Eleanor Ainsley says to me.

She’s one of the oldest Councilmembers, and once she was friends with my own mother.

I nod and then stand with Leah in my arms. I take the steps up to the stage and Eleanor leads me back through the curtains to a private room.

“Thank you, Councilwoman,” I tell her gratefully as I gently lay Leah down on the couch.

“I’m sorry this has happened to you, Aaron,” Eleanor tells me sadly. “I don’t believe this case they’ve brought against you, but I don’t have anywhere near the power that people like Samsen and Petyr have to be able to change things. Your mother would be horrified if she saw what has become of us all.”

“I appreciate that,” I tell her in return. “But can I ask you a favor?”

Eleanor nods.

“If—when Leah survives breaking the mating bond, and goes home to our son, will you check in on her every now and then?”

Neither of us have our own parents left any longer.”

Not that Roberts was much of a father to begin with.

Eleanor looks sad. “These wars have taken so much from so many packs. I never thought I would outlive all of my children, let alone lose them to such violence. And I fear the wars are about to ignite all over again.”

I should probably have an opinion about that, but apparently,

I won't be around to see it.

"Aaron?" Leah says, finally coming around properly. "What happened?"

"I think you fainted," I reply, sending her a reassuring smile. "A doctor will be here soon to check you out."

Leah rises up from the couch and locks her arms around my neck.

"Aaron, this can't be happening!"

I hug her back, wishing we could stay here forever and never let each other go.

But fate has other plans for us.

"I'm sorry, Leah," I whisper to her.

The doctor arrives then, and I move out of the way so she can examine Leah.

After taking Leah's vitals and asking a few questions, the doctor says Leah is probably just dehydrated and it turns out she hasn't been eating enough the past few days since the Council brought us here.

Someone fetches an orange juice for my mate as the doctor leaves again.

"I feel too sick to eat or drink anything," Leah tells me as I open the orange juice for her.

"Just a few sips. Remember, you need to get home to Ethan."

Tears form in her eyes, and she nods, then carefully sips the orange juice.

We sit there holding hands, silent while Leah slowly drinks the juice.

I think there must be so many things I need to say to her, but right now I can't think of a single one.

Just when Leah is finally getting some color back into her features, there's a commotion outside, and Samsen enters with a bunch of Enforcers, like he's too afraid to face me

without an army at his back.

Probably smart of him, all things considered.

“Now that Luna Leah is sufficiently recovered, it is time to proceed with the bond breaking ceremony,” Samsen says.

I curse as Leah becomes pale all over again.

However, I hold out my hand for her to take.

She sets the orange juice aside and bravely puts her hand in mine.

“They can break our mating bond, but it will never change how I love you, Leah, with all that I am,” I tell her as I pull her to her feet.

“I love you too, Aaron,” she replies, tears beginning to fall down her cheeks again.

“I’ll be there for you,” I vow. “To the very end.”

Chapter 255

LEAH

I still don’t feel steady as the Enforcers march us out of the room and back to the main hall, that is now empty of an audience.

At least we won’t have to do this part in front of all the regional Alphas and their Lunas.

Probably the only reason is because the Council keeps the method to breaking a mating bond tightly under wraps, only allowing it under strict circumstances that don’t crop up very often.

I feel like I’m walking in a nightmare.

All I can think over and over is that this can’t be happening.

Things can’t have spiraled this far out of control.

There has to be some way to stop this before our mating bond is broken and Aaron is executed under the next full moon.

But no last-minute stay of execution—literal or figurative—comes about.

Aaron and I are left standing on the stage hand-in-hand, while Samsen sets an old, leatherbound book on the table

next to a silver ceremonial knife.

There's only a few Councilmembers present—including Petyr,

but not Karolina—and I wonder if these are the ones who voted on Aaron's guilt, while the ones who thought he was innocent have made themselves scarce, maybe not wanting to witness this travesty.

"Are you ready to proceed with the ceremony?" Samsen asks indifferently.

It's clear he wants this over and done with.

He doesn't care that he's destroying lives based on false evidence.

"No," Aaron growls. "But we don't have a choice, do we? So let's get it over with."

Samsen's eyes narrow, obviously not like Aaron's tone or his arrogance, however, he turns to pick up the knife and book.

"Alpha Rathborn, as the claimant, it is also your duty to break the bond. You will draw blood with this silver knife, read the passage from this book, and then mark Luna Leah with your blood over the claiming bite to sever the bond."

Aaron nods stiffly, and my heart starts hammering in my chest.

I want to protest.

I want to run away.

I want to get down on my knees and beg for them to have mercy, to hold the trial again, fairly this time, but I know all those words will fall on deaf ears.

Aaron needs me to be strong.

Ethan needs me to be strong and survive this so I can go home to him, even if it means living without my mate and true love.

I lock every muscle in my body and force myself to breathe slowly and not hyperventilate or pass out again like I did earlier.

Aaron takes the knife and scores it across the meaty part of his palm, then looks down at the book, expression stony.

"I, Alpha Aaron Rathborn, of the Rathborn bloodline, deny you, Leah Roberts Rathborn, of the Roberts bloodline. No longer shall our bond exclude us from all others. No longer do I recognize you as my mate. No longer do I claim you as my own."

I feel a wrench inside me, like something starting to rend, and from the subtle flinch Aaron gives, I think he must feel it too.

“So it is done in blood, **so** it will be undone in blood,” Aaron finishes.

He steps forward and presses his palm over the spot on my neck where he bit me to claim me—a memory I don’t even have because I was technically gone from this world when it happened.

A split second later, it’s like my ribs are breaking. I cry out and fall to my knees, clutching my chest.

Aaron is half bent over, breathing hard.

Samsen takes the knife from him, glancing between us in confusion.

“The mating bond isn’t entirely broken,” Samsen says in bewilderment.

Not broken?

Then what the hell is all this pain?

“Leah,” Aaron says between pants. “She’s an Alpha in her own right. She claimed me.”

Samsen’s eyebrows shoot up into his hairline and there’s a shocked murmur of disgust between the other Councilmembers watching on.

“You allowed your Luna to claim you?” Samsen asks in revulsion. “What kind of Alpha are you?”

Chapter 256

Aaron straightens, expression furious and eyes glowing. “I allowed my Alpha—my equal—to claim me, yes. Do you have a problem with that, Samsen?”

Samsen gulps and backs up a step.

If I wasn’t in so much pain, I might have found it amusing.

“Then the ceremony will have to be repeated by Luna Leah to fully break the mating bond both ways,” Samsen says, glancing at me expectantly.

With some difficulty I force myself back to my feet.

Now, I’m scared.

If Aaron breaking his mating claim was that painful—a pain I’m still feeling radiating through my body like hot iron—then

what the hell is going to happen when I break my claim on

him?

My hand is shaking as I take the knife.

And once I'm holding it, suddenly I freeze.

I don't know if I can **do this**.

Before, I promised myself I would be strong because that's what Aaron and Ethan need me to be, but beneath all this pain, and the knowledge that I now have to do the same thing, cause both Aaron and myself even more agony, I don't know if I can do it.

"It's okay, Leah," Aaron says in a quiet voice. "I know this is hard, but you're brave and strong—you always have been. That's why I know you're going to survive this, so you can teach our son to be brave and strong as well."

I nod numbly, but I can't bring myself to look at Aaron as I slowly drag the sharp blade across my palm and blood wells.

My vision is blurred with tears, and I blink rapidly as I look at the ancient book Samsen is holding open.

"I, Alpha Havelock, Leah Roberts Rathborn, of the Roberts bloodline, deny you, Aaron Rathborn, of the Rathborn bloodline. No longer shall our bond exclude us from all others. No longer do I recognize you as my mate. No longer do I claim you as my own."

The pain is getting worse in my chest, but I push on.

"So it is done in blood, **so** it will be undone in blood."

Aaron **steps** in toward me—which is lucky, because my legs feel like stone, and I don't think I can move—so I reach up and **set** my bloody palm on his neck where I instinctively bit him last time we were together, not even realizing I was claiming him.

This time, the pain that rips through my body—rips through both of us—is more like an explosion.

The power of lightning striking a petrol tanker and exploding into a fireball.

I feel Aaron catch me against him, but it doesn't really help. It's like the agony just keeps on expanding and doubling back

on itself and building and building until reality is nothing but this haze of torturous pain.

It doesn't seem to end, and I distantly wonder if this is all I'll be for eternity now, just an embodiment of pain.

It's solid and unrelenting, I then start wondering if I can even survive it.

But that was always a risk, wasn't it?

That we wouldn't survive breaking this mating bond.

And we were so enmeshed, so deeply bonded in a way I doubt
few wolves have ever been.

I try to catch hold of thoughts of Ethan to keep me anchored to this world, but even that isn't
enough to force back the endless waves of agony.

The darkness is coming for me.

I can feel it.

But I will not go quietly into it.

Chapter 257

AARON

I thought absorbing Alpha powers the first time had been painful.

It had nothing on the absolute tearing going on within me once the mating bond broke.

It feels like my body is being ripped apart at a cellular level.

But through all that, I'm holding onto Leah, because I know she's going through the same thing.

I have no idea how long it goes on for, only that it doesn't feel like its ever going to end.

Somehow, through the pain, I start wondering if I'm going to
survive this after all.

Worse, I wonder if Leah will survive this.

I know she's strong, but she's been through so much already.

Eventually, however, the pain starts to feel less intense and I think maybe I'm through the worst of it.

I rouse myself enough to look blearily down at Leah, who is
limp and pale **in** my arms.

I'm not even sure she's breathing.

"Leah," I whisper, my voice hoarse.

However, before I can properly check that my mate—no, **not** my mate any longer—
is still alive, some Enforcers step up and drag us apart.

"Take Alpha Rathborn back to his cell," Samsen says somewhere nearby.

from

“No, wait!” I protest, trying to fight against the Enforcer’s hold,
but I’m as weak as a newborn lamb.

Fighting to survive the effects of breaking the mating bond has sapped all my strength.

“I need to know she’s okay!” I yell as the Enforcers drag me
away.

Samsen and Petyr step closer to Leah, laying where the other
Enforcer left her after pulling us apart.

Petyr kneels down and presses his
fingers into Leah’s neck, and then looks up at Samsen with a shake of his head.

My heart **stops.**

“Is she okay?” I shout, but the Enforcers are still dragging me away. “Tell me she’s alive!”

Neither Samsen nor Petyr bother to answer me, but Petyr
drags a cloth from the nearby table and drapes it over Leah’s still form.

No.

This can’t be happening.

She can’t be dead.

She was meant to survive to go home to Ethan.

Breaking the mating bond was meant to save her, not kill her.

If Leah is gone and I’m to be executed, what will happen to
Ethan?

I need to see her.

I need to check for myself that she’s
really gone, but I’m too wiped from the hours of unrelenting pain to fight against the two Enforcers
dragging me out of the hall and back down to my cell.

They unceremoniously dump me on the floor and then march out again, loudly
clanging the cell door behind themselves.

“**Say,** you don’t look so good,” Axel drawls from across the
corridor. “They’ve worked me over good a time or two, but I ain’t never been dragged back to my cell.”

I roll over so I can stare at him, and he must see something in my face, because his expression hardens.

“What did they do to you?”

“I had to break the bond with my mate,” I say, my words scratchy because my throat is raw.

“You did what?” Axel demands. “Why the hell would you do a thing like that?”

“I didn’t have a choice,” I say, dragging myself up so I’m at least sitting. “They’ve sentenced me to death for treason. I’m

going to be executed under the next full moon. I couldn’t risk

my mate dying when I did, we have a son. He’s not even six

months old.”

“Son of a bitch,” Axel mutters darkly. “At least you did everything you could to protect her, that’s understandable.”

I have to look away, and for the first time in my adult life, I feel

my **eyes** growing wet with tears.

Goddamn it.

I haven’t cried since the day I found out Alpha Roberts brutally murdered my sister.

“My mate...” I start, then have to pause when my voice comes out so rough, it’s barely a growl. “She didn’t make it.”

Chapter 258

LEAH

I blink my eyes open and grimace when I realize my whole body hurts.

I feel like I’ve been run over by a truck. And a train. And then a steamroller.

Every muscle aches and every joint hurts and for a minute I can’t remember what happened.

And I don’t know where I am.

In some kind of office, and I’ve been left lying on a narrow cot.

Just as I sit up, the door opens and Karolina comes in.

In that second, all the memories of the past days come flooding back, and I gasp, my hand flying to my chest.

I feel so empty.

The absence of my mating bond with Aaron is like a black hole inside me.

It’s a void at the very center of **my soul** that’s never going to

be filled.

“Good, you’re awake.” Karolina is carrying an electrolyte drink, which she brings over and hands to me.

I take it with a murmured thanks, immediately worried about how grim she looks and the general negative vibe she's giving off.

"Is everything okay?" I ask, but then feel stupid for asking that question.

Of course everything isn't okay.

I've just been forced to reject my mate and break our mating bond, and my husband—the love of my life—is going to be executed at the next full moon.

"I'm afraid I have some bad news," Karolina says, crossing her arms and avoiding my gaze.

I squeeze the electrolyte bottle until my knuckles ache, wanting to escape this room before I have to hear whatever it is that Karolina's going to tell me.

But I'm frozen in place and whatever this is, I can't escape it.

"What happened?" I ask, my stomach churning.

"**Aaron** didn't survive breaking the mating bond," Karolina

says in a no-nonsense voice, as if she doesn't really care, or is uncomfortable about having to impart this news, and just

wants it over and done with.

And then her words really hit me.

Didn't survive.

"He- He's dead?" I stutter out in disbelief.

Karolina nods, expression even more closed off.

"Yes, I'm afraid so."

"But he's so strong," I reply, totally bewildered.

With everything else going on, Aaron not surviving when we broke the mating bond never even crossed my mind.

"He had the power of three Alpha's!" I just can't wrap my head around how I could have survived and Aaron didn't.

"And sometimes it's the most powerful who fall the hardest," Karolina **says**.

"**No**," I whisper, a shudder of grief going through my body, painful and twisting, like I'm feeling the mating bond breaking

all over again. "This can't be happening."

"You should also know," Karolina continues, as if my whole

world isn't falling apart around me right now. "In light of these events, the Council have decided to let you off from your part in Tobin's death with light punishment. You may retain the title of Alpha in name only. The control of all four packs—Rathborn, Roberts, Leithrow and Havelock—will remain under Council control for the foreseeable future."

I'm nodding as if I agree, but in that second, I can't care about any of it.

Not when I'm now existing in a world where Aaron is no longer alive.

"I've already called Rathborn mansion and told them the news," Karolina says curtly. "Someone will be here shortly to pick you up and take you home."

She doesn't wait for me to say anything else, simply turns on her heel and leaves the room, shutting the door soundly behind her.

All I can do is sit there in frozen, silent grief.

I don't want to move, because that's going to make it real.

And I can't cope with Aaron's death being real.

I just can't.

I don't know how to live when Aaron isn't by my side.

I have no idea how long I sit there, unmoving, barely breathing.

Time has ceased to have any meaning.

Eventually, however, the door opens and James steps inside.

His eyes are red-rimmed, his expression is haggard and there are bruises beneath his eyes as if he hasn't been sleeping.

Seeing him abruptly brings reality rushing back in.

I gulp a breath, but then I can't breathe anymore because I'm sobbing so hard, it feels like my ribs are going to crack.

James falls to his knees in front of me and wraps his arms around me, wrapping me in a cocoon of sadness.

He's whispering, I'm sorry over and over, but none of this is his fault, and Aaron was a brother to him in everything but blood.

This must be almost as painful for him,

Eventually, James practically lifts me to my feet. "Come on,

Leah, I'm **not** letting you **stay** here a second longer."

I let him lead me out through the hall, but everything is a blur.

It's not until we're in the SUV and driving home that my mind partially shifts out of the shock of what's happened.

"How's Ethan?" I ask, my voice a croak.

James gives a little smile, and I wonder if he's personally been caring for Ethan these past days, that's partly why he looks so tired.

"He's good. Great, actually. That's one hell of a kid, you got there, Luna." James cuts me an affectionate look. "He'll be happy to have his mama back."

I want to bitterly argue that Ethan doesn't even know me.

But that's not fair on either of us.

Nor to the memory of his father who did everything in his power to protect **us**, up until the very end when he sacrificed his life for mine.

The grief comes over me again like a dark, drowning wave.

But somehow, I have to keep struggling through for Ethan.

It's just me and him now, and I won't forsake Aaron's **memory** and his dedication to being a father by being any less than the perfect mother to our son.

No **matter** what **it costs** me.

Chapter 259

It's not until we roll into the wide, circular driveway that **it** finally hits me.

"Oh my god!" I gasp, my hand flying over to clamp on James's forearm.

"What's wrong?" James asks with wide eyes, his head snapping around as if looking for a threat.

"When Aaron died, where did his Alpha powers go? Not just the Rathborn powers, but for all three Alphas?" I demand.

James opens his mouth, but then seems to realize he doesn't have an answer. "I don't know."

"You don't think-" My heart seizes like I've been shocked with a livewire. "Ethan."

James's expression immediately drops into one of dread. "He was fine when I left him-"

I don't even bother to wait for James to finish.

If Alpha powers aren't purposefully deemed an heir-like my father did with me by having Adam inject me with my father's

blood-or they're not intercepted by another powerful Alpha in combat, and again with blood-like Aaron did when he took on the Roberts Alpha powers the night Liam killed me-then they go to the next in the bloodline.

Which in this case is my baby son, Ethan.

I rush into the house, and then realize I don't even know where to start looking for him in this giant mansion.

One of the housekeepers is passing by, and I grab at her like I'm a woman possessed.

"Where is Ethan?" I demand breathlessly.

"Upstairs in his crib, napping," she replies in wary confusion.

I let her go and run for the door as James finally catches up to me, tossing an apology and some kind of explanation to the housekeeper as he goes by.

The only crib I remember seeing was in Aaron's bedroom, so that's where I go.

I arrive breathless and already prepared for the worst.

After everything that's happened-after losing Aaron to the mating bond-I'm expecting another blow.

Ethan is lying in his **crib**, right **where** the housekeeper **said** he would **be**.

And he's fine.

He's babbling and drooling and kicking his legs-not napping, but also content to be staring up at the colorful mobile someone has hung with little wolf, moon and star shapes dangling from it.

I sag in relief, and then
my knees give out so that I end up kneeling next to the crib, my brow pressed into the cool wood as I watch my son through the slats.

My whole world.

My last piece of Aaron.

:

“He’s okay, thank God,” James says from just above me, and I
didn’t even realize he was there.

He drops a hand on my shoulder and so I lean into his leg.

“What are we going to do without him?” I whisper, and I
distantly realize my cheeks are wet.

I don’t even know why I’m crying any longer.

Relief that **Ethan** is fine—in which case I wonder which Alpha
on the Council intercepted **Aaron’s** Alpha power—or because
a few hours ago, the love of my life died because I chose to
break the mating bond.

Maybe it’s better this way.

Aaron got to go out on *his* terms instead of walking to his own execution under the next full moon.

“We keep going, Leah,” James says quietly. “Because that’s
what he would want us to do.”

I nod, because I know that down to my bones.

And looking at Ethan, I can almost believe that one day I might be okay.

But today?

Right now?

I have no idea how I’m supposed to pick myself up.

Chapter 260

AARON

It’s barely a few hours later when Karolina comes to see me.

Axel has been surprisingly good company.

Angry on my behalf, and sympathetic, but not in a way that's grating.

He's chatted to me on and off, stuff he's observed about the Council and Montana in general compared to Texas, and a few stories from growing up in the Lone Star State.

Trying to keep me distracted from my grief.

As if such a thing were even possible.

But when Karolina comes down, his expression goes icy and he moves to the back of his cell, settling in with his arms crossed and the wolf glowing in his eyes.

I remember he said something about them working him over and wonder if Karolina had something to do with it.

Exactly what kind of information could they have been trying,

G

to get out of him anyway?

"What do you want?" I ask her flatly when she stops in front of my cell.

"I'm sorry about your mate," she says in a way that makes her sound not sorry in the least.

"No you're not," I tell

her, because I'm sick of playing their games, making nice and pretending to respect a bunch of people who I think are selfish, power-hungry egomaniacs.

If I'd known they were going to railroad me into an execution for treason, maybe I would've made a grab for a Council seat

or two after all.

"Like I said, what do you want?"

"The Council have decided to move up your execution date," Karolina says, and though she's going for casual, I pick up a

tension beneath her words.

"Why?" I ask suspiciously. "What's happened? Are the other Alphas pushing back against your sham trial? Are you really that surprised?"

She **crosses** her arms, and irritation flits over her face before

she can hide it.

"As the Council has taken control of your packs, we will get your affairs in order."

"Get my affairs in order?" I repeat. "What does that even mean?"

But then it dawns on me.

The entire reason for this farce of a trial.

The succession of my Alpha powers.

With everything that's been going on, I've barely thought about it.

But then another thought—a terrible thought—occurs to me and I step closer to the bars.

"I need to call James! Leah died- The Havelock Alpha powers

"Didn't go to your son, he's fine," Karolina interrupts with a slight smile, and I wonder who they did **go** to.

Who in that room intercepted the Havelock Alpha powers and has gained themselves another pack?

"As for your own Alpha powers," Karolina continues. "You will provide the Council with a donation of your blood, and the

Alpha powers of **your** three packs will be distributed to the three **most** worthy Councilmembers."

I give a grating laugh. "Over my dead body."

My mind is already racing, thinking how I might be able to contact James and make sure he's the one to receive my Alpha powers as my heir when I'm executed.

He's the only one I trust to take care of Leah, Ethan and the packs.

Karolina's eyes narrow.

"Do not mistake me, Alpha Rathborn. You will cooperate and you will give us your blood. Or you can count on your remaining days here to be as miserable and uncomfortable

as humanly possible. Don't believe me? Just ask Axel here how

he's found out accommodations."

From across the corridor, a low threatening growl emanates from the shadows.

"Really, Aaron, you can give us your blood...or we can take it." Karolina smirks, before turning on her heel and striding away.

"One of these days," Axel says in a low threatening voice once she's gone. "I'll be free of this cell. And the first thing I'm gonna **do is** make sure that woman meets her Maker."