

Bad Love 301

Chapter 301

EMILY

I can't risk getting any closer, otherwise Axel might sense or scent me.

But I'm dying from curiosity.

Something is going on here.

I just don't know if it's something good or something bad.

I have no idea why Axel would shift and run all the way out here just to intercept those vampires who came to the house to threaten my brother and our pack.

Part of me thinks we should just hand over Leah and the Roberts pack. That would certainly solve our problems.

Aaron isn't responsible for their bad choices, and he shouldn't have to pay for them.

I'm not close enough to hear what's being said, even with my heightened hearing.

The way Axel and the three vampires are all warily regarding each other, I don't think they know each other.

They're not acting familiar, so I don't think Axel was lying when he told Aaron he'd never met these vampires before.

But what the hell could he be talking to them about?

I watch for another few minutes at the heated exchange.

Eventually, however, the vampires get back in their vehicle.

Axel stays standing in the road, watching them as they roll past him and then the luxury sedan quickly disappears into the night.

I have to shift quickly then, and speed off into the darkness, hoping Axel doesn't scent me when he comes back this way.

The wind is blowing sharply from the north with the promise of new snow, so I'm hoping that'll cover the traces that may linger.

My mind is racing all the way back to the mansion, trying to figure out what Axel going after the vampires might mean.

What he could have even needed to say to such creatures.

I manage to sneak back into the mansion, then I rush upstairs to my room, where I hurry into the bathroom. I strip off my clothes and hurriedly tie a bathrobe around my body, and then stick my head under the shower long enough to wet my hair, so it seems like I've been here showering the entire time while Axel was gone.

It feels extreme, covering the lie of me trailing him with such a charade, but I have no idea how Axel might react if he found out I had followed him and spied on him.

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Axel is dangerous, of that I have no doubt.

And he rejected me as his mate, so I can assume he would protect me from his own wrath if I accidentally-or not so accidentally I suppose-found out something he didn't want me to know.

Just as I step back out of the bathroom, Axel walks into the room, and my heart immediately picks up speed.

I silently curse my own body's reaction to him.

It doesn't seem to matter to my wolf-or my body-that he rejected me.

He makes me feel things I don't want to feel.

He makes me want things I shouldn't want from him.

Even more so when he's made it clear that he doesn't feel the same way.

I turn away from him and try to force my wolf to settle.

"You were gone for a while," I say, trying to sound casual. "Did you get things figured out with James?"

He doesn't answer right away, and I have to turn back to him to read his expression.

The problem is, Axel is almost impossible to read.

www

He's staring at me-expression mostly dispassionate as usual, like he doesn't even care about having to deal with me one way or the other-and it's like he's trying to find some kind of ulterior motive behind my question.

I glance away again, willing my face not to burn with guilt.

Does he know I followed him?

"James was busy," Axel eventually says. "So I didn't get to talk to him."

"Well, I'm going to bed now," I tell him instead of saying anything about his lack of conversation with James.

I pointedly go over and get my PJs out of the closet.

"I'll be across the hall if you need me," Axel says, before sending me a nod and stepping out of the room.

In the role of my 'protector' Aaron gave Axel the empty guest room across from mine.

I have wondered a time or two whether Axel sleeps, or if he just lays awake all night and listens for any clues that I might be trying to sneak out.

I've been tempted to leave, but so far haven't been brave enough to try.

Getting caught doesn't seem worth the disapproval and probable lecture I'll get from both Axel and Aaron, the interfering jerks.

Speaking of interfering jerks, once Axel leaves, I get changed into my PJs, but then I start pacing.

I'm debating whether to go and tell Aaron what I saw.

About Axel intercepting and talking to the vampires.

On one hand, it'd probably solve my Axel problem, because Aaron might be pissed enough to kick Axel out of the pack.

But, without a doubt, my brother would simply put some other high-ranking wolf in charge of my apparent care.

Maybe it's the remnants of the broken mating bond, but my instincts are telling me whatever Axel was up to, it wasn't anything bad.

Well, not anything that might directly threaten the pack, anyway.

In fact, it might have been some misguided thing to protect the pack.

Axel does seem very loyal to my brother, after all.

Maybe Axel simply knows something about vampires and thought he could help Aaron by warning them off or something.

I don't completely disregard the idea of telling Aaron.

I don't want to keep secrets from my brother and the Alpha of our pack. However, I need more information before I take this to Aaron. Which means keeping a closer eye on Axel. Easy to do, when he shadows me night and day. I'm about to turn the tables on him in a big way.

Chapter 302

LEAH

It's late by the time Aaron gets the pack settled and things that need to be packed up from the party are put away.

I barely see Aaron until we both tiredly walk into our bedroom and swing the door shut behind us.

I'm tired, but I doubt I'm going to be able to sleep.

I sit on the edge of the bed, and Aaron comes over to sit next to me, dropping his arm around my shoulder.

I lean into his side with an exhausted sigh.

I thought all our troubles were over.

I thought we were finally going to be able to live peacefully, enjoy our family and our pack and know that we were all safe and secure.

My brother's mess was so much deeper and more dangerous than we could have ever anticipated.

"What are we going to do?" I ask Aaron in a fearful whisper.

"We're going to fight," Aaron tells me in a confident voice. "Like we always do."

Bul against vampires?" I shake my head. "It's one thing to go to war against other packs. But vampires are a whole other level of terrifying."

know, but I vow, I'm going to find a way to put these vampires down before they can start a new war,"

Aaron says in a hard

voice.

And when he speaks with such conviction like that, it's easy to believe things will be okay.

Still, I'm terrified for Ethan and the rest of the pack.

"Maybe we need a backup plan in the meantime," I say, even though I already know it's a bad idea.

But I feel this desperate need to protect my innocent son that overrides all other common sense.

"What do you mean?" Aaron asks.

I sit back from him a little so I can look up at him.

"Maybe we need to start recreating the AI tech. Dig out the classified Roberts Corp files and start reconstructing it so we've got something to hand over in case it turns out we don't have any other choice..."

I can see Aaron is just as torn as I am about this idea.

"Leah, we both know that's not the answer. We have no idea

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What

our packs in the short term, but doom us all in the long run when the vampires turn around and use it on every wolf in existence."

"Maybe we could somehow program in a failsafe, so it won't work on wolves?" I know I'm grasping at straws, but I don't know what else to do.

“And have them retaliate when they figure it out? And anyway, recreating that tech and figuring out how to program in a failsafe will take much longer than the two weeks they’ve given us. It took Roberts Corp years and millions upon millions of dollars to even create the technology in the first place.”

He’s right, but it doesn’t make me feel any better.

And even though I know it can’t end any other way than badly, I know I’m still going to dig into the Roberts Corp files tomorrow to see what I can start piecing together.

Maybe we should just hand the research over and tell them to recreate it themselves. Without the right caliber of scientists and engineers, and deep pockets, they might never be able to do it.

But I also wonder how I will live with myself if I made such a choice, knowing what it could mean for all wolves in the long

run.

I’ve never been so torn, and I’ve never been so scared.

“Then what’s the answer, Aaron? Because I’m really worried this is a fight we can’t win, no matter what we do.’

Aaron pulls me closer again.

“Tomorrow I’m going to call a Council meeting. I’ll tell them everything, and then lay out how I think we need to bring all the Councils across the States into this, and then contact the Old Country. This isn’t just our problem any longer. Trying to solve it on our own isn’t the answer.”

“What if no one wants to help us? What if they blame us and tell us we’re on our own?”

Aaron holds me tighter.

“We’ll cross that bridge when we come to it, but at the end of the day, when it comes to a threat like this, the packs have always come together as a united front.”

I nod, not sure I believe him.

But with no other alternative, it’s the only hope I’ve got to hang onto right now.

It’s the only hope I’ve got that my son might have a future.

Chapter 303

EMILY

The following few days, this weird tension settles over the mansion and the pack in general.

Aaron seems to have endless meetings that keep him out of the house at all hours of the day and night while Leah-not that I care about her-does nothing but look after Ethan and disappear into the office to bury herself under work for both the Rathborn and Roberts corporations.

The pack is being threatened by vampires, but I’m sure the next quarter’s profits are super important.

Meanwhile, I’m splitting my time between watching Axel- which is no hardship-and finding ways to sneak off and run through the wilderness at the edge of our territory.

He’s always pissed when I do it, and it’s getting harder to get away from him.

But at least he only thinks I’m doing it because I’m running to cope with the trauma of my imprisonment, and otherwise being a ‘brat’ who won’t listen to him or Aaron about how it’s even more unsafe to go places on my own with the threat of vampires hanging over us.

Sometimes, when I think about the truth-about how they

would react if they knew what I was really doing when I went running off into the woods-I want to laugh hysterically.

They’re worried about the threat of vampires on their doorstep?

They have no idea about the dangerous monster they brought home to live under their own roof.

I don't even trust myself.

Yesterday, I was having trouble ditching Axel since he'd started cottoning on to my tricks, fighting my cravings, as well as the driving need to shift, to run, to just get away from everyone and everything, and I'd come close to completely losing control.

I'd managed to get away from Axel and flee to the forest not long after, but I worried about what will happen if or when I do lose control and attack someone.

I know I will hate myself if I do that.

The problem is the stress within me just keeps building and building.

There's too many things for me to handle all at once.

Being forced to live in the same house as someone I hate, someone whose constant presence reminds me of my years of imprisonment.

Hiding the truth of myself and continuously worrying about what will happen when that truth comes out.

day, is presence

a blessing and a curse.

Despite the rejected mating bond, my wolf and my instincts still want him. Still want to get close to him, to know him in every way that counts.

And dam n it, despite his cool, dismissive, even downright contemptuous behavior toward me, sometimes I see hints of the real him.

The caring side, like when he helped me the night of the party and I didn't even realize I was having a panic attack.

Or his sense of humor which is a little dark and twisty, and suits me just fine.

And with the stress building like a pressure cooker, the time I need between my runs is getting shorter, the calming effects less helpful.

Like today. It's barely after lunch and I'm already feeling the prickly need to get out.

I'm just trying to decide how I'm going to ditch Axel today when he's been extra suspicious and bitchy about everything I've done when Aaron walks into the library where I was trying to find something to distract myself with.

Unfortunately, I know nothing will divert me from the bottomless pit of craving inside me that seems to yawn deeper every day.

"Emily," Aaron says as he steps in and sends a nod of respect toward Axel, who is lurking by the French doors leading out to the garden like he thinks I'm simply going to dash out through them if he wasn't physically blocking them.

The problem is, I probably would, I admit grudgingly.

"You're not usually home at this time of day," I note, seeing that Aaron looks tired and stressed. "Is everything okay?"

He goes and sits in one of the armchairs and indicates I should do the same.

"There's been a development," Aaron says, and immediately I know whatever he's about to tell me, it won't be good news.

"The Council contacted The Old Country and requested their help with the vampire problem, specifically engaging with the vampire Enclave of Elders to see if we can quell this disagreement before it turns into an actual war between species."

“Did they refuse?” I ask in dread, wondering how the hell we can survive against vampires if the Old Country or even other packs refuse to help us.

“No, they were very quick to agree,” Aaron says, his brow creasing as if he was surprised by this. “But they requested a contingent of Alphas travel to meet them in person.”

Alphas, I guess, feeling my insides twist.

I’m trying so hard not to explode, not to cry and beg Aaron not to leave me alone in this house with the woman whose very existence was used as a form of torture against me for years on end.

“Yes,” Aaron replies with a nod. “Myself, Leah, and several others on the Council.”

“Leah as well?” I ask in confusion, going still. “Wait, you’re leaving us?”

Chapter 304

The ramifications of Aaron and Leah leaving for the Old Country start rapidly sinking in, and none of it looks good.

“We’ve been threatened by vampires, and your answer to that is to take your mate and son, and go to the Old Country, leaving us defenseless?” I shout at him.

Axel straightens in alarm at my outburst and edges closer, as if he thinks he might need to physically intervene.

I try to get a handle on my anger and hurt, but it’s no use.

The cravings twisting my insides into knots aren’t helping either.

I want to smash this room to pieces.

I want to sink my claws and teeth into flesh until blood runs like rivers.

I want to tear out my own insides, if only to make all of this stop.

Aaron looks both pissed off and hurt at my demand.

“I don’t have a choice, Emily. Do you think I actually want to leave at a time like this? Don’t you think my Alpha instincts, my sense of responsibility, is telling me that doing such a thing is wrong on countless levels? We requested the help of the Old Country Wolves. If we refuse their mandates, then we don’t get

Aaron gets to his feet, staring down at me with disappointment and detachment.

“Whether you choose to understand or keep acting selfish is up to you, Emily. But this is happening. The private jet has already put in its flight plans to Romania. Leah and I are leaving tonight. Hopefully, we won’t be gone for more than a few days, but at this point, I don’t know what to expect from the Old Country Wolves, so it might end up being longer.”

I don’t have any words.

Nothing that won’t alienate Aaron further or cement his idea that I’m a brat.

How can he say that about me?

All the things I'm doing, all the things I'm trying to tell him, it's not for my own sake.

It's for the sake of the pack.

How can he not see that Leah and Roberts pack brought us here - on the brink of a war with vampires, the deadliest creatures known to wolves? To the world!?

"Who will be in charge of the pack in the meantime?" I ask in a quiet voice, unable to keep the tight anger out.

Aaron frowns, as if even that is an affront to him.

g with us, as extra protection for Leah and

Ethan," Aaron answers, his gaze cutting away from me, which gives me an ever deeper bad feeling.

"Obviously as my sister, you're next in line of succession, because Ethan is still too young. The pack will be expecting you to step up and take on a leadership role," Aaron continues and I don't know whether to be grateful or terrified about everyone's expectations of me. "However, I've talked to Jessica and she has agreed to support you and act as pack Luna during Leah's absence. If you aren't coping, I've given her permission to also take over your duties should the need arise."

I feel the betrayal of that far more deeply than I expected to.

My best friend.

Placed in a roll that should have fallen to me at any other time.

Except I'm damaged goods.

I'm the broken, fragile sister.

I can't be trusted to spend a day alone, let alone manage an entire pack.

"And while it has caused some controversy," Aaron goes on. "I have decided to put Axel in charge of the pack until I get back. He's been an Alpha in his own right, so he knows what's required in the role. Plus, he doesn't have the history and personal alignments within the pack, so I know he can be

ipletely impartial. You will work closely with him to ensure the pack runs smoothly while I'm gone."

My entire body goes numb, and I cut my furious gaze over to Axel, but he's looking placidly at Aaron and quite obviously ignoring me.

"Don't make things more difficult than they're already going to be, Emily," Aaron warns me.

Apparently, me just existing makes things more difficult for everyone, so what does he even expect me to do?

Lock myself in my room and play the damaged victim who can't cope with life?

Never mind that's how I feel most days, but I refuse to let that jerk old Roberts Alpha win.

He stole enough years of my life as it is.

Everyday I get out of bed and walk out of my bedroom despite feeling like nothing but a shriveled-up husk inside, I figure it's a massive fuck you to that old dead bastard.

I force the pain down deep into what is a bottomless well. "Enjoy your European vacation, Aaron."

I know it's petty, but part of me wants Aaron to hurt even half as much as I'm hurting.

I stalk out of the room and ignore the murmur of both Aaron's and Axel's voices, before Axel takes to following me like always.

I have no idea where I'm going or what I'm doing, I just know I need some way to escape all this hate and anger and ugliness raging inside my chest.

As I go around the next corner, I almost bump into someone coming the other way.

Leah steps back and looks at me with wide eyes.

Suddenly, that bubble of fury and helplessness in my chest bursts, and I lunge forward, claws and fangs emerging.

Chapter 305

AXEL

Emily lunges at Leah with a furious, feral snarl and even with my heightened reflexes, I'm not close enough to reach her in time before she takes Leah down to the floor and lands on top of her.

I do, however, reach her in time to loop an arm around her waist and lift her before she can sink her fangs into Leah's neck like she was aiming to do.

I've barely got my arms around her when she turns on me in a fit of blind rage.

This has been building up since the moment she was brought home.

I could see it in the way she would tense around other pack members, or the feral gleam in her eyes when she thought no one was looking and she would glare at Leah.

Leah scrambles up from the floor, staring with wide eyes as I try to subdue Emily without hurting her, all the while avoiding her shredding me with her sharp little claws and teeth.

"Run!" I tell Leah.

Because if on the small chance Emily **got** away from me, she'd pick up where she left off.

Leah darts by us and then goes sprinting down the hallway, shouting for Aaron as she goes.

With Leah gone, Emily momentarily becomes even more wild, and her claws rake across my jaw and neck.

That's the last straw for me.

Furiously, I take her legs out from underneath her and flip her down so she lands on her stomach. I come down on top of her, using my weight to try to subdue her, but at the same time trying not to crush her, because she's so much smaller than me.

However, she's still raging and fighting beneath me.

"Stop, Emily!" I command her in a hard, booming voice, putting some of my long-dormant Alpha power into the words.

If anything, it only makes her fight harder beneath me.

I pin her arms, and then lean down and clamp my teeth onto the back of her neck, growling a final warning. I don't break the skin, but there's every chance she'll at least have bruises later

1. on.

This is a move of domination I've never had to use on anyone in my life, not even when I had a pack.

But Emily is closer than ever to going rogue.

The only thing that's going to get through to her now is pure instinct and base aggression.

It works for the most part.

She

goes still beneath me and lets out this breathless kind of whimper.

But her body is still taut like a bow drawn too tight, and I have no idea if she's going to get right back up and start fighting the second I let her go.

The worst thing about this is what it's doing to my body.

Having her underneath me, feeling the way her strong, lithe body fits against me, the womanly scent of her, my teeth sunk against her flesh...

I want to bite her in a completely different way.

In a way that will bind us together for eternity.

I want to rip off every stitch of clothing until she's naked and moaning and begging me for more.

My wolf is frustrated and on edge and doesn't understand why I rejected the mating bond when our mate is right here.

Ripe for the taking.

I stagger back, not fully trusting myself.

The second I'm no longer physically forcing her to submit, she starts struggling again. Although maybe not as fiercely this time.

I flip her over and then use my hips to pin her as I grab her arms.

"Enough!" I roar at her.

"I will not submit to you!" she snaps at me, straining against my hold. "You rejected me as your mate. You have no right—"

"You did *what?*" a furious Alpha voice demands from above us.

Chapter 306

I freeze, cursing that I was so wrapped up in Emily, I didn't realize Aaron had arrived.

With Aaron here, I figure he can control his own damn sister.

I roll off her and get to my feet, not flinching and not backing down as I meet Aaron's furious gaze.

"It's true," I tell him without a hint of remorse. "Emily was my mate. And I rejected her."

Aaron looks positively murderous, but he doesn't get a chance to say or do anything as Emily scrambles back into action, partially shifted.

I can't say whether she's going after Leah again or plans to leave the house and run to the woods.

Either way, she's still completely out of control, operating on instinct and aggression.

Aaron intercepts her with a curse, clamping a hand on the back of her neck—much like I'd done with my teeth a few minutes ago—forcing her to go still.

"Submit!" he roars at her, Alpha power at full force.

It's enough to make me shiver, and I've never been intimidated anything in my entire life.

The power of three Alphas is certainly nothing to mess with.

Emily, however, still has some fight in her.

It's clear in the way she's gone still, but still straining at the edges, like she's going to explode again any second now.

"Take her up to her room," Aaron growls at me, thrusting her in my direction. "I'm going to get the pack doctor."

I take hold of Emily. All her muscles feel like stone beneath my hands and her eyes are gleaming with this wild look.

"No!" she screams, twisting against me. "I'm not going upstairs! Let me go! Let me out!"

I wrap my arms around her and toss her over my shoulder, immobilizing both her arms and legs.

It's the only way to get her upstairs without hurting her or letting her hurt me.

Aaron barely waits to see if I've got her under control before turning and striding off to get the pack doctor from the medical

annex.

Once we reach her room, I toss her onto her bed. She bounces but then comes right back at me.

"Damn it, Emily!" I shout as I catch her against me.

my own aggression rising up within me and it's getting all wrapped up in lust and how I denied our mating bond.

My instincts are telling me to subdue and dominate and claim her.

"You need to stop. Now!" I tell her with a growl.

I don't know if I want to yank her closer or shove her away from

1. **me.**

My blood is running hot and my teeth ache with the need to bite her.

All my mind wants to do is picture how I could sling her down on the bed and make her mine in every way that counts.

I've never felt this close to losing control before and that's what finally shocks my senses back into logic.

If I lost control, there's no telling what might happen.

Damn this woman.

She pushes me to extremes I've never experienced.

"Emily," I snap again, pushing her away from me. "Aaron has gone to get the pack doctor. If you don't calm down before they get here, you'll be sedated. Is that what you want?"

She jerks away from me with a final growl, however when she

spins and stalks

away from me, she comes face to face with a mirror, and freezes, staring blankly at herself.

It's the same full-length mirror I saw her

standing in front of the other night, wearing that silver dress that'd stolen the breath right out of my body.

God, she'd looked gorgeous that night.

The second I'd seen her, I'd immediately regretted rejecting the mating bond.

If I hadn't, I could've taken her in front of that mirror, making her watch herself come apart beneath me.

I was half-hard that night thinking about it.

And the same thing is starting to happen again now that I've let my thoughts stray.

However, Emily suddenly shrieks angrily. She lunges toward the mirror and breaks it with her bare hands

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I lunge forward and grab her back from the cascade of breaking glass.

She sags in my arms, crying now that the fight has all gone out of her.

Away from the glass, I sink to the floor, holding her against me.

Chapter 307

EMILY

"Let me see," Axel says gently, pulling my hands from where I've tucked them against myself.

They're all cut up and bloody, but the slices are superficial, so they'll probably heal easily enough.

Axel, however, rips the bottom of his shirt and then gently winds the material around the worst cuts, stemming the last of the trickling blood.

"Thank you," I murmur, my voice hoarse. "I don't know why I did that."

It's the truth.

The way I lost control scares me.

It was kind of frightening the way the emotions just overwhelmed me like that and I had to do something, anything

to let them out.

I only wish no one else had witnessed it.

Axel has seen sides of me I wish I could bury deep, never to see the light of day again.

I want me as his mate.

Someone as broken as I am.

Someone who can't control themselves.

Someone who is dangerous and can't even be trusted to be left on their own.

I don't regret attacking Leah.

She's still the enemy after all.

I can see that, even if no one else can.

I only wish I'd bided my time and done it when we'd been alone so no one could have stopped me.

Of course, Leah is an Alpha **in** her own right, so maybe she would have simply killed me.

But at least I wouldn't be living in this misery any longer.

At least I wouldn't have to worry what will happen to me or the people I love if I fully snap one day and go rogue.

At least I wouldn't be living in this horrible limbo.

Not just a wolf any longer.

But also not just a—

I cut the thought off before it can take hold,

I can't even face what was done to me.

What I've become.

Instead, I force myself to focus on the here and now.

Now that Axel is simply holding me—

not trying to control me- his touch and presence is easing the wildness inside me.

The storm has calmed and drained away.

I lean into him, letting his strength and solid presence soothe me in a way I probably shouldn't let it since he's not my mate.

We sit like that for a few silent minutes, and it's exactly what I need.

But part of me wishes this was real.

That Axel was holding me because he was my mate and he loved

1. me.

The way his touch is so gentle, I can almost believe the fantasy of it.

I know I shouldn't, but I'm already feeling so weak and exhausted from running the gamut of emotions just now—and from everything that's happened since I stepped out of that isolated house last week—that I give in to temptation and slip my arms around him.

For a second, he stills, and I hold my breath, waiting for him to thrust me away or shout at me.

Instead, he holds me in return, and I breathe a sigh of relief.

I rest my cheek against his shoulder and let my eyes slide closed.

Just for this second, I'm going to believe the lie.

That eventually I'll be okay, and that I'll have someone like Axel to love me, and protect me, and hold me when the world seems too hard. That eventually I'll be *me* again. Strong and capable and able to love myself.

After a few long moments that might be the closest I've come to happiness and true relief for over ten years, Axel lifts a hand and smooths it over my hair.

"Feeling better now?" he asks in a low tone, his voice a pleasant rumble.

I nod and then lean back so I can look up at him.

"I'm sorry...thank you for taking care of me," I whisper, feeling shame heat my cheeks at the way I lost control.

"Emily," he says, frowning a little, and I shiver at the way he says my name. "What happened? The way you hate Leah, it seems like more than just the fact that she's the daughter of your pack's enemy."

glance away, my first instinct to tell him a lie, telling him nothing.

But I find I don't want to.

I don't want to be alone in this any longer.

"Leah is the reason I was abducted."

Chapter 308

I can see Axel is confused by what I've just said.

"How can Leah be the reason you were abducted? She was just a child," Axel says, but his voice isn't judgmental or critical, just

curious.

I think then he might actually listen to me and understand where I'm coming from.

"The Roberts Luna was killed," I tell him, the memories of that time coming back to haunt me.

Really, those memories never left me. It's not like I had much else to think about during those ten years I was locked up.

"And then both my parents were killed," I continue, a lump rising in my throat. "The number of wolves who'd already died was getting higher and higher, and other packs were beginning to get pulled into the conflict. The Council decreed that peace needed to be reached. They decided in favor of the Rathborn pack and told the old Roberts Alpha he needed to hand Leah over to be Aaron's future bride. Of course, it wasn't like Rathborn pack came away from it much better off. My brother had to sacrifice his life and his true love, Jessica."

"I still don't see what that has to do with you," Axel says, brow creasing in confusion.

glance away from him, trying not to let the memories overwhelm me.

I'd barely been old enough to be fighting in the war myself.

I'd only just turned seventeen, but after my parents were killed, I swore I would get my revenge.

Instead, the Old Roberts Alpha used me for his own revenge.

“Barely an hour after the ruling, I was out with other Rathborn pack members because we’d heard yet another group of Roberts wolves had trespassed on our territory. We got ambushed. The Roberts Alpha and what was left of his best fighting wolves slaughtered the other pack members I was with, and abducted me. It was a massacre. And all the bodies they burned. All so they could cover the fact that I was taken, not killed. Aaron and the rest of the pack assumed I was killed that day, just like the old Roberts Alpha hoped they would.”

“I’m so sorry you went through that, Emily,” Axel says in a low voice, and I can tell he means it, they’re not just empty words.

“The old Roberts Alpha, he told me from the moment he took me that the only reason I was there, the only reason I was alive, was because the Rathborn pack had his daughter.

It was like some kind of twisted trade in his mind. Aaron had Leah, so the Alpha Roberts had me. He would come and see me all the time. Sometimes almost every day, but then sometimes not for weeks. Somehow he was getting updates from within the Rathborn pack, so he’d tell me about her. What she was doing, and whenever the Rathborn pack treated her badly, he’d do the same

to me, but twice as bad-”

I have to stop then, because it’s starting to feel like I can’t breathe again, and I don’t want to go back there.

To the panic, to the feeling of helplessness.

To the torture.

That was only the beginning.

Those early days, when he’d withhold food, or beat me, or make me sleep in a cold dark closet with no bedding and no blankets.

I used to hope my pack was treating Leah as badly, because it was what she deserved..

The Roberts pack had brought nothing but death and misery to the Rathborn pack.

However, at the same time, I started wishing Aaron and the others would just leave her alone and forget about her, so maybe the old Roberts Alpha would do the same with me...

Of course, eventually Leah had grown up and then Aaron had actually married her.

When the Roberts Alpha had come to tell me—raging about it- I’d refused to believe it.

I’d been convinced that surely Aaron would find some way to get himself out of it.

Cars, alter all, to appeal to the Council and get the ruling reversed.

After that was when the old Roberts Alpha had really stepped things up.

When he’d started his research, and the experiments had begun...

I shudder, feeling my stomach churn, and can’t let my thoughts go any deeper into that darkness.

“It’s okay, Emily,” Axel says gently. “You don’t have to tell me anything else.”

I take a calming breath and look up at him, but then freeze as my gaze catches his.

We're so close, less than an inch apart.

It would be so easy to close the distance between us.

I want to feel his mouth on mine more than I've ever wanted anything in my life.

"Emily..." he whispers roughly, his eyes darkening as he stares.

at me.

I'm struck by the idea that maybe he wants me after all.

That the spark between us is undeniable.

alling to blaze into an inferno.

But then why did he reject me?

I'm tempted to lean forward, just to find out what might happen.

However, just then, the door opens and

Aaron walks in, his expression grim as he glances from me and my bloody hands, to the broken shards of glass littering the carpet.

The doctor also bustles in and takes a clinical look over the situation.

"Get the sedative," Aaron says in a cold voice.

Chapter 309

My whole body goes cold as I hear Aaron's order for the doctor.

Well, colder than I already felt, anyway.

It's like there's ice water in my veins instead of blood.

I wonder if that's better or worse than the white—

hot lava of rage that'd been boiling through my body since Aaron told me he was leaving and I saw that bitch, Leah, who just keeps ruining my life over and over.

Axel helps me to my feet and then leads me over to the bed.

"That won't be necessary," Axel says in a clipped tone, and I can practically feel him standing protectively over me. "She's calm now. She won't get angry like that again, will you, Emily?"

The way he says my name—almost making it sound exotic when it's plain as Jane—makes me shiver and I quickly shake my head, avoiding the judging gazes of both Aaron and the doctor.

"She did cut her

hands, though," Axel continues, tone a little more reasonable now it seems like Aaron's not about to sedate me into oblivion. "So maybe the Doc can take a look at that."

The doctor looks questioningly at Aaron, waiting for permission, only moving toward me when Aaron gives a single nod.

His eyes are ghillering with his wolf.

Anger is practically radiating off him.

I know he's upset about what I did—attacking his wife and mate, the woman who is technically my Luna and the one I should look to above all other female pack members—but I think he's also pissed at what he overheard.

About Axel being my mate and rejecting me.

I wonder what Aaron is angrier about.

The fact that someone like Axel is my mate in the first place, or that Axel rejected me out of hand without even giving us a chance to know one another?

What will I do if Aaron insists on Axel honoring the mating bond after all?

I can't decide if I'm intrigued or terrified by the idea.

Unbidden, I remember how Axel felt when he pinned me down in the hallway and clamped his teeth into the back of my neck to subdue me and make me submit.

Partly, I'd been furious about how my body was reacting, that I could want someone who has treated me so terribly. Someone who hasn't bothered hiding the fact that he doesn't like me and is forced to interact with me only by order of my Alpha brother.

When Axel had been on top of me—the weight of him bearing

me down, his hips flexing into mine, the alluring, masculine scent of him inundating my senses—all I'd wanted to do was submit.

To melt in a puddle beneath him and let him do whatever he wanted to me.

But it was a weakness to want that.

It was a weakness to want to kiss him just now.

And I've spent enough years being weak and helpless.

So instead, I'd turned that want into more anger.

Until I'd seen myself in the mirror.

I'd seen how close I was to becoming the monster on the outside that I was hiding on the inside.

And then, I'd only been furious and hateful toward myself.

All of this, I knew, wouldn't inspire Aaron to have any confidence in me.

I'd be lucky if he didn't just hand all of my responsibilities over to Jessica when he left, because I'd demonstrated yet again how I couldn't handle things.

Except ever since we'd had the party, and I'd slowly but surely felt more comfortable with members of the pack over the last few days, parts of me that I'd thought were long dead and buried were being brought back to life.

But it's dangerous to feel those things.

I can't get complacent and actually think I belong here among these wolves, with this pack that used to be my family.

Eventually I'm going to have to work out where to go and what I'm going to do, because I can't stay here hiding what I am for the rest of my life.

One day soon, I might lose control even worse than I did today, and I know I wouldn't be able to live with myself if I actually hurt someone.

The doctor checks my hands and says the wounds are superficial and should heal quickly enough on their own.

He then checks me over while Aaron and Axel stand by watching.

I can practically feel Aaron's judgement and disappointment settling on my shoulders.

When the doctor finishes, he turns to Aaron and tells him I seem fine now, as though I'm not even in the room.

"I want you to leave several doses of sedative with Axel," Aaron tells the doctor.

"Why?" I demand, even though I'm sure I don't want to hear the answer.

Aaron turns a level, aloof stare on me.

"So that next time you lose control like that, he can sedate you more quickly before you hurt yourself or anyone else."

Next time.

Not if I lose control.

But next time.

Like I'm already a lost cause and it's just a matter of time before I'm causing more drama.

I can't decide if I'm about to get angry all over again, or this latest injustice just hurts.

Before I can say anything, Aaron turns his attention to my guard.

"Axel, we need to have a word."

Axel nods in resignation and crosses the room without looking in my direction.

Aaron tells the doctor to stay with me until Axel gets back, but I flee into the bathroom, telling him I'm going to wash the blood off my hands.

I almost want to demand that if Aaron is going to talk to Axel about the mating bond, then I should be part of that

Write youth com

conversation..

But I can't stand to hear again how Axel doesn't want anything to do with me.

Experiencing the pain from Axel rejecting the mating bond hurt enough.

I don't need to be humiliated on top of that.

Chapter 310

AXEL

Aaron stalks across the hall into the room he gave me to use.

I'm assuming he doesn't want to leave Emily for long in case she tries to run or decides she's going to pick up where she left off **with** Leah.

I have a better understanding now of why Emily hates Leah so much.

The old Roberts Alpha sounds like he was a twisted bastard.

I think Aaron would maybe have more sympathy and understanding for Emily if he knew some of what she went through, but it's not my place to tell him.

I won't betray Emily's confidence like that.

Aaron and Leah leaving for the Old Country for a few days, or a week is probably for the best.

It'll give Emily some time to adjust without Leah here **to** constantly remind her of what she went through.

However, I get the sense Emily wasn't telling me everything.

Like maybe she told me a sanitized version, and there was much more to it.

Probably things that were even more horrible than what she spoke of.

It's clear I need to get to the bottom of it all.

Preferably before we have more instances like today.

There are mounting mysteries about Emily that make me think all isn't as it seems with her.

Something is bubbling under the surface.

Something volatile and wild.

Maybe something more than just the abduction and captivity, and even the pack wars before that.

And for Emily to start healing properly, I think we need to get out in the open whatever is going on with her.

Maybe I rejected her as my mate, but not because I wanted to.

Not because I thought there was anything wrong with Emily.

The more I get to know her, the more I can see why the Moon Goddess paired us together.

We both have our dark sides, but Emily is brave and fierce and has the kind of spark I've rarely come across in all my long centuries of life.

protect her.

Because it would be better for her in the long run.

Because being mated-bound-to someone like me would be nothing but a curse.

Besides, I'm immortal and Emily isn't.

So, what?

I'm supposed to mate her and love her and then get to live one short lifetime with her?

And then maybe go rogue when my mate dies and spend the rest of eternity missing something—someone—I can never get back?

Who in their right mind would sign up for that?

What I do is too important.

I keep the balance.

I keep the peace between wolves and vampires.

I am the line that separates them.

I assumed that's why the Moon Goddess never gave me a mate before, because if I lost her and went rogue or died myself, then who would uphold the ancient treaty any longer?

I don't understand why this has happened here and now with Emily.

But one thing is certain.

Even if I can't mate her, I can still protect her like she's mine.

I can still make sure she's safe and well before I have to move on to whatever next rogue vampire or wolf I'm required to hunt down.

"Tell me exactly what happened," Aaron says, crossing his arms and taking up a belligerent stance.

"The day we came home from the Council Hall after Ryker and his pack attacked, the day you found out Emily was still alive," I begin, trying to keep my voice even and free of emotion since I

don't know what Aaron is thinking about all this right now. "I was the one who found Emily out in the woods. As soon as I saw her, I knew. I felt the pull down to my bones. Down to my soul."

Aaron's eyes narrow. "And what? Right then and there you rejected her? When you knew what'd happened to her? When you could see how fragile she was? Did you even stop to think what rejecting your mate would **do** to my already broken sister?"

He's shouting by the time he finishes those rapid-fire questions.

"I did this for Emily's sake," I tell him calmly.

I will not feel bad for what I did to protect my mate.

Even though it meant protecting her from myself.

I thought things would be simple when I agreed to come to Rathborn pack lands with Aaron.

I thought I would be able to wrap up whatever unrest was happening between wolves and vampires in Montana, and then move on like I always do.

Except this whole situation has proven to be anything but simple.

For a start, what's brewing between species here may be one of the biggest threats to the ancient peace treaty I've ever encountered.

The audacity of the vampires here—working with wolves to develop technology that has the potential to wipe out entire species—is almost unbelievable.

And then there's Emily.

The mate I want...but can never have.

I thought I could keep my secrets, keep detached.

But Aaron is worthy of my respect in a way I've rarely come across.

A wolf with the power of three Alphas—almost unheard of.

For the first time **in** a long time, I realize I am going to have **to**

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Write your t

tell the truth of who I am.

Aaron might be fine with it.

Or I might end up fighting one of the most powerful Alphas I've ever met just to escape this house alive.