

Bad Love 281

Chapter 281

LEAH

My breath catches in my chest as Ryker and Aaron rush at each other, clashing in the middle of the room in a flurry of splintering furniture, savage snarls and slashing claws.

I'm terrified for Aaron, but I can't just stand there and watch him fight Ryker. I need to trust he can take care of himself.

James and I hurry around the perimeter of the room to reach the remaining Councilmembers who are cowering in the corner. These are older wolves, delegates. Not warriors or fighters like my husband or his adversary.

We urge them to run, keeping ourselves between them and Ryker.

He sees what's happening at one stage, and rushes toward us, but James steps in and shoves Ryker back, while Aaron catches him and flings him into a nearby bookcase.

The whole thing comes crashing down on top of him, and for a second we all pause, watching as Ryker drags himself from beneath the pile of books and splintered wood.

Us can react, Ryker fully shifts and goes streaking out of the room.

Aaron growls and then shifts as well, sprinting off after him.

I want to chase after them as well, if only to keep Aaron in my sight so I know he's okay.

I'm terrified of losing him yet again, and for some reason my brain thinks as long as I can see him, I can stop that from happening.

But I don't have the luxury of doing that.

We came here for a reason, and it's time we took care of that.

I turn to James. "Come on, we need to find the tech."

James nods and we rush off, deeper into the Council Hall.

We search the ground floor, finding more carnage and dead bodies, but don't turn up anything else.

It occurs to me that Aaron could've done this. He could've been a force of death, indiscriminately sweeping through these hallowed halls and killing everyone in his wake.

He's far more powerful than Ryker. Far more deadly.

Is pure.

Even though the Council failed him, even though they lied and cheated and did everything to break him, he hadn't set out to destroy it. When faced with his own death, he still chose pack-all packs-over himself.

I love him a little more for that.

"What about the basement?" James asks, shaking me from my thoughts.

"Let's look."

We go down, but when we get there, we find that most of the underground level is set up like a prison.

"Did you know this was down here?" I ask James in confusion, then wonder if this is where they were keeping Aaron, and how bad it must have been for him, down here away from natural light and fresh air.

"Hey!" a voice calls out.

James and I glance at each other and then walk down until we stop outside of a cell where a man is locked behind silver bars.

"What's going on up there? I can scent blood, a lot of it," the man says with a southern accent, glancing

between us both.

green eyes and a mess of sandy blond hair.

"A rogue wolf slaughtered most of the Council," I reply. "Who are you? Why does the Council have you locked up down here?"

The guy shrugs. "They wanted something from me I wasn't willing to give. As to who I am, that's not real important. The question is, who are you? Because I can scent Aaron all over you."

"You know Aaron?" I ask, worried that this confirms my suspicions about my mate being held down here.

The guy nods. "He had the cell across from me for a bit over a week. Now, your turn."

"He's my mate," I reply, crossing my arms.

"Ah, you must be Leah," the guy says. "Aaron was real torn up when he thought you were dead. Glad you're still alive."

"James," I say, looking up at the Beta. "We should let him out.

Go see if you can find some keys to the cell."

James doesn't look like he thinks this is a good idea but nods anyway and then goes to do as I asked.

"Thanks, sweetheart, you've got no idea how much I appreciate it," the guy says gratefully.

"I probably owe you for helping Aaron stay sane and not going rogue while he was down here, especially after he thought I died," I reply with a shrug. "It's the least I can do."

James returns then with a set of keys, and I try not to notice how they're slippery with blood. No doubt James had to take them off one of the bodies of the Enforcers Ryker had slaughtered. Or maybe James had to do some killing to get them himself.

James opens the cell and then turns to me. "We need to get back to searching."

"What are you looking for?" the guy asks curiously.

"Some AI tech my family's company built that a faction within the Council stole," I reply.

The guy nods. "Second floor, restricted access room."

James and I look at each other in surprised confusion.

"You're saying that's where the tech is?" I ask.

"Sure thing," the guy answers. "Those Enforcers gossip like old women in a church yard. Amazing what you learn when you shut ya trap and listen once in a while."

"Okay," I say, looking at James again. "Looks like we're heading up."

I turn to the new wolf I've just met. "Aaron went after the rogue wolf--"

"Say no more," the guy replies, holding up one hand. "I'll go find him and back him up if he needs it."

"Thank you," I reply in relief.

I'm sure Aaron is fine, but it's been a while since we split up, and I'm worried that he hasn't come to find us yet, which means Ryker is probably still alive and causing havoc.

We get to the ground floor.

"Wait," I say as the guy goes to turn away from me. "I don't even know your name."

He tips his head to me. "Axel Sawyer, at your service, Luna."

With that, he shifts and streaks off through the building in blur of golden fur.

"Did we seriously just let Axel Sawyer free?" James says, aghast.

We'd all heard rumors of what the rogue wolf had done

in Texas, but he was supposed to have moved on to North Dakota, last I'd heard anyway.

Weirdly enough, he hadn't seemed as rogue or deadly as the rumors had made him out to be. "We can't do anything about it now," I reply, wondering if I've just added another problem to our already full plate....

Chapter 282

James and I step out of the elevator on the restricted access floor to find Ryker running down the corridor toward us, Aaron nowhere in sight.

Ryker is holding something, and I recognize the cylindrical solid state drive we'd used at Roberts Corp with the full and final software on it. He has it!

The AI tech is in that solid state drive. The SSD is the key.

I don't even stop to really think.

I have to get that SSD.

I launch into a sprint straight toward Ryker, partially shifting as I lunge.

Ryker barely breaks stride as we crash into each other, and while we both have Alpha power, he outweighs me by a hundred pounds, and it feels like getting hit by a train.

Still, I try to grab for the drive.

Behind me, I hear the sound of James growling as he aims to get into the fray.

However, Ryker picks me up by the back of my shirt and flings me into James.

We both go crashing into the nearby wall and then end up on the floor in a tangle of limbs, dazed and bruised from the impact.

By the time we get ourselves up, Ryker is nowhere in sight.

"Are you okay?" James asks, panting.

"I'm fine!"

I barely wait for James to agree before I sprint for the stairs.

I have no idea if Ryker went down the elevator or took the stairs, but with heightened speed, it makes no sense to wait for the elevator.

When I arrive on the ground floor with James a step behind me, I almost crash right into Aaron coming from the other

direction with Axel on his heels.

"Did you see Ryker?" I demand, out of breath.

"No, the bastard got the drop on me earlier and I lost him. I've been looking for him ever since," Aaron replies in frustration. "Why? Did you see him?"

We ran into him on the restricted access floor. Aaron, he has the software!"

At this, Aaron's expression becomes even more grim. "We can't let him get away with it. He's gone rogue, only God knows what he'll do with it. You and James take the north side of the building, Axel and I will go south."

I agree, and then James and I rush off, running straight to the north entrance, because where else would Ryker go with the drive? He's obviously going to run and take the nearest exit.

We go outside and check the parking lot, asking the few wolves we find who are looking shellshocked from all the violence and confusion if they saw Ryker come out this way.

No one gives us an affirmative, and eventually we give up, walking back through the Council Hall to find Aaron.

The inside of the building is quiet like a tomb, and we find Aaron in the main foyer, talking with the few

Councilmembers we managed to save from Ryker's slaughter when we first arrived.

For a moment I'm worried they're going to detain Aaron again, despite everything that's happened. However, as I get closer, it seems they're thanking Aaron for saving them to them.

Aaron asks as me and James step up next

I shake my head and Aaron curses under his breath.

"Alpha Rathborn," one of the Councilmembers says, an older lady whose name is Eleanor. "I'm so sorry about what has happened to you and your mate in recent times. I'm sure you realize by now, but there was a faction within the Council -mostly overseen by Tobin, Karolina, Samsen and Petyr- who had started going to extreme lengths for their fanatical beliefs. Obviously, in the end, that became their undoing."

"I'm relieved we were able to get here in time to save you from Ryker, Eleanor," Aaron says, and I wonder who she is to him, because he seems to have a genuine regard for her.

"Obviously, you are cleared of all and any charges," Eleanor says with a quick smile, and the other few Councilmembers all murmur their agreements. "And while I'm sure the Council aren't your favorite people right now, Alpha Rathborn, nonetheless, we need to ask a favor of you..."

Chapter 283

AARON

The Council has offered me a seat at the table.

The same Council that tried to kill me now wants me to rule among them.

I immediately accept, knowing it'll give me more control over the future of both my pack and family. Axel lingers, and I can tell he's not sure what to do with himself, so I walk over and clap him on the shoulder.

"Thanks for your help today," I tell him.

He shrugs. "Didn't do much, partner. Most of the action had already gone down by the time your mate released me from the cells."

"Still, I appreciate your willingness to fight with us. Which is why there's a place in my pack for you, if you want it."

Axel looks surprised. "Even knowing all the rumors about me and my past?"

"It doesn't matter what people gossip about, I got to know you down in those cells, and I can see the real man you are beneath all that. Besides, what's the point of making mistakes and leaving them in the past if we don't get the chance to learn from them?"

"I'm not promising to stay forever," Axel cautions. "Eventually I'm going to have to go back and face all those past mistakes. But in the meantime, I'll gladly take a place at your side."

"Then it's settled," I tell him with a grin.

"Besides," Axel adds as we start walking toward the SUV where James and Leah are waiting. "I owe your mate for freeing me."

"And I'm sure Leah will tell you she was just doing what was right, and you don't owe her anything," I respond.

Axel looks at Leah then, and while there's a hint of appreciation in his gaze, it's not to the point where I

feel threatened or think he means anything by it other than respect.

“That’s one hell of a Luna you’ve got there, Aaron,” Axel says in a low voice.

“I’m not proud to admit it took me a while to realize that, but I definitely know it now, and I’m trying to prove every day that I deserve her.”

Axel nods and doesn’t say anything else as we arrive at the SUV.

Leah immediately steps into my arms, and I hug her tight, enjoying the simple feel of her lithe form against mine.

“We were so close, Aaron,” she says, her voice muffled against my chest. “I can’t believe we got so close, only for Ryker to steal it. What the hell is he even going to do with it?”

“I shudder to think,” I tell her in return, which is the absolute truth.

Rogue wolves are unpredictable at best.

I don’t want to even think about what a rogue wolf in possession of a weapon that can kill entire cities worth of people is planning to do with it.

“And now the Council has officially tasked you with finding him,” Leah says worry clear in her voice and in her expression as she leans back to look up at me.

But even if the Council hadn’t officially tasked me with tracking down and stopping Ryker, I still would have done it.

Someone needs to secure that AI tech, and honestly, I feel for Ryker.

Imagine being forced into a situation where you felt like you had to kill your mate for the greater good of all wolves at large.

If I’d had to do something like that, I’m not sure I would have simply gone rogue. More like I would have burned the entire world down around me, and then taken myself out as well.

Unfortunately, I’m now intimately familiar with the feeling of losing a mate.

But to know it happened by your own hand?

I can barely conceive of such an agonizing tragedy.

“Come on,” I tell Leah. “Let’s get home to Rathborn mansion. I can’t wait to see Ethan.”

Leah nods, but then something seems to occur to her and she gets this expression on her face that I don’t know how to read.

“Leah, what’s wrong?” I ask in alarm, terrified something happened to Ethan while I was locked up.

“Aaron,” she says in a rush. “I completely forgot with everything happening... James and I, we found Emily.”

“Who?” I ask in confusion, even as my heart starts pounding too loud and too hard in my chest.

Because Leah can’t actually mean-

“Your sister, Aaron. We found Emily. She’s alive.”

Chapter 284

AARON

The drive back to Rathborn mansion goes by in a blur.

It’s almost impossible to believe that my sister is actually alive, and I don’t think I’m going to fully believe it until I see her with my own eyes.

But stronger than my disbelief is the guilt and the rage.

Guilt, because my sister has spent the past ten years locked up, less than an hour from our childhood home, waiting to be rescued.

The rage, meanwhile, threatens to consume me.

I want to go dig up the bones of Liam and the old Roberts Alpha and bring them back to life, just so I can kill them all over again.

Slowly and painfully.

Make them suffer as much as my innocent sister suffered all these years.

We arrive back at Rathborn mansion, and I rush from the SUV and into the house, calling for Emily.

However, it's not Emily who steps out of the informal sitting room, it's Jessica, and the unexpected sight of her pulls me up short.

She looks just as shocked to see me as I am to see her.

"Jessica," I greet. "You're back."

"Of course I'm back!" Jessica cries. "They said you were dead. I came for your funeral."

Tears start streaming down her face and I feel bad for her -for my entire pack-and the trauma they must have gone through in the past days, thinking their Alpha was dead.

"I'm sorry, Jess." I'm sorry for all of it.

Jessica nods, sending more tears spilling down her cheeks.

She tentatively steps forward, so I hold my arms open to hug her.

There's nothing more than comfort in the hug.

She doesn't try to cling to me or make it into anything more and I think we're finally starting to move beyond our past in a healthy way.

"Do you know where Emily is?" I ask when we step apart again.

At this, Jessica looks anxious.

"I've only seen her for short periods of time since Leah and James brought her home. She's mostly been shifting and out running...I'm not sure how well she's coping with being back, Aaron. I mean, she's working hard to cover it up, but it's like you can see her fraying around the edges. I'm worried she might go rogue any time now."

My blood runs cold at Jessica's words.

Surely I'm not going to get my sister back, only to stand by and watch her go rogue from whatever she endured, being held captive by Liam and the old Roberts Alpha all those years?

I can't let that happen.

I have to do whatever it takes to make sure Emily recovers.

"Thanks, Jessica. I'm glad you were here-her childhood best friend-when she came back. I'm sure that was really helpful."

Jessica nods and begins to turn away, but then pauses.

"And Aaron, I just wanted to say, I've had a lot of time to think. I can accept things now. Being away helped. I'll always care about you, but I know we're not meant to be together."

"Thanks, Jessica, I really appreciate you saying so. I just hope you can find a mate and true happiness as well."

Jessica smiles and nods. "I hope so too, one day."

"I'm going to send out some of the guys to find Emily, if you want to join us?"

Jessica shakes her head, however.

“Emily is angry with me right now. She was ranting about Leah, and I tried to tell her that Leah isn’t her father. It took me a long time to separate Leah from her pack, and Emily didn’t like me saying so.”

I nod in understanding, and Jessica sends me one last smile before disappearing deeper into the house.

I call James then and tell him to get Axel and a handful of other guys we can trust to keep quiet.

I don’t know what sort of state Emily is going to be in when we find her, and I don’t want her clearly fragile state to become gossip for the pack.

That would only hinder her recovery.

But if Emily is truly on the edge of going rogue, then she’s going to need constant care and monitoring. I can’t have her shifting and running off, not when I don’t know if she’ll come back again.

I lost my sister once. I won’t lose her again.

I go find Leah—who is in Ethan’s nursery—and tell her what’s happening, before I head out and shift myself, joining the others who are ready to run out on the search.

I only hope we’re not already too late.

Chapter 285

EMILY

I can’t escape the vague feeling of panic that’s been lodged in my chest ever since James and that bitch Leah found me in the remote cabin.

It feels like any second now, someone is going to grab me and force me back into captivity.

And I think part of me would welcome that.

At least it’s familiar.

At least I know what to expect when I’m being held.

There are rules and I follow them if I want my life to be easy and pain free.

But now that I’ve been released, there are no rules.

Or, at least not the same rules.

I’m just free and there’s something slightly terrifying about it.

It’s easier to be in wolf form.

My wolf acts on instinct. She sees the world in more simple absolutes.

She can ignore the human anxieties and questions of what my life is even supposed to look like now.

She can ignore the question of how I’m going to hide the truth from the rest of the pack.

My captivity changed me in so many ways, I can’t even remember the girl I used to be before the old Roberts Alpha captured me.

However, the changes aren’t just emotional or psychological.

The truth is, Liam and his father experimented on me in ways I don’t even understand.

They had a plan for Roberts pack.

To become the strongest, fastest, most deadly pack.

A pack that could easily decimate any other pack, or even the Council should they decide to act against them.

And I was the lab rat for their hideous research and testing.

I know if anyone finds out, I’ll be immediately kicked out of the executed immediately.

They’ll be as disgusted with me as I am with myself.

I can feel the lure of going rogue teasing around the edges of my consciousness.

It would be so easy to give in. To push into my wolf consciousness so completely that the shift becomes permanent. It wouldn’t be so bad. The lands here are so open. I could sleep beneath the stars, maybe

even merge into a wild wolf pack eventually.
Except if I let that happen, I'm frightened of what I might do.
Because I'm dangerous.
I am absolutely terrified of myself.
So I shift and run, trying to forget.
The problem is, I can't outrun myself.
I've found the place in the forest where Jessica, James, Aaron and I used to play when we were kids.
It's this clearing next to a stream.
Right now, it's under a layer of snow, but in the spring, the
ground is carpeted with sweet grasses and wildflowers, and the stream flows faster, tumbling over rocks
as the ice melt washes down from the mountain.
During the summers, we used to swim and fish in the stream, staying out late into the night after the
sun went down, listening to the chatter of frogs and insects as a wide sky of impossibly bright stars
dusted the inky sky above us.
My chest hurts, and I wish more than anything I could go back to those days.
That I could somehow travel back in time and avoid what happened to me.
Carve out a different life for myself.
But such a thing is impossible.
And I don't know how I'm supposed to live with what I am now.
I'm so lost in thought that it takes me a few seconds to realize I'm no longer alone.
I scent another wolf before I see him, and it sends this weird ripple of energy through my body.
This huge, tawny-colored wolf comes trotting into the clearing, and I instantly go on high alert.
My wolf pushes up hard, preparing to shift so I can defend myself-or maybe even attack first-but I resist
the change as the tawny wolf shifts himself, and then straightens into his human form.
He's built.
Wide across the shoulders, with brownish-blond hair and intense blue eyes.
I back up, on high alert, my years of captivity leaving me with zero trust in strangers.
However, my wolf then catches his human scent even stronger this time and perks up.
But this is swiftly swallowed by confusion.
Mate, my wolf whispers, but it's quickly becoming
overwhelmed with this potent mix of hope and dread. Without wanting to, I shift back.
I tentatively take a step forward, even though part of me
wants to flee.
"Who are you?" I ask, my voice trembling.

Chapter 286

AXEL

The girl in front of me is so stunningly beautiful, it makes my chest ache.
Hair, dark as night, tumbles over her shoulders in untamable waves, all the way to her hips.
Her green eyes glow with the vibrancy of a forest in spring, and her skin is a symphony of flawless
beauty.
There's something almost otherworldly about her, and it stirs my Hunter instincts, but I ruthlessly push
them down.
Montana is crawling with vampires, and most of the time, the lingering presence of them-even from a
distance-is abrasive to my heightened senses. Like nails on a chalkboard.

It's probably deceiving me into seeing suspicious things where there's only shadows and tricks of the light.

I remind myself I'm not on a vampire hunt right now, I'm simply helping Aaron track down his wayward sister.

Aaron had told the search party that his sister had dark hair and green eyes.

He never said anything about her being absolutely stunning.

And I know part of me thinking this is absolute bias.

Because I recognized her for who she is as soon as I caught her scent about a mile back.

My mate.

The one thing that I believed impossible for me, because of the cursed circumstances of my birth.

Because I've lived impossible centuries of life, and in all that time, I never once came across another single wolf who would be my mate.

Because of who I am... what I am.

A truth I'm hiding from Aaron, even though he's been nothing but good to me, and doesn't deserve the way I'm lying to him.

Part of it is self-preservation, but part of it is adherence to my own personal vendetta mission.

The one that brought me all the way from Texas to Montana in the first place.

I've long grown accustomed to the idea I would never have a mate, that I'd always be alone.

How could the Moon Goddess be so cruel as to tie any woman's fate to my own?

But here I stand, looking at-sensing-the proof that the Moon Goddess is in fact a cruel bitch.

This innocent, trembling, girl standing in front of me.

Clearly broken by a decade of captivity.

I would destroy her.

There's no doubt in my mind.

Which is why this can never be.

"My name is Axel," I finally respond to her question in a cold voice.

I stride forward, and she flinches back from me. That single motion makes my heart clench.

Before she can flee, however, I catch hold of her arm.

"Your brother sent me to fetch you back to the house," I continue, watching as she clearly debates whether to try.

fighting me to flee.

But my words make her pause in confusion.

"My brother?" she says, staring up at me with wide green eyes.

"Aaron, he's alive," I tell her, belatedly remembering that she probably still thinks he's dead like the rest of the pack, killed by being forced to break his mating bond with Leah.

"He- He is?" she whispers, clearly not sure if she should believe me.

"Yeah, he is, sweetheart. So let's get you back to the house."

Her eyes widen a little-probably at the endearment that'd slipped out-not that I mean anything by it. I have a habit of calling any woman who comes across my path sweetheart, it's just one of those sayings I picked up along the line.

"You-You're-" I can see her mind working around the same thing I'm feeling, and I can't help but growl.

"Don't even think about saying it."

Her expression crumples, and she shrinks beneath my harsh gaze.

But then she seems to find some backbone, and glares up at me, even though there are tears forming in her eyes.

Then she opens her mouth and says the one thing I don't want to acknowledge.

"You're my mate." Chapter 287

EMILY

The stranger-Axel-is cold and indifferent.

His expression is harsh and unforgiving as he stares at me.

Could my wolf be wrong?

How can this man be our mate?

He stands before me, unfeeling and unsympathetic, like a statue of ice.

"I told you not to say it," he growls at me, and I want to run from him, but he's holding my arm in a bruising grip.

"I-I'm sorry," I stutter out, wishing I could take it back.

"Since you're so insistent on knowing," he says, tone cutting and caustic. "Yes, it does seem like you're my mate. But I do not accept it. I do not accept you."

I flinch and feel myself shrinking.

Of course he doesn't accept it.

Or me.

I'm damaged goods.

I spent ten years being locked up.

And even though no one knows my secret, I'm dangerous, broken and unlovable.

"Are you rejecting me?" I whisper, and already I can feel the pain of our mate bond tearing jaggedly apart.

"Yes, Emily. I reject you."

The ache turns into a sharp shot of pain like an elastic pulled too tight and suddenly snapped.

I cry out, and my knees give way, but Axel doesn't let me fall.

He dispassionately holds me up, and I barely have time to recover from the slowly fading pain, before he's dragging me into motion.

If rejecting the mating bond hurt him, he certainly didn't show it, and I'm left wondering if this man can feel anything at all.

Who is he, even, and how did he come to be part of the Rathborn pack?

My Brother's top men, I assume, since Aaron entrusted him enough to help find me.

"Let me go!" I shout at him, pulling against his hold.

I'm strong.

Stronger than a regular wolf should be thanks to the old Roberts Alpha and his experiments.

But apparently Axel is stronger.

He easily subdues my struggles and growls at me, eyes glowing for a brief moment.

"You will go back to the house, Emily. Now. Aaron wants to see you, and since Aaron is pack Alpha, you will obey him, which means you will obey me."

In that instant, I hate this cold, arrogant, horrible man.

I'm glad he rejected me.

Clearly, being mated to him would be a fate worse than death.

Something I am already familiar with.

"I'll return only because I want to see my brother, not because you tell me to," I tell him stubbornly, even though part of me fears how he will retaliate for my defiance.

This time when I tug on my arm, he lets me go.

But it's calculating, designed to humiliate me, because I'm not expecting it, so I end up falling backwards into the snow.

He looks down dispassionately at me.

"Shift so we can run back. It'll be quicker," he orders as if he is an Alpha in his own right.

Where does he even get the audacity?

However, before I can say anything, he shifts himself, and then stands there staring at me.

I can tell he's impatient and disgusted with me, even in wolf form.

My cheeks burning with shame and self-loathing, I shift and then obediently follow Axel all the way back to the mansion.

The closer we get, the more anxiety twists my stomach into knots.

If Aaron is back, then I've got no doubt his traitorous bitch of a wife is here too.

I can't believe after everything, not only did Aaron marry the daughter of our enemy, he went and fell in love with her- mated her- as if the war that killed our parents, the pack who were responsible for all the misery inflicted on us as children didn't matter any longer.

The old Roberts Alpha, he made it clear one of the main reasons he'd held me captive instead of simply killing me, had been because he'd been forced to hand his daughter over to Aaron in order to maintain a peace he didn't even want.

He would come and visit me regularly, giving me updates on Leah's life I didn't want to hear.

Many, I refused to believe.

Like when he came to tell me that Aaron had eventually married Leah, as per the agreement.

I'd thought he was lying.

Just another way to torture me.

But the truth when I'd finally been freed from my captivity had been so much worse.

And the fact that she had been the one to find me?

I hated it.

In fact, I didn't even believe it.

I'm completely sure she knew where I was the entire time.

Her father or brother would have told her- bragged to her- about the truth of my captivity.

She would have chosen to continue my imprisonment once her father and brother died.

She probably loved knowing that I was out there alive, and Aaron was just walking around in oblivion, grieving me when I wasn't even dead.

But once she thought Aaron was dead, she'd needed a reason to maintain control and sympathy of the pack, so she devised this whole thing about accidentally 'discovering' I was being held captive so she could look like a hero to the pack members, and they would want to keep her around.

As I shift and walk back into the house- even though it's my childhood home- it feels like walking back into a prison. Like I might never see daylight again.

It takes everything within me not to turn and flee.

Pretty much the only reason I don't do it is because of Axel's threatening presence, and the fact I know

he won't let me get
far.

My only hope lies in getting through to Aaron.

Somehow, I have to make him see his mate for the lying, two-faced manipulative bitch she is.

Chapter 288

AARON

I step into the sitting room, I'm eager to see my sister for the first time in ten years.

Emily has her back to me, staring out the window.

Axel stands by, looking both annoyed and bored, and I briefly wonder if Emily has been difficult to put him in such a mood since the last time I saw him.

I don't know what to expect.

Jessica's warning about Emily's fragile state keeps echoing in my mind.

Emily is going to be difficult; I know that much.

Who wouldn't be after a decade in captivity?

My sister is no doubt broken in many different ways and needs the support of myself and the pack so she can slowly put her life back together.

"Emily," I say softly as I approach, and she whirls around to face me, eyes wide like a cornered, panicked animal.

"It's okay," I tell her calmly. "You're home now. You're safe."

Emily's eyes fill with tears as she steps forward.

I catch her up against me, hugging her tight.

I can't believe the miracle I've been gifted.

That I have my sister back, after living with the pain of my entire immediate family being dead for so many years.

"I'm not safe, Aaron," Emily says through her tears, voice muffled against my chest.

"What do you mean?" I ask worriedly, setting her back from me a little.

Her eyes dart around the room, as if she expects to be attacked at any moment.

"I won't be safe while she is under the same roof as me," Emily whispers in a shaky voice.

"Who?" I ask in suspicion, though I think I already know who my sister is talking about.

"Leah!" Emily cries, as if it should be obvious. "How can you

keep her here, Aaron? On our pack lands? In your home? She's the daughter of our worst enemy. Her marriage to you was all a sham, a ploy to put a wolf in sheep's clothing right under your nose. And you fell for it! You're still falling for it. You need to get rid of her now, before she can turn on you."

I shake my head sadly at Emily's ranting.

"Emily, Leah is not who you think. She grew up among us. She is part of the pack now. Hell, she is the pack. She is Luna, and the beating heart of us. We wouldn't be here, living peacefully now, if it wasn't for her. Things have changed since you were last home. I know it's probably hard to see now--"

"No, Aaron!" she snaps, pulling away from me. "I'm the only one who can see clearly. Mark my words, I will not accept her as your mate. And the second I see any evidence of her true Roberts colors, I will act to defend myself and this pack!"

Apprehension and concern rush through me, along with some anger.

Emily is much more unwell than I even feared.

And she's directing all the pain of her captivity toward the person who deserves it the least.

The person who found and rescued her.

“Emily, listen very carefully to me,” I tell her, injecting Alpha into my tone so I know I have her attention and she will be compelled to do as I say. “Leah is your Luna, and you will accept it. Furthermore, you will not look upon her with suspicion. She-and I as your brother-do not deserve such disrespect. If you do anything that threatens the safety of your Luna, or anyone in the pack for that matter, there will be consequences, even if you are my sister. Do I make myself clear?”

Tears spill down Emily’s cheeks and she looks wounded, as if I’ve physically harmed her in some way. I feel terrible, but I can’t let this irrationality continue.

“Emily,” I say more gently. “Your mind has been muddled by all those years of captivity. You’re stuck in a past that doesn’t exist anymore. I’m going to do everything I can to help you. Just please, don’t fight me on this. Trust me. I only want what’s best for you.”

Emily glances away, and I can’t tell if she agrees with me or not.

I’m worried she’s going to continue this campaign of hate against Leah, no matter what I say.

Which means Emily can’t be trusted.

The thought cuts me to the core.

This is my sister. She’s been tortured and imprisoned.

I hate that I have to be so harsh with her.

“Axel,” I say, turning to glance at my newest pack member. “I’m entrusting Emily’s safety and supervision to you. I require you to monitor her twenty-four-seven and report to me anything she does to harm herself, or other pack members. Emily is going to attend sessions with the pack therapist, and you will also report her progress to me. Agreed?”

Out of everyone, he’s the best person for the job because he didn’t know Emily before, so he won’t be swayed by sentiment or old attachments. He also isn’t pack so he’s less likely to talk or get wrapped up in gossip.

“Yes, Alpha,” Axel replies easily, with a smooth nod.

“Aaron, you can’t do this!” Emily yells in distress. “I’m not some fragile, broken doll you need to watch and fix. All I tried to do was tell you the truth.”

“I’m sorry, Emily,” I tell my sister. I take a deep breath. “But they aren’t truths, they’re delusions. And until you can tell the difference, this is the way things have to be.”

“I’m going to make you see the truth,” Emily growls, but she’s jittery and agitated like a trapped, wounded animal. “And then you’ll regret this!”

Chapter 289

LEAH

I’m sitting in our bed, reading a book to Ethan, who is drifting off to sleep after just finishing a bottle, when Aaron slips into the room.

He looks weary, like the weight of the world is sitting on his shoulders, as he comes over and stretches out on the bed next to us, trailing his fingers over Ethan’s soft curls.

“How did things go with Emily?” I ask, even though I can tell they probably didn’t go well.

“It’s worse than I thought,” Aaron replies in a heavy voice. “I’m worried she might never recover from this. We still might lose her, if she can’t take it anymore and goes rogue.”

Guilt for the part my family played in this-in destroying an innocent girl’s life-is like acid in my veins.

“Aaron, I’m so sorry,” I tell him, the words desperate and heartfelt.

“I know,” Aaron says with a quick smile. “But it’s not your fault, Leah. You can’t be held responsible for

the actions of your
Brother and father.”

Aaron’s words might be true-and I’m grateful to hear them- but it doesn’t make me feel any less guilty.
“Maybe there’s something I can do to help,” I offer. “Maybe I can talk to her-”

But Aaron quickly shakes his head.

“Yeah...that’s not a good idea right now, Leah. In time, yes, I want you both to get along, maybe even become friends for the sake of Ethan, our family and the larger pack. But right now, Emily can’t see past her hatred toward you for what your father did to her.”

Aaron closes his eyes for a moment, an expression of pain on his face.

“I don’t even want to imagine what those ba tards subjected her to. I don’t know if I can hear it without losing it to the rage already festering inside me. I’ve told her she needs to start seeing the pack therapist, but eventually I think I’m going to need to know exactly what she’s been through as well.”
I reach over and take Aaron’s hand.

I also don’t want to think about what terrible things my father and brother might have done to Emily.
thing was impossible, that they

weren’t bad people who would hurt an innocent girl for the sake of simply hurting her.

But now I know better.

“Will she be okay, left to her own devices?” I ask, wondering if I dare approach Jessica and ask her to keep an eye out and let me know if it seems Emily is getting worse, not better.

Aaron already has so much on his plate, especially now that he has a seat on the Council.

It seems keeping the peace in the pack and looking after its members is the least I can do for him. And it is partly my role as Luna anyway.

Jessica has never exactly been my biggest fan, but in the few days since she returned, she’s actually been surprisingly nice and even somewhat respectful toward me.

I’m not sure what she did while she was away, but it seems to have changed her for the better.

“I put Axel in charge of watching out for her,” Aaron says. “Same way it’s James’s job to look out for you.”

“Oh, that’s a good idea,” I reply.

I used to chafe against James following me everywhere, always checking up on me.

But that was when I thought he hated me.

It meant he was there through the good times and the bad times, even when I didn’t want him to be.

And eventually, he’d become one of the most important people in my life.

My best friend.

I hope the same can be true for Emily.

“I’m glad you think so,” Aaron said with an amused look. “Because Emily certainly doesn’t think so.”

“She’ll come around,” I say confidently, even though I’m not actually sure.

But it’s what Aaron needs to hear.

And it is what I hope for my sister-in-law anyway.

I never had a sister, only my brother, Liam, who betrayed me and tried to kill me.

I’d love to have a sister for real, and I cautiously wonder if Emily can heal and eventually, we can perhaps become that for one another.

It would be ideal for all of us-Aaron and Ethan included.

Pack is important.

Family is important.

And I want to do everything in my power to make ours one of love, acceptance and safety.

The opposite to what I had in the end.

Before Aaron can say anything else, his phone buzzes, and he sighs as he pulls it out of his pocket.

However, his eyebrows arch up in disbelief as he sees the screen.

“What is it?” I quickly ask, worried some new calamity is about to befall us.

“It’s Ryker.”

Chapter 290

It’s a text message from Ryker, not a call.

But it’s still just as shocking.

He went rogue.

He ordered his pack to slaughter most of the Council.

And then he took the dangerous AI tech.

What could he even want?

“What does it say?” I ask in trepidation as Aaron reads the text.

“It’s an address, nothing more,” Aaron replies, seeming both thoughtful and suspicious.

“It could be some kind of trap,” I tell him, not able to think of why Ryker would send us an address with no other information.

“Could be,” Aaron says, getting to his feet. “But I’m going to check it out anyway. Coming?”

Aaron holds his hand out for me, and I smile as I take it and get to my feet.

It fills me with love and gratification that he respects me as an Alpha in my own right.

That he just assumes I’ll be coming with him and can take care of myself.

Instead of telling me I’m weak or need protecting or some other baloney.

I gently pick up Ethan from the bed where he’s fallen asleep, and then take him across to his nursery.

He fusses a little as I put him down, but Aaron calls Tara up to settle him back down again, and then we go down through the house and out to where James and William are waiting in the SUV.

Not much is said as we drive.

Interestingly, the address is on what used to be Karolina’s pack lands.

Although, I assume they’re Ryker’s pack lands now, as he would have absorbed Karolina’s Alpha power when he killed her.

I wonder how tortuous it would feel, to possess the Alpha power of the dead mate you killed with your own bare hands.

It’s the stuff of nightmares, and I shudder to think about it.

We roll up slowly on the address—a small house in a modest street—trying to figure out if there are any other wolves around.

There doesn’t seem to be anyone around, so we park and cautiously approach the house.

James and William go around the back, while Aaron and I walk up to the front.

Aaron rings the bell, but there’s no answer.

He looks around to make sure we aren’t being watched, and then uses his supernatural Alpha strength to simply wrench the handle hard enough to break the locking mechanism inside.

We walk in, finding the house quiet, dusty and seeming abandoned. James and William come in from the back, but say they didn’t see anyone around either.

Ryker’s scent lingers in here, so he can’t have been gone that long.

We explore the house, until we come to the dining room.

There, on the dusty table is the solid-state drive from the quantum computer that runs the AI tech.

There's also a note, and Aaron picks it up to scan the contents.

"Ryker has gone back to The Old Country," Aaron reports. "According to this, he'd already be on a flight to Romania by now. He says he only took the tech to make sure no one else got their hands on it-there still might be people within the Council we can't trust. He says he's not sorry for ordering his pack to attack the Council, but he's ready to go home and face the consequences of his actions."

"Do you think he even really went rogue?" I ask as I check over the SSD, but it doesn't seem to be damaged, and I'm pretty sure it's not a fake. "Or was it just some kind of cover for what he really intended to do-get the drive?"

"I don't think there's any way to ever know for sure," Aaron replies. "But at least we finally got this damn software out of their hands."

"Thank g d!" I say adamantly, and Aaron laughs in relief.

This damn piece of tech that my father and brother put so much of our pack's money into.

Except all it's done it cause problems and death since the day I found out about it.

"The real question is," I say to Aaron. "Is what do we do with it now?"