

Bad Love 41

Chapter 41

It's a bit like a jail break.

Only I'm leaving the hospital.

Brian wheels me out into the hallway and we look both ways.

"You ready?" he asks.

I fight a smile. "Let's do this."

He wheels me to the left and toward the double doors at the end of the hallway.

I'm sure there are follow-up visits I'll have to schedule and a whole slew of paperwork to sign myself out of here so the hospital isn't liable for anything. But I just don't care about playing nice anymore, or about playing by the rules.

Where did that ever get me?

He pushes me out of this wing and I shoot a fist in the air in victory.

He laughs and picks up the pace until we're almost running-well, he's running, I'm 'rolling' to the elevator bay.

There are some nurses hollering, "wait!"

I cover my eyes as I'm wheeled in and the doors close.

He punches the button for the ground floor and the elevator starts its descent.

"I can't believe we're doing this," I say. I twist my neck and glance up at him. "I can't believe you're here. This is all so surreal."

I'm about to have my first date-at my dad's funeral.

Tears fill my eyes.

"Some things are worth waiting for, Leah." He tucks my chin. "All right, this is the hard part. So, uh, try not to look too conspicuous."

I'm in a hospital gown. I still have the iv needle in my hand. My hair is a big, wild mess.

I've got Thor pushing me around.

"We're definitely going to stand out."

"Just act normal," he says.

The doors open with a ding and Brian pushes us through the main area of the hospital.

He smiles at the female guards on duty, thanking them for their time and help. Next up, we have to clear the billing department and there are additional guards at the end of this corridor.

They're even scanning wristbands, probably to make sure the patients are cleared and not dashing out without insurance or making payments.

I hold my breath.

"Just stay calm," Brian whispers.

"Do you have your paperwork, miss," the older man at the door asks. He's in his sixties. Dark hair. Bald.

"I'm just taking my wife outside for a few minutes. She has surgery tomorrow. They'll start prepping her in a few hours. Her room isn't even ready yet."

He doesn't say anything.

I look the man in the eyes. "I might not make it," I admit. "I just want to breathe some fresh air for a bit."

The man continues to stare at me. He's human, at least I think he is. He doesn't say anything for several seconds. Then finally he relents. "All right. Don't stay out too long. The temperature is going to drop tonight. And though it's busy now, the beds are going to open up as the night shift starts."

"Thank you," I whisper.

"Good luck," he tells me.

I keep my eyes down and hold my breath as Brian wheels me out the last door.

I'm not just escaping this place for a while.

I'm escaping my life.

This choice...it's my own. And for the first time, maybe ever, I'm doing something for me...

Chapter 42

AARON

I bought flowers.

A bouquet of lilacs and lillies and a whole bunch of other blooms that I don't know the names of, but that are bright and cheerful. I don't particularly like how strong they smell.

When I knocked James out and left the mansion, I found myself driving back here.

To Leah.

I've been wrong about a lot of things with her.

I know that.

She deserves truth, if nothing else.

And a man that needs to apologize, he shouldn't come empty-handed.

So... flowers.

She'll likely throw them back in my face, and rightfully so. I know she doesn't want to see me, let alone speak to me, but there are things she doesn't know.

About my pack.

About hers.

About how much she means to me.

"You've got a lot of nerve," Adam says. He has two security guards behind him. They're wolves. Roberts pack, I suspect, and they don't appear shy about throwing down in this facility.

I roll my shoulders.

I'm itching to fight.

Adam holds out his arms, blocking the guards from me. "We're not doing this here. Leah's been through enough. She needs to rest after her treatments--"

"What treatments?"

Adam snaps his mouth shut. "You're not welcome here. She doesn't want to see you. This isn't just a pack issue, it's on record with the hospital, Aaron. You may have walked in like you own the place, but there are protocols and surveillance, and a whole slew of humans that work in this facility. You may be an Alpha on your lands, but that doesn't matter here."

"I'm not here to make problems. I just want to talk to Leah. She deserves the truth."

"Yes." Adam scoffs. "And you've had ten years to share it with her."

"I'm going to see my wife." My implication is clear, no one is going to stop me

The guards' shoulders go up, almost like their inner wolves' hackles are rising.

"You're going to let me say my piece, and then if Leah wants me gone, I'll go."

Adam shakes his head.

"Don't make this hard, Adam."

I'm maybe a hundred feet from Leah's room. I can see the female physician from earlier picking up a phone, probably to call security. She looks anxious and she's shaking her head worriedly.

"Call them off, Adam," I warn him. "I swear if you block me from this, I'll do everything in my power to make your life a living hell."

"I can't do that. I owe it to Leah to respect her wishes."

Part of me respects him for it.

Somebody needs to defend her. I sure as hell didn't.

My hands curl into fists..."If it is a fight you want..."

"Doctor! Adam!" He turns at the female running toward him.

It's that same middle-aged female physician, interfering again. She eyes me warily then pulls Adam aside.

"We can't find her," she says.

She pitched her voice low, but my wolf senses are acute.

"She's not in her room or the oncology department."

Oncology? Wait. Does she mean cancer?

"What the hell are you saying?" Adam asks.

"Yeah," I butt in. "I want to know what the hell is going on. Where is my wife?"

The physician frowns. "She appears to have left the hospital. She's missing."

Chapter 43

Adam escorts me back to Leah's hospital room. He closes the door behind me and the other guards.

I try her cell phone.

Adam rings her too.

Nothing.

"She may have the volume off. I had her put it on silent in case you..." he trails off.

In case I tried to bother her, he implies.

I growl.

"Her clothes are here, Adam." I point to the neatly folded pants and shirt. The shirt still has splatters of blood on it from when she'd been coughing. "If she was going to leave, she would've changed and put on shoes."

"Is it possible she's still on the grounds?" one of the guards suggests. "Maybe she was hungry or got lost or maybe she just didn't feel like being cooped up alone in here. It's not uncommon for patients to wander."

Adam doesn't look convinced though. Neither am I.

"Sam," Adam says to the first guard, "Go down to the security office and review the security footage. Track her movements on the feed." He looks at the second guard, a slightly shorter, wide-shouldered wolf. "Ralph, check each room on this floor."

"Yes sir."

When we're alone, I cross to the window. It's dark out and the moon is half full. I still hold the flowers and I don't know what to do with them. For some reason, I can't seem to bring myself to put them down.

"How sick is she?" I ask Adam.

I'm not yelling or demanding or screaming.

"Please," I say. "I just want to know."

I can see his reflection in the windows. Adam shakes his head. "She's dying, Aaron. Even with the treatments, we don't have a lot of hope. She doesn't have much time left."

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LEAH

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Brian lifts me into his truck and buckles me in.

"Hey, I'm not an invalid."

He tugs on one of my curls, then tucks it behind my ear. "I know. I just wanted to do it."

It's a small act. A chivalrous one.

It makes me realize that while things weren't always bad with Aaron, they were never really great, either.

I didn't get dates.

He didn't go out of his way to open a door for me. Or to talk.

Brian hasn't closed the door yet.

"What are you doing?" I ask a little nervously.

"Just looking at you. You're beautiful, Leah."

I blush.

When was the last time someone paid me a compliment?

I'm not attracted to Brian. I mean he's handsome, perfectly so. But I can't just switch my emotions so quickly. I appreciate the attention though.

Most days in the mansion, people look straight through me. I roam that big house like a ghost.
Aaron...everything I feel for him is twisted up in love and hope and hate.

I need to spend some time learning to love myself before I can really think about getting involved with someone else.

Still, it's nice that someone else is taking interest in me. That someone is trying to support me on a day that's going to be one of the darkest of my life.

Brian had parked in the back of the ER Department, and that's where he came in, he tells me. He closes the door and then circles around the front of the truck. He climbs inside and shoves the key in the ignition. "Are you cold?"

"No, not really."

He turns the heat on anyway.

He pulls off onto the road. "You're sure about this, right?"

I'm not sure about anything.

"Oh, here, I grabbed your medicine." He passes me a pill bottle. Huh, the nurses brought everything in tiny paper cups. "We still have a few hours. Where do you want to go?"

Chapter 44

AARON

I sink into one of the chairs and try to process everything.

Leah. Missing.

Leah. Dying.

It just doesn't make sense.

She's young. A force of life so bright at times I found it hard to be around her. I can't imagine her not in this world. I can't imagine that she's sick or hurting.

Or that she's been suffering for a long time and I never noticed.

My chest aches and I rub at the center of it.

"I still have to make rounds," Adam says. "And there is a chance that if Leah left, that maybe she doesn't want to be found. She might be sick of all of us."

I nod.

I don't like it, but it may be true.

I should've done so many things differently.

I should've loved her.

All the nights wasted. All the days when I purposely kept her at arm's length. All the times she tried to make our marriage a real one. Not just in bed, but by being a real partner.

She'd help in the kitchen and make my food.

She'd wait up for me in the library, reading one of her books, so I wouldn't work late alone.

She'd laugh and argue with me, and not back down, no matter how many times I tried to relegate her to some background role.

And now she's gone?

Dying???

But I can't lose her. I can't let go.

My throat tightens. And pain seizes my body. It's not physical so much as a wave of grief that floods my entire being.

I go to her bed and pick up the pillow. Beneath the astringent smells of the hospital, I can scent her. That light fragrant smell of her hair that's partly her shampoo and, beneath that, the unique, elusive scent of her skin.

Adam reenters the hospital room.

I can imagine what he sees.

Me holding a bunch of smooshed flowers and breathing into a hospital pillow.

"You, uh, need to see this," he tells me.

Sam walks in behind Adam and holds up an iPad. He plays the footage of Leah being rolled out of the hospital. He freezes the frame.

"It appears she left the premises with someone."

I zoom in for a closer look. "What the hell is Brian doing here?"

"Oh," Adam says, leaning in. "That's right. I knew he looked familiar. Brian Leithrow is an Alpha too. He comes from a good family."

I'm incredulous. "Adam, what are you talking about? That man," I jab my finger at Brian's face on the screen, "is a liar. I was friends with him until I learned that he lied about everything-his name, his birthright, his background. He killed old man Leithrow to assume control of his pack."

"What!?"

"Everything Brian has is stolen...And now he has my wife!"

Chapter 45

LEAH

Brian stops at a Walmart.

He parks the car. "I'd tell you to come in with me, but I think the backless hospital gown is going to get some odd looks." He grins. "Maybe even get you arrested. Indecent exposure and all that."

I laugh. "I wasn't thinking about clothes when you wheeled me out of the ward. But, yes. I need some. I can pay you back."

He shakes his head. "Don't mention it."

His

gaze

rakes me from head to toe, like he's seeing beneath this thin cotton gown. I hold my breath.

"Keep the truck running," he says. "And the doors locked. I'll be back in a few minutes."

I watch his big form cross the parking lot and enter the store. In this part of the country, there aren't many stores and this late at night, I'm grateful he thought to come here first.

The dashboard clock says 9:43 which gives at least two hours until my father's funeral service.

We're over an hour from my family's packlands. It'll be close, but I don't see any reason why we wouldn't make it.

After about fifteen minutes, I move to unbuckle the seatbelt to get more comfortable, and I feel something heavy beside me. It's my phone, in the pocket of this hideous hospital gown. I take it out and see a slew of missed calls.

Most are from Adam. But some are from Aaron.

Just seeing his name fills me with so many conflicting emotions.

Hurt, so much hurt.

Sadness that he couldn't be honest with me.

Anger for the lies and what he did to my father-and all for what? Because I threatened to divorce him? It seems so petty now, especially if our marriage wasn't ever valid in the first place.

He calls again as I'm holding the phone and it shocks me so much I fumble my cell.

I watch the screen blink silently. I don't force him into voicemail or anything like that. But I have no intention of answering. No matter how many times he calls.

I can't describe the feeling, knowing that he's trying to reach me.

Why?

What can he possibly want?

The driver's side door opens.

I shove the phone in my pocket.

Brian hands me several bags of clothes. There are sweaters and jeans, socks and shoes. I blush at the panties and bra.

He even looks a little red. "I had to guess your sizes."

"O-okay."

"Here," he hands me a slice of pie from the bakery section. "You always liked apple pie, right?"

I'm choking on tears, I'm so touched. "Yeah."

"Eat first. Then I'll stand outside while you change."

He whips a plastic fork and napkin out of his pocket. He even has a small bottle of milk.

"You really break out all the stops when you do something, huh?"

He laughs. "Oh, I don't know, Leah. I think I'm just good at getting what I want..."

Chapter 46

The pic is delicious.

Even though it was store bought and a little stale, I can't remember enjoying something more.

"Thank you," I say.

He smiles at me.

"Seriously. I still don't know how you turned up out of the blue or how you knew to come to the hospital..."

I leave the sentence hanging, but he doesn't answer my question.

"Well, in any event," I eventually fill the silence. "I really appreciate you breaking me out. And that pie is probably the best thing I've ever eaten."

He laughs. "You're easy to please."

I tug at the sleeves of the sweater. It's lightweight but soft.

The jeans are too big. They probably would've fit a few weeks ago, but now I have to roll them at the top. I've lost weight.

He pulls onto the county road.

"Oh, wait." I lean forward to gauge where we are. "I think you wanted to take a right. We need to head north on the interstate."

He glances over at me. "I'm taking the scenic route."

I frown at the digital clock. "We might be cutting it too close."

"I've got this. Just sit back and relax for a bit."

I do sit back, but I feel a little uneasy. I can't miss my father's funeral. I think of the road we're on and how it loops around. "Brian, I don't think we can go this way. We're heading in the wrong direction."

He doesn't reply.

My heart starts to pound.

"Hey, we need to turn around." Only the last word sounds more like 'wound' and my tongue feels thick. "Bwiannn."

My words are garbled.

My eyes start to droop and it's hard to move my arms. My head lulls to the side.

"That's it, sweetie. Don't fight it."

Fight it?

Oh my god, he knows what's happening to me. I stare at the pills in the container on the dash. But he'd handed them to me, left them in the car. I didn't take any.

The pie.

"You dwugged-"

Panic consumes me and I try to wrench open the door, but my muscles aren't responding. I don't even have the strength to unfasten my seatbelt.

"Just settle down now," he tells me. "This isn't something you need to get all anxious about.

Anxious? "Lemme go!"

I scream. "Help! Help!

He turns up the radio and continues driving down the road.

Chapter 47

AARON

I'm on my phone and barking orders to Adam's men.

"Send me the footage from the hospital parking lots. Leah would've been too weak to walk, and he couldn't just carry her away. I want a vehicle. License plate numbers. Now!"

Ralph is already on it.

I barrel out of the hospital and there's an SUV idling.

James rolls down the window. "Get in."

His lip is still busted and so is his nose. He hasn't shifted to heal.

I slide in and slam the door.

He tears out of the parking lot. "Do you know where she is?"

"How do you know I'm looking for Leah?"

James' knowing gaze swings to mine. "I've known you since we were born, Aaron. There's only one person on this planet that can get you this agitated."

"Brian Leithrow has her."

"Yeah."

"What do you mean 'yeah?'"

"The wolves that attacked you on the summit. I recognized one of them from Brian's pack."

"You didn't tell me."

"I was busy gathering evidence. You were busy accusing me..."

James's hands tighten on the steering wheel.

I'm impressed. Here, I'd thought the worst of him.

I struck him.

"Liam knows that I made a vow to your sister."

James grunts. "That tracks. Think back, only a handful of people knew you and Jessica pledged yourselves to each other. Me, Brian, Anthony and Tobin. Remember? We were at that Fall Festival Party." He shrugs. "Anth and Tobin wouldn't say anything. But for Liam to know... who stood to gain by telling him..."

I sigh.

"I wouldn't sell you out, Aaron," he says quietly. "I had our tech team hack Liam's phone..."

I stare at James in astonishment. Then I admit: "I thought

maybe Jess was connected to this somehow, and you were covering for her."

He shrugs. "I love my sister. But not enough to commit murder. Especially not the murder of an Alpha I've known my whole life and consider a brother."

I grunt.

I really f**ked this up.

"Yeah, you did."

I didn't

thinking.

say that out loud. He just knows me. Knows what I was

"But it's not over yet," James says. "Let's get your pain-in-the-ass wife back. Then you can grovel and apologize for being a dick to her."

"And to you."

"You're always a dick. It's one of your finer qualities."

I squeeze James' shoulder. "Thank you."

He nods.

I take the call from Adam when it comes in. "Okay, we're looking for a black Dodge Ram. New model. Suped up." I repeat the license plate number.

"We can call in the local cops but an APB out," Adam says. "Let them know she's been abducted."

"Yeah. Okay. Do it." It'll be a hell of a lot of human attention, but I can mitigate those issues later, if they come up.

I end the call and toss the phone on the dash. "What's his endgame? Why Leah?"

James whistles. "You haven't heard yet."

"Heard what?"

He glances at me for a second then back at the road. He steps on the gas. "Leah's father...Alpha Roberts... he didn't establish Liam to assume control of the pack. He left a death letter behind, before he killed himself. It's all anybody can talk about. Apparently, the Council already knows too."

"Knows what!? Goddamnit, James, don't make me drag this information out of you!"

"Alpha Roberts didn't leave his assets to Liam. He named Leah his heir. She's going to inherit everything."

Chapter 48

LEAH

I'm groggy.

My head is swimming and even though I blink to clear my eyes, it's hard to see.

I'm still in the truck.

I'm in the back seat. My hands and ankles are bound.

I try to sit up.

The motion makes me nauseous but I go slowly and peek out the window. I have no idea where I am. The woods, somewhere, but not a place I've been before.

There's a clearing and between the headlights and the moonlight, I can make out the edge of a forest.

There are rows and rows of trees in perfectly spaced rows. Like this area had been harvested for hardwoods at some point. It must have been a long time ago. They replanted only pines, which makes sense, because they're quicker to grow for timber. The last harvest must have been some time ago, because the trees have grown substantially, and they're probably not too far off from being cut down again.

I don't see Brian.

I tear at the cuffs on my wrist. They're metal, quite possibly lined with silver, and I can't slip my wrists free.

My ankles have the same shackles. Running will be impossible.

I slide my body into the front seat, on the driver's side. The seat is low to the ground to accommodate Brian's height, and I stay ducked down. I want to lock the doors, but I'm worried the tell-tale click will let him know I'm awake, and not staying where he put me.

I rummage through the middle console, in the compartment in the door. I feel around on the floorboard, hoping, praying he may have left the keys.

The truck is turned off and short of driving out of here, I don't see a way to escape.

There's nothing but this grove of trees for as far as the eye can see.

"Ah, you're awake. Splendid. Let's get this party started."

Brian's on the other side of the truck, grinning through the glass at me.

I shrink back in horror and slam the lock button.

He holds up his keys and unlocks the vehicle.

I slam the button again.

The clicking goes back and forth between us for a few seconds, then Brian puts his fist through the window. I scream as the glass shatters and rains down on me.

I shrink back, but he's already opening the door. He reaches in and grabs my arm, hauling me across the truck and out the door on his side, where I'm dropped to the ground unceremoniously.

"Okay." He glances at his watch. "It's almost midnight. Your pack will conduct the formal burial ceremony, and the collective power your father possessed will transfer to his named heir."

"Unless someone challenges, Liam."

"You're the heir, Leah. And you're right here, with me."

"That...that's not possible."

Brian shrugs. "Your father turned his little girl over to a monster when you were what, barely thirteen." Brian laughs. "He was going to die. I doubt your father was the first guy to make a deathbed act to try and save his soul."

"I'm human. This won't work."

"You're part of his bloodline," he says. Then shrugs. "Maybe it doesn't. Guess, we're going to see."

"What do you want?"

"You." He waves a hand. "Well, more specifically, I want your father's lands. His Alpha powers. The corporation and control of it. Come on now, you can see where this is going."

I shake my head and push myself up until I'm standing.

I hate that I played right into this man's trap.

I hate it more that I was so desperate for attention that I was easy to trick.

"Ah, here they come," Brian says.

Who? Who is coming?

Chapter 49

AARON

James floors it and the SUV careens off the road onto the trail.

"We'll make it. We have team members en route. Give it a minute, Aaron. Don't go rushing in without a plan."

How can I wait?

Brian is ruthless.

He'd said that he'd inherited his pack from his grandfather, but he wasn't related to Old Man Leithrow. He only took the name when he killed the old Alpha.

And here Brian was, preparing to do the same thing again. Only this time to Leah.

And in her condition, she wouldn't stand a chance.

She's human, weak, sick.

He's a power-hungry Alpha.

"He's taking her to the Grove," James mutters.

I haven't been back to this site in ages. Too many battles happened along these lands, and in the last one, I showed no

mercy.

I still regret the things I did that day.

If Leah ever knew...

All the bodies we'd burned...

"Contact Liam. Notify Roberts' pack. They need to call off the ceremony. If there is no transfer of power, there's no cause to hurt Leah."

"Adam is heading to them personally. He tried calling. You tried calling. I sent three men to their grounds too. It's a two-hour drive." James sighs. "This is an Alpha's funeral, Aaron. Roberts' pack would've shifted. They would've been running in their true forms since nightfall. They aren't going to be back at the pack house or busy on cell phones."

I know this. I get it. But da mn it, "We have to stop that ceremony."

We're closing in on the Grove, but if we fail, then I need to ensure that Leah will be okay. James pulls past the off-road.

"Where are you going?" I ask.

"We're not heading in on the main trail. They'll see and hear us coming from a mile away. We'll circle around the state park and cut in from the backside of the Grove."

"Leah doesn't have that kind of time." I open the car door.

"Da mn it, Aaron!" He slams on the brakes, flips off the headlights and lets the Range Rover skid to a stop.

"Take the trail," I tell him.

He checks his phone. "Our men are coming. 20 clicks away."

"Wait for them then. You can leave the car and come in on foot."

"What about you?"

I peel my shirt over my head. "Don't worry about me."

James is still swearing as I partially shift and run down the hillside into the trees. James' plan was better. Safer. And if we'd divided our routes of ingress and gotten our men in place sooner, I probably would have gone along with it.

But the ceremony takes place at midnight.

That's in four minutes.

Our men won't be here for ten.

Brian isn't going to drag this out. He isn't going to chance

someone interfering. The minute the transfer occurs, he's going to kill her.

There's no time to waste.

Chapter 50

LEAH

I'm on the ground.

Brian is standing in front of a bonfire and at least a dozen wolves have formed a circle around us and the flames.

It's...eerie.

Something about these woods feels too still. Forests are normally teeming with life and this one seems desolate. I don't think because it's a man-made copse, that it's vacant. The reason seems darker, deeper, like there is something wrong with the earth beneath the trees.

"Why did you bring me here?"

Brian arches a brow.

"I mean, I know why. But why here? Why not go back to your lands or somewhere else?"

It's closing in on midnight and I need to buy time. I won't be able to stop the transfer of power. An Alpha can connect to anyone in his bloodline or pack, and in choosing me, my father ensured that his power would go to me. I could be on the other side of the world and it wouldn't make a difference.

I can't stop the influx. But maybe I can distract Brian enough to stop him from killing me.

I'm not stupid. Brian brought me to a scrap of land that's in a neutral territory. We're far from my father's pack, from Aaron, from the Council.

I just need to keep him talking.

I twist my wrists and try to pull one of my hands free. The shackle bites into my skin and I bleed..

I use my blood to try and slicken my skin but even though I'm tugging hard, I can't get the cuff past my bones. Desperate, I yank my thumb out of its socket and muffle a scream.

The cuff slides off, but I fist my hand around it so it isn't

obvious.

Brian's still talking. He's pointing out at the rows and rows of trees.

The men surrounding the circle start to strip.

They're going to shift, and when the time comes, they'll probably fight over my bones. After Brian kills me.

I shudder.

I would try to run, but I won't make it a dozen feet, not with how my feet are bound, and with this many wolves, on this terrain, they'd take me down in seconds. No. I need to bide my time.

Wait for Brian to get closer. When he attacks, I need to be ready.

And I am.

I ball my hands into fists.

"Your mom died right here," Brian says.

"What?"

"You asked why I chose this place." He grins.

AARON

I'm able to see the dozen or so men spread out around the fire. Leah's standing alone. Brian's walking slowly in a circle around the flames. He was always dramatic.

There is no honor in what he's doing.

By our laws, he could challenge the Roberts Alpha. If he prevailed in a battle to the death, then he'd assume control over that pack. Fair and square.

But Brian doesn't play fair.

He never challenged Leithrow. He murdered the man in his sleep.

And taking on Leah, even if he does 'challenge' her and his men are there to testify to that as witnesses, what honor is there in killing a woman?

A human who cannot defend herself.

He's a coward.

My teeth extend until my canines hang out of my mouth and my arms are clawed and muscled entirely.

I'm going to rip his head from his body.

Part of me wonders if Leah will even be able to sustain the influx of power when it comes. She's so sick. I see that now. I think I've known for a while but just didn't want to face what my eyes were telling me.

Abruptly Brian strikes her.

He punches her in the face and she whirls with a muffled scream.

I don't think. I run. I burst into the clearing.

He sees me. And smiles.

His wolves are already responding, charging in my direction. Brian grabs Leah and drags her against him. But Leah doesn't stand still. She gouges one of his eyes and Brian roars. Then she punches him in the throat with one of the hand cuffs.

She tries to run but makes it only a few feet before her bound legs trip her to her knees.

Brian rips off his shirt and shifts fully.

His wolf is big and pale and furious. Blood pools from its right eye. He pounces on Leah and mauls her leg.

I slash and bite at the first wolf. Then savagely attack the one after.

And the one after that.

These wolves are circling around me. I'm gravely outnumbered. I should be focusing on them, but all I see is Leah.

Her body thrashing.

Blood staining her jeans.

I don't hear the howls or roars.

Only the heartbreaking sound of her screams.