

Bad Love 261

Chapter 261

LEAH

By the time evening rolls around, I'm exhausted.

I've divided my time between accepting condolences from pack members who've come to see me—at the same time, needing their own comfort because their Alpha is dead and the uncertainty over who will be our new Alpha is terrifying- and looking after Ethan.

It occurs to me that we're going to have to have a funeral, and that sends me into a mini breakdown, somehow making everything real all over again.

James comes to find me where I'm curled up in the middle of Aaron's bed, hugging his pillow as if it can somehow bring him

back to me.

"You should eat something, Leah," he says gently as he sits on the edge of the bed.

"I'm not hungry," I reply automatically, even though I know he's right.

"You don't have to come down," he tells me with a slight frown.

"I'll have the chef send something up."

I nod absently, even though I doubt I'm going to be able to stomach much food.

"Are you okay?" James asks after a few silent moments, and we both kind of smile sadly because we know that's a dumb question.

With Aaron gone, neither of us are okay.

"I was just thinking about the funeral. We'll have to contact the Council and organize for them to return' Aaron's—"

I swallow, unable to say the rest of the words.

"I'll take care of it, Leah," James says in a rough voice. "You shouldn't have to do that."

I nod, and a few more tears escape.

I wipe at them in annoyance.

All I seem to do these days is cry.

But can anyone blame me, considering everything I've lost?

"This isn't right," I say to James, some of my annoyance at myself giving way to anger toward the Council for the hand

they played in my tragedy. "The Council can't get away with this. The only reason they went after Aaron was because they were scared of his Alpha powers. He didn't even do anything wrong."

"I know," James says softly with a sigh. "But what are we going to do? Fight the whole Council? That'll land us right where Aaron ended up."

"I don't know," I mutter bitterly. "I just know I can't stand to watch them get away with it."

James nods and I can tell he feels bad about not having an answer for me.

Then, as my thoughts are spinning from one thing to the next, another thought occurs to me.

Aaron was helping me search for the missing AI tech that has the potential to kill thousands if not millions of people if it ended up in the wrong hands.

I'm on my own with this massive problem yet again, and I have no idea how to solve it.

"James," I say, looking up at him. "I'm going to need your help."

James drops his hand on my knees, squeezing comfortingly.

"Anything you need."

I send him a thin smile. "You might regret saying that."

I then launch into the long story about the AI tech, my father, brother, and then how the tech went missing while I was in a coma and Aaron had been helping me try to find it, but with everything else going on around us, our efforts have been hampered.

By the time I'm done, his eyebrows are practically in his hairline.

"Leah, that is absolutely nuts," he tells me in disbelief.

"I know. But it's also my responsibility. I need you to pick up where Aaron left off and help me find it."

James frowns, but nods anyway. "I don't have as many connections as Aaron had, but I'll do everything I can to help you. We definitely have to make sure it doesn't fall into the wrong hands."

James's words remind me that Karolina said something similar when I spoke to her.

I start thinking back and realize that unlike James, she didn't seem that surprised at the time when I told her the story...as if maybe she already knew something about it.

I sit up as her words play back in my mind.

*I'm personally invested in making sure **that** AI tech ends up in the right hands...*

There was something about the way she said that. Something sly and underhanded.

My pulse picks up as an entirely new thought occurs to me.

What if Karolina knows something about where the AI tech ended up?

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The next day I get up early, and after making sure Ethan is changed and fed, I take him down to the office where I asked

one of the housekeepers to set up a playpen for him. They've brought out this little bouncy thing that I can strap him into and it has a mobile attached to it that plays music as it spins.

Ethan seems happy enough to lay in it, but I leave it close to where I'm sitting and angled toward the desk so we can see

each other.

Then I start digging into Roberts Corp files for the past seven months to make sure I didn't miss something the first time I checked for clues about what's happened to the project that was meant to be handed over to the military.

James joins me mid-morning, bringing a bottle for Ethan, who is almost due for his nap.

After I've fed him and he's lulling off to sleep, James offers to take him up to his crib.

Ethan fusses a little when I hand him over, but James rocks and shushes him until he settles down again.

While Aaron and I were kept by the Council for all those days,

it seems James got the hang of looking after my son.

After they're gone, I switch my attention back to the computer, combing through information about the various properties and land-holdings Robert Corp has in its portfolio.

I'm about to keep clicking onward when I notice something

weird.

One of the properties that's meant to be condemned has a monthly budget for upkeep..

I've found a few weird financial things like this—it seemed my father and Liam had come up with all sorts of inventive ways to move money around in creative ways.

I decide to see if I can figure out where the money was actually going—probably into the AI tech program like the rest of it had been—however, it's quickly apparent that isn't the

case.

In fact, the money is still regularly being drawn down every month, no one ever put a stop to it after Liam died.

Even weirder, it does actually seem to be going into maintenance and utilities of the property—water, electricity, even food and other expenses.

Which makes absolutely **zero** sense if the property is really condemned and abandoned.

Something is going on there, and I need to know what.

Another secret project of some kind?

Or is it possible I've just located where the AI tech got moved to, and whoever is now overseeing it?

I scribble down the address and have just jumped up from the desk when James returns from putting Ethan down for his nap.

"Whoa," James says as he catches me rushing across the office. "Where's the fire?"

"I found something!" I exclaim. I hold up the piece of paper with the address written on it. "And we're about to go find out what that something is."

It's not until we're in the SUV with James behind the wheel that he finally asks me what we're going to check out, and I explain **to** him about the financial anomaly.

He agrees it seems weird, especially as the drive takes us into remote woodland.

"Why would my father need property all the way out here?" I wonder out loud, even though I know James can't answer the question. "There's nothing around for miles."

"Whatever it was, knowing your father, it was definitely sketchy."

I send him an unimpressed look, but he only grins back at me.

Fine. I'm ready to admit my father was flawed and didn't have anyone's best interests at heart when he made all the choices he made that led him to being killed by his own son for nothing other than greed.

A few minutes later, we turn into a long narrow drive. Halfway along it, there's a tall chain-link fence with a gate blocking anyone from going any further.

James pulls up the SUV and we both get out, only to find the gate has an electronic lock on it.

“What the hell was my father keeping here?”

Chapter 263

I’m debating whether to call our security company and find out whether this property is registered with them, and if they might be able to give me remote access, when one of those ATV four-wheeler vehicles comes from the other direction.

The two guys sitting in it are wearing security uniforms, but I recognize them as Roberts pack.

“Luna Leah,” one of them says in surprise as he walks closer to the gate. “We weren’t expecting you.”

“Well,” I say, crossing my arms and gathering all my formidable Alpha power now that I’ve got it back again. “Considering both my father and my brother are dead, you had to assume I was going to become aware of this little project at some point, didn’t you?”

The two men share a quick, concerned look, clearly unsure what they’re meant to do.

Is it possible that my father or Liam left strict instructions that

I was not to know about this place, let alone come here?

But why?

“How can we help you, **Luna?**” one of them finally asks me.

“You can start by opening this gate.”

They share a look again, this time one of resignation.

It’s not like they can defy me. I’m pack Luna and an Alpha as well.

But it seriously makes me worried about what on earth my father and Liam were either doing or keeping here.

While the two men open the gate, James and I get back into the SUV.

“This is totally weird, right?” I say to James as we roll through the gate.

“Definitely weird,” James replied in concern, while we wait for the gate to slide closed behind us again.

After that, we follow the ATV up the drive.

I have no idea what I’m expecting, but the perfectly maintained—if not gorgeous—house and garden are definitely

not it.

“What the hell?” I mutter as we pull up in the driveway, just in front of a detached garage.

As I get out of the SUV, I notice all of the house's windows have bars on them.

Not just any bars.

Silver bars.

I have no idea what to make of this, but my heart is skipping in my chest, and I can't think of a single reason why my dad would need a house out in the middle of nowhere with silver

bars on the windows.

Unless he was keeping someone—a wolf—captive.

But who?

And why?

James follows me, looking just as confused and concerned as I feel, as we hurry toward the porch steps.

Once there, we find a silver barred door in place of a screen door.

I look to where the two guards are slowly walking up the short. stairs to join us, looking even more worried and resigned.

"Open this door!" I tell them, underlying my voice with a whole lotta Alpha command.

"Luna Leah, I don't think that's a good—" one of them starts, though he does so timidly, as if knowing it's not a good idea to question me, but still struggling with whatever standing orders my father or Liam left him.

"Open. This. Door. Now!" The words are a threatening growl, and the two men scramble to comply.

Once both the outer door and inner door are unlocked—and it takes some moments because there are a ridiculous number of locks on both of them—they step back and aside, avoiding

my gaze.

I march forward and yank open the door, James only a step behind me.

Inside, the interior is nicely decorated and homey.

Someone obviously lives here, and if not for the fact there are bars on the windows and all the doors are locked, I might have said they had a nice life.

However, it's all very impersonal.

There are no photos or personal items anywhere, as though whoever lives here isn't allowed to truly be comfortable in this space.

I suppose that makes **sense**, given that it's basically a fancy prison.

The sound of our entrance has obviously drawn someone's attention, because a moment later, we hear the sounds of footsteps coming down the stairs.

James and I both glance at each other and then walk around so we can see the bottom of the stairs where they come down in the corridor, just across the hall from the open double doors of the sitting room.

A woman slows as she gets to the bottom of the stairs, obviously not expecting to see James and I standing there.

Something about her looks vaguely familiar, but I can't put my finger on what it is, because I'm sure I've never met her

before.

That's when I realize she's not looking at me.

She's staring at James like she can't believe her eyes.

James, meanwhile, has completely frozen beside me, and he looks more like he's seen a ghost.

What the hell is happening here?

"Who are

you?" I demand into the strained silence.

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My words seem to shock James out of his stupor somewhat.

"Emily!" he says in disbelief.

Emily—whoever the hell she is—jumps down the last few steps and rushes to cross the distance between them, throwing herself into his waiting arms.

"James! Oh my god!"

She's crying and even James's eyes look suspiciously damp as he blinks rapidly while holding the woman tight against him.

"Can someone please tell me what the hell is going on here?"

I demand, feeling a little bad that I'm intruding on what is

obviously a tender reunion.

James finally lets Emily go and she steps back, looking at me with curiosity and confusion.

“Leah, this is Emily Rathborn.”

It takes a second for that to sink in.

“Rathborn?” I repeat in confusion.

“Aaron’s **sister**,” James says in awe and wonder, like he **still can’t** believe she’s here, even though she’s standing right in

front of him.

“Aaron’s sister...” I repeat, and I know I sound dumb, but my brain is just refusing to put these pieces together. “Aaron’s

sister who was killed by my father during the war? The

same reason why the Rathborn pack brutally retaliated and slaughtered my mother, leading to me being sent to live with Aaron as a sacrificial peace offering?”

Emily’s eyes suddenly narrow.

“Are you Alpha Robert’s daughter?” she demands furiously.

I feel like admitting to it isn’t going to end well, but it’s not like I can deny the fact.

“What about it?” I demand, tilting my chin up.

Emily doesn’t answer.

Her eyes glow with her wolf, and next thing I know, she’s sprung at me, claws and fangs ready to rip me to shreds.

Unfortunately for Emily, she either doesn’t realize or doesn’t

care that I’m an Alpha.

I’m **faster and stronger than her**.

I easily dodge her attack and turn the tables, grabbing her before she can swing around to attack me again and pin her against the nearby wall, twisting her arm up behind her so she can’t move.

“Leah, don’t hurt her!” James says quickly.

“Get off me, you bitch!” Emily snarls, fighting against my hold, even though it must be painful.

“That’s Luna Bitch to you,” I tell Emily, growling the words low

in her ear. “You’ve got two choices. You either bow to me and

accept me as Rathborn and Roberts pack Luna, or I leave you locked up here to think about it for another decade.”

She struggles for another second, but quickly works out it’s futile. She can’t match my Alpha strength.

“Fine!” she snaps, finally giving up the fight. “I can accept you’re Luna of our pack, but I will never respect you and I sure as hell won’t bow to you.”

It’s better than nothing.

I can’t really blame her for hating me since my father has held her captive here for **so** many **years**. **I’d** probably feel the same **if** I was in her shoes.

I just need to know she’s not going to try to rip my throat out the second my guard is down.

“Try anything like that again, and you’ll be banished instead of reunited with the pack. Do I make myself clear?”

She jerks a nod, but I can still feel fury in every line of her body.

Still, I cautiously let her go and step back again, returning to stand next to James.

“Are you okay?” he asks me, touching my shoulder gently.

I nod as Emily turns around and glares daggers at James.

“Why are you asking her if she’s okay?” Emily demands. “I’m the one who’s been locked up here for half a lifetime!”

“Because she is my Luna,” James answers simply. “And because I guard her with my life, as per your brother’s standing orders.”

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“I can’t believe Aaron actually married you,” Emily says bitterly, and the hatred I can see she has for me and my pack, it’s the kind of soul–deep loathing that a person can never shake.

“Aaron **loves** me,” I correct, and then **realize** what I said.

My throat immediately swells with the need to **cry**.

“Aaron loved me,” I say brokenly, and I feel James wrap his arm around my shoulder.

“What do you mean?” Emily asks in alarm. “What happened to my brother?!”

Chapter 265

I'm grateful for James's solid, silent support next to me.

Honestly, I don't know how I would be getting through these agonizing days without him.

"Aaron died," I say, cutting my gaze away from Emily.

The words are physically painful to say, like they're being wrenched out of my chest.

"We had no choice but to break our mating bond after the Council sentenced Aaron to death for treason. I had to survive

for our son, Ethan."

Emily gasps, and I can't help but look back at her.

"Aaron has a son?"

"That's right, Emily," James puts in with fondness in his voice.

"You're an aunt. You're going to love Ethan when you meet him."

"Oh my god," Emily whispers, seeming to not know what to do with this information.

Except then **apparently** she decides.

"**It** should have been you," she says viciously. "You should have died, and Aaron should have survived breaking the mating bond!"

"Even if he had," James says, starting to sound annoyed now. "The Council still would have executed Aaron for treason. He had the power of three Alphas, and the Council was scared about what he planned to do with that power. They needed an excuse to stop him, and they found it. Ethan would have been an orphan if things had played out that way. Is that what you want for your nephew?"

Emily at least has the good sense to look somewhat abashed at James's words.

"Besides," he continues. "Leah is the one who figured out you were being held out here. Both Alpha Roberts and her brother Liam took the information to the grave with them. So, if it wasn't for Leah, you might never have been found at all!"

Emily crosses her arms grudgingly, and I doubt I'm ever going to get any gratitude for getting her out of the gilded prison my father had been keeping her in.

"Alpha Roberts and that asshole Liam are dead?" Emily says. "Well, at least there's some good news!"

I roll my eyes.

Honestly, Emily is going to be the kind of handful I don't even want to think about right now.

I really didn't need this on top of everything else happening, but I'm glad she's alive, and I know the Rathborn pack will be overjoyed to welcome her back into the fold.

"Come on, let's go home," I say. "I want to be there for Ethan's next feed."

James nods and then motions to Emily.

"I'm really leaving?" she says anxiously, as if she can't quite believe it.

Does she seriously think I could find out she's being held here and just walk away, leaving her to the same isolated, lonely fate my father and brother did?

She really doesn't think highly of me at all.

But I suppose that's no surprise considering what she's endured at the hands of Roberts pack.

"Yes, Emily, you're really leaving," James says gently, but then sends her a quick, cheeky smile. "Unless you want **to** stay?"

"No way in hell!" Emily replies adamantly. **"Let's get out of here."**

I let Emily walk ahead of me—honestly, I don't trust her at my back in the slightest bit—and then follow James and Emily out to the waiting SUV.

I pause to tell the two men to report back to Roberts pack lands where I'll have someone reassign them new duties, and by the time I've done that, I turn to find Emily has helped herself to the front seat of the SUV and is talking animatedly

to James, probably catching up on all the things that've happened in the Rathborn pack since she's been gone.

I get into the backseat and then get to spend the whole drive back listening to the pair chat like the long-lost friends they are.

As we swing around the circular driveway of Rathborn mansion, there's another SUV pulling in, and someone is getting out of the backseat when James pulls our vehicle to a stop.

Emily suddenly squeals in excitement and rushes out of the car.

That's when I get a good look at who it is, and my heart drops into my shoes.

Jessica.

Chapter 266

AARON

Another day has gone by, and I'm aware of the minutes trickling away like sands draining rapidly through an hourglass.

The final moments of my life are running away from me while I'm stuck in this cell, and I don't even know when it's all going to be over, only that Karolina said they'd moved up the execution date.

Axel and I have talked escape plans, but I know it's more for distraction than any real ability to be able to do anything.

Axel says he's tried to escape several times in several different ways, so those plans go out the window right away.

Maybe there's a chance I could fight my way out.

I have the power of three Alphas, I could probably get pretty damned far.

But there's any number of Enforcer wolves and regular Council members between me and freedom, and despite my abilities, I can **still** be killed.

At this point, trying **to escape seems** like it would only **hasten my** inevitable death, and the Council are known to be vindictive. The last thing I'd want is my escape attempt

somehow coming back on Ethan or my pack, leaving them

vulnerable to be punished by the Council for something they didn't even have a part in.

I'm already worried about how they're going to fare under whatever new Alpha they get once I'm gone.

Late that day, the doors open and Samsen comes strutting in, along with a dozen Enforcers.

Clearly they're not taking any chances with me, and are ready to stop me with extreme force if I so much as look like I'm

going to try anything.

"Samsen," I say snidely from where I'm sitting on my cot, not even bothering to rise.

He doesn't deserve the respect of me meeting him on my feet. "To what do I owe the non-pleasure of this visit?"

"It's time for your blood donation," Samsen says, motioning to one of the Enforcers who is holding a tray of equipment needed to draw blood.

"I'm sorry, my what now?" I asked, even though I heard him **correctly** and already knew **this** was coming **since** Karolina told me. "I'm not donating anything."

Samsen looks pissy about this, but motions the Enforcer forward to open the cell door.

Now, I do get to my feet. But I cross my arms and widen my stance, letting Alpha aggression roll off me and making it clear nobody better touch me until I'm good and ready.

"Tell me which three Council members are getting my Alpha powers, and I'll think about cooperating."

"I don't have time for your games, Alpha Rathborn!" Samsen snaps impatiently. "Cooperate, or we'll be forced to give you a wolfsbane sedative."

"It's a simple question," I reply in a deceptively mild voice, glaring at the Enforcer who is edging into my cell.

It's clear he wants to run as far away from me as fast as possible. Sweat dots his brow. But he also knows he can't defy Samsen without serious consequences.

"Just tell me who, and it'll make all this much easier," I continue after a moment.

Samsen huffs in anger.

"Myself, Karolina and Petyr," he answers angrily. "Happy **now?**"

“Not in the least,” I growl, letting my wolf rise up, and then stepping forward to grab the Enforcer who was dumb enough to step into my cell.

I grab him by the shoulder and ram him into the wall, knocking him out cold.

Samsen screams at the other Enforcers to do something, even as he backpedals to put as many of them between me and him as possible.

I make my way through maybe three more Enforcers, and manage to get out of my cell, before there’s a hollow whump noise and then something hits me in the chest.

I look up to see one of the Enforcers staring at me with wide eyes over a tranquilizer gun.

“Son of a bitch!” I growl furiously, lunging forward.

But halfway into the action, it’s like my muscles turn to jelly and I abruptly collapse in a heap on the floor.

My eyelids are trying to drag themselves closed, but with the last of my energy, I glare up at Samsen.

“You’re going to **pay for this. Even if I have to come back from beyond the grave** to exact my revenge.”

Chapter 267

LEAH

I don’t know why I’m surprised to find out Emily and Jessica were best friends, considering Aaron and James are equally close, and they all grew up together.

I climb slowly out of the SUV and then walk around to join James.

“Did you know she was coming home?” I ask him, trying to keep the accusation out of my voice.

He knows how contentious things have been between me and Jessica over the years, with Aaron firmly in the middle. The least he could have done was given me a heads up.

“No, I didn’t know,” James says, shaking his head.

I can tell he’s being truthful, so that alleviates some of my annoyance at least.

Aaron had mentioned that Jessica had taken an extended vacation and gone to stay with some relatives in another pack somewhere—at his expense of course—and it’d been easy to put her from my mind and simply believe she might never come back.

Her timing, however, couldn't have been worse.

I don't want to have to deal with her and all that petty rivalry right now with everything else going on.

Eventually, Emily and Jessica are over the shock of their

unexpected reunion and I slowly walk toward the mansion, debating whether I should ask Jessica why she's come back.

As I get closer, her eyes narrow, and that pretty much seals the deal for me.

Jessica and her nastiness are not worth my time or energy right now.

I ignore her and keep walking, but I can hear her and Emily whispering between themselves, and know they're talking about me.

Emily hates me for who I am, and Jessica hates me for what she thinks I took from her.

There is no way in which having them together and against me is going to end well.

As I reach the doorway, I hear James greet his sister.

"Jessica, I didn't know **you** were coming home," **he** says, and I pause just inside the doorway where they can't hear me to listen in.

"How could I not come home? I heard about what happened **to** Aaron. Basically, every wolf in Montana is talking about it. I left to come home as soon as I heard. Aaron was the love of my life. He should have been my mate. I needed to be here for the funeral."

I spin and walk away, not waiting to hear what James says in response to that.

Jessica's words make my stomach tighten with an old, familiar churn of jealousy and anger.

She doesn't have the right to claim Aaron was the love of her life.

I doubt she knows what real love even feels **like**.

The kind of soul-deep connection that Aaron and I shared was nothing compared to whatever young romance they had before I came along.

And I'm sure she's going to swan around the mansion and grounds, acting like she's the widow and her whole life is over while I do the real work of looking after Aaron's son, seeing to the welfare of the packs and running the businesses.

Jessica **doesn't** have a clue, and I can only hope she'll go back **to** wherever she was once the funeral is over.

However, with Emily back in the picture, I get the feeling hoping Jessica will leave might be wishful thinking.

I **go** upstairs and find Ethan with Tera. As I'd hoped, it's time for his next feed.

I sit in the new nursery that James put together while Aaron and I were being held captive.

It's in a room across from Aaron's bedroom, and I have to say, James did a wonderful job.

There's a comfortable recliner/rocker chair to sit in while I'm feeding or settling Ethan, and I sink into the comfortable chair with Ethan in my arms, fussing for his bottle.

As he starts greedily gulping down his milk, I smile and feel grateful for this small slice of quiet and peace with my son.

These moments are few and far between, with our lives being **so** complicated like they are, so I want to make sure I treasure the times when it's just me and him, and things are simple.

Quickly though, as the bottle empties and Ethan starts lulling off to sleep, my mind starts going back to all the problems I

need to take care of.

One of the biggest being the damn AI tech.

I was really hoping we might have found it today.

Instead, James and I ended up bringing home a miracle that's probably going to end up being yet another complication, if Emily's attitude toward me is anything to go by.

”

I'm running out of places to look **for** the AI tech, and wonder

what else I can do or who else I can ask.

An idea comes to me, and I'm not sure whether it's a good one or not.

But that's half the problem.

I seem to be running short on good options these days.

So, I think, what the hell.

Aaron is gone and my life is never going to be the same.

What's one more risky play in the grand scheme of things? Especially if it ends up paying off.

It's time to ask Ryker for help.

Chapter 268

James isn't happy, but he also doesn't have a better idea.

So I finally convince him later that evening to drive me to the luxury hotel where I know Ryker has been staying.

We don't say much to each other during the long drive.

I can tell James wants to convince me not to do this, while I want to ask about Jessica.

However, I know that puts James in an awkward position, she

his sister, after all. It wouldn't be fair to expect him to not respect her privacy or whatever.

So we sit there in strained silence with the weight of all the things we're not saying hanging between us.

Instead of using the valet service at the front of the hotel, James insists on parking the car himself nearby, which leaves us about half a block away to walk.

As we're approaching the hotel, a woman steps out through the revolving doors and gets into the back of a black town-car waiting for her.

I stop dead in my tracks as I realize it's Karolina.

What the hell is she doing here?

It can't be a coincidence that she's just stepped out of the same hotel where Ryker is staying.

Although, the hotel does have a high-end bar and restaurant, so I suppose it's possible she was just meeting someone and it

has nothing to do with the fact that Ryker is staying here.

But my instincts are telling me this is no coincidence.

Something else is going on here, and I wonder if it's somehow connected to the mess of Aaron and the Council and the fact that I'm now a widow.

I'm going to get to the bottom of all this, one way or another.

With renewed determination, I march into the hotel and up to the penthouse suite where Ryker is staying.

He has a couple of guys standing in the hallway, acting as security, and it makes me wonder about the kind of life he lives where he can't even stay at a hotel without bodyguards manning the outside of the room.

As I approach, one of them speaks into a wire attached to his jacket.

By the time we arrive at the **door**, they simply nod and let us in, since apparently Ryker has let them know he'll see us.

Inside, the penthouse has a spectacular view over the city and out toward the snow-capped mountains in the distance.

Ryker is standing by the bar to one side of the sitting room.

"What an unexpected surprise," Ryker says with a smile that doesn't quite reach his eyes. "Can I get either of you a drink?"

James murmurs a polite refusal, and takes up a stance near the inside of the door.

"I'll have whatever you're drinking," I tell him confidently as I cross the room.

"The Luna has fine taste, I see," Ryker teases, before pouring a measure of expensive bourbon into two glasses.

"So," he says as he brings the drink over to hand to me. "What brings you here, Luna Leah? I have to admit, I'm surprised to see you, given everything that's going on."

"You mean because the Council killed my mate?" I ask, ignoring the sharp pang in my chest I get whenever anyone mentions Aaron and what happened to him.

Ryker dips his head, expression sobering. "I'm sorry, Leah.

Aaron was a good man. He didn't **deserve** an end like that. Especially not at the hands of a Council that's clearly forgotten the Old Ways."

I nod as I accept his condolences, then take a sip of the bourbon.

I've never been much of a drinker, but I find the bourbon has a pleasant smoothness with a hit of fire when it goes

down.

"I know Aaron respected you," I say after a moment. "And I've forgiven your part in what happened that night with Liam."

Ryker inclines his head. "Then I assume you're here to ask for my help in some manner."

I nod, not surprised he guessed that.

There's a reason Ryker is known to be so deadly and effective, and part of that is the fact he's not dumb by any means.

"Yes, I have come to ask for your help," I tell him, before tossing back the rest of the bourbon and then setting the glass aside. "But first, you're going to tell me why Karolina was here."

At first, Ryker doesn't react, other than to raise an enquiring eyebrow.

"You are not cautious," Ryker says instead of answering. "You take risks, knowing the results may be worth the price, where others would not be so brazen. I respect that."

"You can respect it by telling me about Karolina," I reply coolly, even though I don't really agree with his assessment of my personality.

I take risks because I have to, in order to protect my packs and the people I love.

And most of the time, I'm terrified of making the wrong decision.

Ryker smiles, and this time the expression is more genuine.

"It's simple, really," he says with a shrug. "Karolina is

my

mate."

Chapter 269

At first, I think I can't have heard that correctly.

"I'm sorry, did you say she's your *mate*?" I repeat with a bewildered shake of my head.

I didn't realize Ryker and Karolina even knew each other.

They certainly haven't made their relationship public knowledge, and I wonder why that is.

"Yes, it's true," Ryker says, going to pour himself a second

drink. "You are surprised. I was also, when I first came to this country and met her."

I want to ask so many questions, but I keep my mouth shut.

It's not really

any of my business, and it may not have any bearing on what's happening within the Council and what happened to Aaron.

Then again, it might have everything to do with it.

"Though we are mated, it has been somewhat contentious," Ryker continues, and I'm glad he's giving some explanation, so I'm not left with something else I need to dig into. "I don't

agree with much of what your Council and Karolina does and believes. They have strayed too far from **the Old Ways**.

Meanwhile, Karolina believes I am stuck in the past and

the traditions that don't serve us any longer in this modern

world. But, without traditions, who are we as a species? In the

absence of traditions, there is chaos, and I think your Council

aptly proves that. So yes, while we might be mates, it is not exactly a happy occurrence for either of us."

"I'm sorry to hear that, Ryker," I murmur, and I actually mean

1. it.

For every couple who finds something amazing like

the relationship Aaron and I had, there are other couples on the opposite end of the spectrum who are enemies or can't see eye to eye on the important things, and I wonder why the Moon Goddess paired them as mates when they will never be able to get along.

It's clear that is what's happened for Ryker and Karolina, and I can only imagine how difficult it must be.

Live with a mate who will never understand you, maybe never even like you, let alone love you, or break the bond and risk never having another mate in your life again?

Not many wolves get second chance mates.

I've heard of it happening, but I've never met anyone **in** real

life who has been blessed like that.

"**Now**, Leah Luna," Ryker says, clearly ready to change the

subject. "I assume now that we've lost Aaron, you've come to ask my help in tracking down the missing AI technology your father and brother were foolishly responsible for creating."

I stop dead in my tracks at his words.

“How did you know?” I demand, wondering—not for the first time—if Ryker has the ability to straight up read people’s minds like it’s rumored the Alphas of the Old Country used to

be able to do.

“Aaron brought me in on the problem a few weeks ago,”

Ryker responds, which puts an end to my question about mind-reading.

“Oh,” I reply, wondering why Aaron never mentioned it. Maybe he just forgot with everything else going on around us.

Then, obviously, his main priority was keeping Ethan safe by keeping him a secret from the world.

“Then you know everything I need you to know. That we

have to find it before it falls into the wrong hands—if it hasn’t already—and I have absolutely no idea where it could be.”

Ryker nods thoughtfully. “Aaron had some suspicions that **were** confirmed before Tobin’s death—that the Council were involved.”

“As do I,” I reply, even though

I’m now reluctant to bring these suspicions to life, given the startling fact that Karolina is Ryker’s mate.

But I’m here, and my options are getting narrower and narrower. I either lay everything out on the table and hope Ryker can help me, or I walk away now and don’t use one of the last resources I might have left.

“Karolina said something to me, while I was being held by the

Council before Aaron’s trial.”

Ryker doesn’t respond, other than to look at me with a questioning expression, and I know I’m about to tread onto dangerous ground.

“It wasn’t so much what she said,” I push on determinedly. “**It**

was how she

said it. I think she knows something about the tech. Maybe even where it ended up if Tobin had it.”

Ryker stares at me for a long moment, and I think this is all probably about to go bad.

“You’re right,” Ryker eventually replies. “Karolina definitely knows something about the AI tech. There is a very good possibility she even knows where it is.”

I can’t believe Ryker is confirming my suspicions.

He and his mate really must not get along at all.

“However,” he says, and I think I may have spoken too soon. “As much as I do not agree with Karolina or your Council, it **is not** honorable, nor my place, to meddle in their affairs. I am not taking the side of my mate or her corrupt Council. But, know this Luna Leah. If you go after my mate, I will consider you my enemy.”

Chapter 270

I’m glad to climb back into the safety of the SUV with James after leaving the meeting with Ryker.

There wasn’t much left to say after Ryker made his ultimatum. He’s not going to help me get the AI tech back, not if it means moving against his mate.

I know I should heed his warning.

No one in their right mind pits themselves against the Old Country Wolves and expects to survive.

But the tech—and whatever damage it might do is my responsibility.

My family built it, and my family lost it.

No matter the cost, I have to get it back. Then decide whether to hand it over to the military like it was supposed to be, or destroy it and tell the military that the project failed.

“This isn’t good, Leah,” James says once we start driving.

“Tell me about **it**,” I mutter despondently. “But it doesn’t change things.”

“It doesn’t?” James says incredulously. “Leah, you heard Ryker. **If you go** after Karolina, he will come for you. Even Aaron was smart enough not **to** cross the Old Country Wolves.”

“In the past, maybe,” I reply, ignoring the tightness in my chest and the tears that prick my eyes. “But if he was here now, I know he’d be thinking about doing exactly that.”

God, I wish Aaron was here right now.

My entire body aches with wanting my mate.

My heart and soul are in agony, wounded in a way I know I’m never going to recover from. Not until I meet Aaron again in the next life.

“Things are different now,” I keep going, shoving all those

feelings down to be dealt with later when I can be alone. “The

stakes are **too** high. We can’t just wash our hands of this AI tech and be done with it. We have to get it back. Could you

honestly live with yourself if the tech got used and hundreds of thousands—maybe even millions—of people died? Or worse, what if whoever has it started turning it against other wolves to eliminate rival packs? Would you still be able to look at yourself **in** the mirror and not feel the weight of all those deaths?”

James looks grim. “No, you’re right. I couldn’t live with that. So what are **we** going to do?”

“Look deeper into Karolina for a start,” I reply. “We’ll just have to do it in a way that hopefully Ryker won’t find out about.”

James doesn’t reply to that, and I spend a few minutes mulling over my thoughts.

“James,” I say as a few ideas start coming to me. “Is there a way to track Karolina’s car? Or better yet, her cell phone? Maybe even both.”

James doesn’t look happy about my idea, but then again, he hasn’t looked happy about any of this conversation.

“Yeah. It’s not that hard.”

Good.

I finally feel like I’m getting somewhere.

If Karolina knows where the missing tech is, then maybe she’ll be there to either check on it—or, god forbid—get ready to use it.

1. it.

Tracking her movements for a few days or weeks should give us a good idea of all the places she goes to, and then we can

start checking out those places ourselves and see if that gets us anywhere.

It’s late by the time we get back to Rathborn mansion.

James wishes me goodnight, and we go our separate ways.

I check on Ethan, but he’s sleeping soundly in his crib across the hall in the nursery.

I go into Aaron’s room, then into the luxuriously appointed bathroom.

I take a shower but don't linger. I just want to wash the day away before I go to bed.

I climb onto Aaron's large mattress and collapse in the middle, dragging the blankets over myself and burrowing into the pillows.

I can still catch the faintest hint of Aaron's scent and I savor it, knowing one day soon it'll be gone, just like he's gone.

And one day in the distant future, I won't even remember what he smells like any longer.

The tears come then. And like every night since Aaron was taken from me, I cry myself to sleep.

Almost as soon as I do fall asleep, I begin to dream.

But **it's so** lucid, it's **as** if I've been somehow drawn into another **reality** while I'm **not** conscious.

It's a beautiful sunlit field, dotted with yellow and white flowers, along with butterflies flitting around and bees buzzing by.

I don't think I've ever been here before, but somehow it feels familiar, and comforting, as if I've truly come home **for** the first time in my life.

"Leah!"

My heart jumps at the sound of Aaron's voice, and I spin toward the source.

Aaron comes jogging toward me across the soft green grass. He's wearing light colored linen pants and a white shirt, gaping open halfway down his chiseled chest.

His eyes are glowing with happiness and the gentle breeze teasingly tousles his dark hair.

"Aaron!" I cry in disbelief, overjoyed to see him.

I run the last few steps to meet him, and he catches me up against him, swinging me in a couple of dizzy circles, before gently setting me back on my feet.

But the thing is, I can feel him.

It feels real.

Something is telling me this isn't a dream.

"Aaron," I say in wonder, drinking in his handsome features, looking up at the face I never thought I'd see again. "Where

are we? What is this?"