

Bad Love 291

Chapter 291

AARON

We take the device back to the Rathborn mansion, but I think it's obvious to both of us what needs to be done about it.

The drive needs to be destroyed.

It's too powerful, too terrible for anyone to have.

I honestly don't know what the old Roberts Alpha and Liam were thinking when inventing this.

Well, actually I probably do.

They were thinking about money, and nothing else.

They were thinking about all those billions of dollars they would get paid from the military, and how it might make them the wealthiest pack in Montana.

Still, it was a devil's bargain.

How could any amount of money be worth your soul?

To know something you were responsible for creating would be used to kill countless people?

Once we're alone, Leah sets it on the desk and then looks at me.

"I think we should destroy it," she says, and there's a hint of apprehension to her voice, as if she's worried I might disagree.

I smile at her. "I think you're right, Leah. We can't risk anyone else getting their hands on this. I don't even want to imagine what the military would do with it if we handed it over to them."

"Good," Leah says with a nod. "So, what's the best way to do it? Do we just wipe the drive, or..."

I walk over to one of the cupboards recessed into the wall and search around until I find a compact toolbox, filled with the basics.

I get out a hammer and then take it over to hand over to Leah.

"Would you like to do the honors?"

She takes the hammer with a gleeful look on her face.

"I would love to!" she declares.

I step back and watch as Leah wields the hammer and smashes the drive into a million little pieces.

Within a minute or two, what was once a solid-state drive containing an AI program worth billions of dollars is reduced to worthless pieces of debris.

Leah drops the hammer to the desk and turns to me with a triumphant grin on her face.

"That felt really good," she says with a laugh, before throwing herself into my arms. "I can't believe it's finally over, Aaron. We can put all that bad stuff behind us and begin our lives together properly now."

I hold her tight, feeling the same relief and joy. What bits are left of the tech, I'm going to burn.

Personally.

"We did it, Aaron!"

Yeah. We did.

We have each other, we have Ethan, the packs are safe.
I have a seat on the Council so I can make sure it doesn't
become corrupt again.

And I even got back the sister I thought was dead.

"What do we do now?" Leah asks, leaning back to look up at
me.

"Now we get to live our lives the way we want, the way we deserve," I tell her.

I lean down and capture her lips, loving the feel of her in my
arms.

My mate is everything to me, and I know the things she can stir within me will never get old.

Leah breaks the kiss after a moment and pulls back from me.

"Oh! I know what we should do," she says, looking happy and excited. "We should have a party to
officially welcome Emily back into the pack."

I smile down at my mate, so happy and proud of the Luna she
has become.

That she would even think to do something like that for my long-lost sister, even though she knows
Emily doesn't like

her, is just the type of generous, kind-hearted thing my mate
would think of.

"That's a wonderful idea, Leah," I tell her. "And I think we
should do it sooner rather than later. If Emily can see and be reminded of all the people who missed her,
all the pack members who are so happy to have her back, maybe that'll
help her."

"I'll go talk to the chef," Leah says happily. "Let me know if there's any favorite foods you think Emily
would like to eat.

Oh, and I'll get James to take me into town for some new decorations, so I'll need to know Emily's
favorite colors."

There's a new spark in Leah's eyes and a spring in her step
that wasn't there before.

Destroying the AI tech-the last of her father and brother's hateful legacy-really has seemed to take a
weight off her.

"I'll text you anything I can think of that might help," I tell her and find amusement in the way she
wiggles her fingers at me and then disappears out the door, off to take party planning
to the next level it seems like.

Now, the only small issue left to address...

Telling the guest of honor in question.

Because while I told Leah I thought it was a good idea-and

I do think that-I know that Emily isn't going to want to have anything to do with it.

In fact she'll probably refuse outright.

But for the sake of the pack-for morale and a sense of
togetherness-this party is going ahead.

I'm not sure if it's because we've been at war or battling so many problems this last year, but even with
the peace and having my mate and son and sister safe, I'm still feeling this low-level hum of dread.

We've laid all our problems to rest. Yet I can't escape this feeling that we haven't even seen the worst of them yet...

Chapter 292

EMILY

"You can't make me!" I scream, hurling the glass of water I was holding across the kitchen.

It smashes into the wall right next to Axel's shoulder, but he doesn't so much as flinch.

Even when he gets rained on by water and shards of glass.

He just stares at me in bored contemplation, like he would literally rather be anywhere else than stuck in this kitchen with me right now.

Aaron flicks his hand and then the chef and other wolves who were assisting him in the huge, luxuriously appointed, modern kitchen all scramble to flee the room, leaving me alone with

Aaron.

Well, apart from Axel.

Who doesn't do anything other than to idly flick a shard of glass off his shoulder.

"Emily," Aaron says in that overly patient voice I'm starting to

hate. "This party is for you. To officially welcome you back into the pack. There are people who haven't seen you yet, who

will want to catch up with you. You're the daughter of the last Alpha, the sister of the current Alpha.

You're important to the morale of the pack, and you will act accordingly."

I want to pull my hair until it starts coming out in clumps.

What is there to even celebrate?

I'm not the same girl who walked out of this house ten years ago, the last morning before I was abducted.

I'm a freak now.

A monster.

I'm not fit to be part of this pack.

"Who even thought this was a good idea?" I demand angrily.

Aaron's expression hardens and then I know.

That bitch.

"This was Leah's idea?" I demand, furious. "Wasn't it!?"

Of course it was.

She wants to humiliate me.

I bet when she put the idea to Aaron, she made it sound like she cared about me and my standing within the pack.

She just wants to use me to make herself look better.

I can't believe Aaron doesn't see how manipulative she is.

"It doesn't matter who came up with the idea," Aaron says through a tight jaw. "The point is that the pack needs this after all the loss we've suffered-recently and right back to our own parents. We need to let go of the past and embrace a new future, one that can be brighter now that you've returned to us."

"Fine," I say stubbornly, crossing my arms. "Have your party.

But leave me out of it."

“You know all you’re doing is acting like a stubborn brat right now,” Axel puts in from where he’s still leaning against the wall, sounding perpetually bored. Aaron shoots him a narrow-eyed look as if he doesn’t necessarily want the input, but at the same time, doesn’t disagree. And anyway, what right does Axel have, putting in his opinion? He gets no say in what I do. No matter if Aaron appointed him my glorified babysitter. I glare at him. “This doesn’t concern you, rogue. So stop speaking. I don’t have to accept my enemies any more than I have to accept you trailing my every move like some unwanted stray.” Axel’s eyes flash and his body tenses. But he doesn’t reply. Aaron takes a deep breath like he’s mustering as much patience as he can. Well whatever. I won’t apologize. And that sharp pang of hurt because my brother sees me as some burden? I’m ignoring. “Emily, the party is in your honor and you will attend,” Aaron growls, injecting a powerful note of Alpha power into his voice that makes me flinch back. “I love you. And I’m trying. We are all trying. But kindly remember I am your Alpha. Don’t test me. You won’t like the results.” With that, Aaron spins on his heel and marches out of the room, while I sag against the nearby counter, feeling like I’ve been run ragged. “He’s not kidding,” Axel drawls. “People around these parts talk. Word is, he used to punish Leah real bad when she used to defy him. Even locked her up and starved her for days at a time.” This news makes me feel a little better. I’m glad Aaron treated Leah like that. She deserved it and more. Axel frowns. “It was f cked up, Emily. And Aaron regretted it afterwards. He did it because he thought she was conspiring with her pack against yours.” He shoves a hand through his hair and then rolls his eyes when another piece of glass shakes free. “I didn’t mention it to suggest it was okay or to make you happy. I’m just reminding you that your brother can be cold and calculating when he has to be. Don’t push him to that, Emily. It’ll hurt him more than it hurts you.” His tone makes me think that Axel sees me as selfish. Some childish, selfish woman who’s just acting out on spite. He doesn’t know what I’ve endured. The nights being constrained. Not knowing if I’d be trapped and left to starve to death. The days left alone with nothing to do except wait, wondering if my life would be the total sum of wasting away inside those walls. The loneliness. The terror. Then... the pain. Sometimes, I think it might be better if I died. It’d be easier for these people, I think. They could all move on with their new, happy ‘normal’ where everyone gets along and celebrates peacefully.

A thought surfaces and it's like acid in a wound, cutting me so deep I want to cave into myself and scream: I don't belong here.

I don't fit into this world. This pack. This family.

I'm consumed with hate and rage and I'm an abomination to my species.

Really, it's just a matter of time before they find out and try to kill me. Or worse, cage me.

And I'll never be a prisoner again. Never.

Axel's eyes narrow. He takes a step toward me.

I growl.

His brow furrows with ...concern?

But I can't trust him-I can't trust anyone.

Not even my brother.

He is a stranger to me.

"I need to run," I mutter, turning toward the service door that leads out to the back of the mansion.

"Not alone, sweetheart," Axel drawls, pushing across the kitchen to follow me.

"Why can't you just leave me alone for five minutes!" I yell at him, even though I know it's pointless.

"That's on you. When you can prove to your brother that you're stable and trustworthy, then maybe you'll get left alone," Axel tells me without a hint of remorse. "Until then, you're stuck with me. And I have to tell you, Emily. The way you acted with Aaron just now? All you're doing is proving him right. You're a fcking liability..."

Chapter 293

AXEL

Emily spins away from me and rushes out through the door, as if she can actually get away from me. She's angry and sad, frustrated and scared, anxious...a whole bunch of bad things that are causing a cocktail of explosive behavior within her.

I huff an annoyed sigh and stuff down that sinking feeling in my gut, and follow after her.

Unfortunately, having experienced my share of captivity over the long centuries of my life, I know a thing or two about the volatile emotions that come into play once you find yourself free again.

It's almost as terrifying as the imprisonment itself was, once you realize you can go anywhere or do anything.

Then, there's the rage. The acknowledgment of everything you'd been denied for every second of your capture, all that anger that you hold in it starts boiling up.

With Emily, though, I suspect it's more than just being held captive. She has a wild look in her eyes that speaks of desperation, of abuse.

Of horrors that are unspeakable.

I know my fair share of those too.

She hates me right now and I'm not too proud of myself either.

Rejecting Emily had been a rash decision. An instinctual one. I've been alone for so long and I've sworn off ties. or relationships that might make the people around me vulnerable. The moment I felt that draw, that inescapable need to touch, to claim, I knew I had to end it.

Before something ever got started.

Severing the bond hurt like a so ofabitch. I hate thinking that I caused her pain. The woman's a victim.

Emily doesn't deserve
to suffer more.

I scan the vast yards behind the mansion. I don't see her and
there are paths carved through the snow in all directions.

I shift quickly.

I lope out across the yard, but after a minute, it becomes apparent that Emily managed to do what I
considered dan
near impossible.

She's disappeared on me.

I don't know which way she went, and I can't easily catch any
trace of her lingering scent...which makes no sense.

I growl at the inconvenience of her, at the impossible position
she's putting me in.

Aaron will have my ass in a sling if I can't find her quickly.

As I'd told Emily, wolves gossip in a pack like this, and aside
from talking about the turbulent mess that had been Aaron's
relationship with Leah previously, they also talked about how Aaron punished James for failing in his
duty to safeguard the pack's Luna.

And James is Aaron's Beta. His brother in all but blood.

Since I've got no such standing, there's every possibility Aaron will do worse to me if I fail to keep track
of his sister.

I trot back and forth in an ever-widening arc across the yard and around the back half of the mansion,
scenting and listening until eventually I pick up a trace of Emily's fading
scent.

She must have been moving fast to barely leave any remnants
of scent behind.

And for any other wolf, they might not have been able to pick it up at all.

But I'm no ordinary wolf.

Also, even though I rejected her, Emily was my mate, and my wolf is more in-tune to everything about
her.

My wolf is thrilling at this chase, liking the idea of hunting down our mate, clearly not caring that I
rejected her, and we can never actually be anything to one another.

I take up the trail and bound off in the direction she fled, annoyed that she's got a good head start on
me, and could

get up to anything or go pretty much anywhere in the time it's
taken me to work out which direction she took.

I head way out into the wilds of Rathborn pack lands, much further than I had to go yesterday to find
her.

I wonder what the hell she could even be doing out here all
alone.

If it's simply the need to run and escape, then maybe her hold on her own sense-her ability to prevent
herself going rogue- is more tenuous than we thought.

When I find her, she's trotting back toward me, casual as
anything, as if she didn't just run off and lead me on a merry

chase.

For a second, I think I smell fresh blood, but the coppery tang of it is there and then gone in the next moment, so I don't think too much about it as I shift and step into her path.

"Shift back. Now," I tell her in a short voice.

Her beautiful, dark little wolf huffs, before transforming into the human girl.

"What?" she demands impatiently, crossing her arms, as if I'm the difficult one in this scenario.

I step closer, dwarfing her with my size and stature. "I'm only going to say this once more, Emily, so you better pay close attention. You do not run off on me, under any circumstances, or there will be consequences. Do you understand me?"

"I don't care if Aaron put you in charge of me," she snaps back in frustration. "I don't owe you anything, and you're basically a

stranger to me. A stranger who rejected our mating bond the second you realized we had one. If I need to run, I'll run. You don't own me. You have no claim on me!"

She's right. I gave that right up.

She goes to step past me, and I grab her arm, dragging her in closer to me.

My wolf ripples under my skin.

It wants us to claim her, whispering I'll never have it so good. as I'll have it with my mate, but I ruthlessly push my wolf and

its traitorous desires down.

"Aaron is your Alpha. You'll respect him if nothing else. And he says you're my responsibility. So keep on pushing me, darlin' and see where that gets you."

Chapter 294

EMILY

The following night, I find myself standing in front of a full-length mirror, glaring at the reflection of me wearing a silver, floor-length silky gown that no doubt cost a small fortune.

When I was younger-before I was taken-I used to love nothing more than picking out expensive couture dresses, spending pampered hours getting my hair, nails and makeup done for a party just like this one. I would have loved being the center of attention. I would have loved being all sparkly and frivolous, as I danced and laughed the night away without a care in the world.

That girl doesn't exist any longer.

That girl was kidnapped, locked away in a tomb, forgotten, left to die a slow death alone.

The girl I am now-the monster-still looks pretty as a picture on the outside.

But inside is all twisted and broken and ugly.

I fear it's only a matter of time before Aaron and the rest of the pack see what's beneath the façade and reject me outright.

They'll banish me from their pack-or worse-and go about their lives.

It's probably what I deserve.

But it's not what I want.

For a second, longing comes over me, and the girl I used to be wants her mate.

Axel.

For him to accept me and love me and save me from myself.

I turn sharply away from the mirror, because I can't stand to look at myself any longer.

And I can't afford to feel things like that.

Axel rejected me.

He made his feelings and intentions clear.

How can it hurt so much when I don't even know this man or

his wolf? It's cruel that I should long for something that I've never even experienced.

I'm not going to be the pathetic girl who chases after him when he's already stated plainly that he doesn't want me.

There's a knock at the door, and-as if summoned by my thoughts alone-Axel steps into the room before I can even give him permission to enter.

He makes no effort to hide the fact that his gaze is dragging slowly up and down my body, and it leaves tendrils of heat in its wake, making me feel all shivery and off-balance.

"Aaron said it's time for you to come down," Axel says in a low drawl-the way he always talks, as if normal words can be made into some kind of sensual sport.

And yes, I knew the party was in full swing, but I've been hiding up in my old/new bedroom.

I want to protest.

I want to fight and run and tear off this stupid dress and disappear out into the night.

Except both Aaron and Axel have warned me there'll be consequences if I don't cooperate, and part of me is terrified. to find out what those consequences might be.

I don't think either of them would physically hurt me.

But I learned the hard way that there are far more painful and deeper ways to be hurt, other than just physical pain.

I don't answer Axel, I barely acknowledge his presence as I pick up my skirt from the floor and stride past him.

I swear I feel the trail of his fingers across my hip as I go by, leaving me shivering, but I tell myself it was probably my imagination.

Axel despises me.

He tolerates me because Aaron requires it of him.

So why would he touch me?

I walk with a steady pace downstairs, the noise of the party coming up to meet me, while Axel is a step behind me the entire way.

When I reach the bottom, Aaron appears from somewhere, looking relieved.

"Good, you came down. We can do the rounds before they start bringing out the food."

My brother doesn't give me a chance to reply or catch my breath.

Next thing I know he's walked me up to a group of people and then it's a blur of, "you remember this pack member, right?" Or, "this pack member joined five years ago."

And everything in between.

Does he expect me to remember everyone's name?

Or anyone's names?

Some of them are vaguely familiar, but it's clear I've forgotten a lot in ten years.

Axel trails after me like a silent shadow, and the more people we talk to, the more it feels like the walls are closing in.

I'm trying to be polite and smile and act like the sister Aaron expects me to be.

Trying to be gracious when people seem genuinely happy to see me again.

But it's getting harder and harder.

Everything feels like too much.

The lights are too bright. The music and chatter are too loud.

There's a million different scents and my brain seems to want to take notice of every single one of them. It's too stuffy but I feel cold and then I start feeling dizzy and this vague sense of panic makes it harder and harder to breathe.

A firm, warm hand clamps around my elbow and I become acutely aware of Axel standing right next to me.

"I think maybe Emily would like a drink, Aaron, and maybe some food, now they're starting to bring it out," Axel says above my head to my brother, as if I'm not even there.

But maybe I'm not.

It's like I'm having this weird out-of-body experience.

"Yes, that's probably a good idea," Aaron responds, sounding distracted, as if his attention has already moved onto something else. "We can meet the rest of the guests later."

The rest?

Haven't I already been paraded in front of enough pack members?

Axel tugs then, and I blindly stumble after him, not even asking where we're going.

Next thing I know, cool, fresh air hits my face as we step outside, and I can finally breathe again.

Axel sits me down on one of the outdoor benches, and then presses a cold glass of water into my hand. I don't even know where he got it from.

"Sip slowly and try to take some deep breaths," he tells me in a low, gentle voice.

I do as he says, rapidly feeling better.

But then I'm immediately suspicious.

"Why are you helping me?"

Chapter 295

AXEL

Emily is a spitfire. Which is a damn sight better than a few minutes ago when she looked like she was going to pass out.

"I know a thing or two about panic attacks," I tell her in reply.

Her features crease in confusion.

"I wasn't having a panic attack."

"You really were, sweetheart. Thought you were going to keel over right there in the middle of that ridiculously fancy ballroom. Who even has a ballroom in this day and age?"

Just as I'd hoped, Emily laughs, and some more color comes into her face.

"It is kind of ridiculous," she agrees.

She takes another sip of water, her expression becoming thoughtful.

"You've had panic attacks?" she asks me, clearly not sure if she has any right to question me like that.

ner,

She 188ks & little disappointed. "But

someone I was close to once. Used to have them regularly, and they were way more debilitating. I had to figure out the best way to help. I picked up a trick or two."

She nods and then is silent for a moment, dropping her gaze.

"Thank you," she eventually whispers. "It felt like I was going to die if I didn't get out of there."

"Why didn't you say anything?" I demand heatedly.

She might not be my mate-only because it's impossible and I refuse to subject someone as beautiful and fragile as her to a life chained to the likes of me-but that doesn't mean I want her to suffer in silence.

"Because Aaron-and you-told me to behave," she replies, her eyes losing some of their sparkle.

I take her chin in my hand and urge her to look back at me.

"There's a difference between being good and being miserable," I tell her.

"Is there?" she asks bitterly, before looking away again.

I realize then that she's staring out to the land beyond the buildings surrounding the ranch, where fields eventually give way to forest and wilderness.

"Do you think..." she begins, but then bites her lower lip with indecision.

"Aaron will definitely notice if you shift and run," I tell her, reading the longing in her gaze.

But I can also sense the wildness in her, the need to regulate.

I doubt we'll be able to get her through the rest of the party if she doesn't release some of that tension.

"But I might be able to cover for you, at least for a little while. But we need to make it quick."

She nods eagerly, so I get out my phone and send a message to Aaron, making up an excuse about a torn skirt and we might be a little while before she either fixes it or decides on a new dress.

Aaron doesn't seem too bothered-I'm guessing he's busy with other Alpha duty now, or probably spending his time with.

Leah and Ethan.

"Let's at least walk down past the far buildings before we shift, so no one sees us going," I say as I help Emily to her feet.

She smiles and there's a spring in her step now that wasn't there before.

I can't say I've made the wrong choice.

The instinct to protect her and look after her is still strong within me, despite having rejected her and breaking the mating bond.

It's both a blessing and a curse that Aaron gave me this protection detail.

I wonder what he'd say if he knew Emily was my mate.

Would he be glad that I had rejected her, not wanting someone like me as his sister's mate? After all, even if the stories aren't completely true, he's still heard all the rumors about what I reportedly did in Texas.

Or would he be enraged that I had dared hurt and reject his sister without even giving her-or us-a chance?

And he doesn't even know the truth of my nature.

I'm sure if he did, he'd banish me from his pack and the new place I've earned here.

Maybe even kill me.

With the power of three Alphas, Aaron might be one of the only people alive who'd actually have a chance of killing me.

I put the thoughts aside as Emily and I round the last of the main buildings.

Emily quickly shifts and then takes off like a shot through the darkness.

If not for my heightened sight, I wouldn't have been able to

see her.

I mutter a curse, as I'm a few seconds slower, then have to try to catch up with her.

She's small and sleek and fast, and after a few minutes as she streaks toward the far tree line, I start to think she's moving

even faster than a wolf should be able to.

I lose sight of her as she plunges into the underbrush and have to pause to pick up her scent.

After another few minutes, I inwardly curse.

I've lost her.

Again.

Chapter 296

AARON

The party is into full swing, and everyone seems to be having a great time.

After eating, the band started playing popular music, and now I was out on the ballroom floor with Leah and Ethan between.

Ethan is smiling and laughing, but I can see he's getting tired since it's long past his bedtime, but he's still in good spirits.

Leah looks beautiful.

I don't think I've ever seen her look so happy, so carefree and relaxed.

Finally, I have what I've always wanted.

My mate, my son and my pack are all safe and happy.

We don't have to worry about war or rival packs or a Council that wants me dead just because of my Alpha powers.

I've barely had the thought and relaxed into the moment when my wolf perks up.

And not in a good way.

He's bristling, sensing something in the air.

Leah immediately senses my change in mood.

"Aaron is everything okay?" she asks, looking worried.

I lead her to the edge of the dance floor.

"Everything is fine," I tell her soothingly.

I don't want to worry her about whatever my wolf is sensing, especially since I can't even tell what it is.

Plus, no one else seems to have sensed anything.

Maybe I'm just so used to living with some kind of conflict hanging over my head, I don't know what do to, how to feel, when things are fine and safe and going well.

"Would you believe me if I said I just remembered something I wanted to ask Axel?" I say, figuring the white lie is pretty harmless. And it's partly true.

She snorts. "I believe there's something you need to do, and you don't want to alarm me about whatever it is."

"That...is absolutely true."

"

She kisses me quick and hard. "Do what you need to do."

Axel and Emily have been gone for a while—even though he said they might be—but with that odd feeling surfacing and not being

able to shake it...

“Go,” Leah tells me.

Leah smiles, and then someone comes over to talk to her, so I leave.

I head through the house until I reach the office I share with Leah, where the noise of the party doesn't quite reach.

I call the guys who are patrolling the perimeter of our pack lands, but they don't report anything unusual. I tell them to double check anyway.

I can't shake this bad feeling.

It's only getting worse.

Restless and agitated, I leave the office and head back to the party, thinking I need to find Emily and Axel. Maybe that's the problem, that I haven't seen them in a while, and I'm worried about how Emily is coping with everything.

However, when I reach the party, it's clear that the sense of unease is maybe starting to be felt by the pack. The mood isn't quite as jovial any longer.

Leah comes up to me, gaze worried.

“Aaron, what's going on?”

“Honestly, I'm not sure right now,” I tell her.

If the rest of the pack is beginning to sense danger, then we're really f u c ked.

Right then, Ethan starts wailing.

Screaming, really. He's inconsolable and Leah looks even more freaked out.

By now, my wolf is straining, pushing up within me, wanting to break out, prepared to attack this unseen danger, even though I've got no idea what's even causing this latent sense of malice.

I get my phone out again, this time calling down to the gate.

There's no answer.