

Bad Love 51

Chapter 51

In a rush, three packs converge on the valley.

Mine.

Karolina's.

And a contingent of the Regional Council, led by a vicious wolf named Tobin. I'm not sure what he's doing here, but I recognize the red streak of his fur and the violent way he dismembers the wolf nearest him.

I barrel into Brian. My teeth sink into his neck and my momentum slams us to the ground where we roll toward the fire.

He growls. Through his fur, I bite down until my teeth rupture skin. The spurt of his blood is satisfying. He claws my chest and abdomen.

I bite harder. In my lycan form, I use my hands to grip his front legs and I wrench them mercilessly.

He tucks and his legs slice down my side.

Somehow, he breaks my hold and runs back toward Leah. She's hobbling away from the mayhem. I tackle Brian again.

Leah starts convulsing.

It's begun.

I roar and several of my packmates respond. They leave their respective fights and charge toward us.

Leah is so vulnerable. And she's hurt and bleeding.

It's never been done, what's happening here tonight.

Alpha powers passing to a human...

Brian slashes my face and I shove my hand into his mouth when he snaps at my throat. I use the grip of his jaw to rip it off.

He wails and I shove my hand through his chest, piercing his heart.

I'd thought about ripping off his head. But that's too quick. Too merciful. Let him suffer. I run to Leah and catch her in my arms.

We sink to the ground.

Her body arcs and the power she's receiving radiates through her body.

She's still bleeding. Still absorbing her legacy. But I hold her close. All around us, wolves are regrouping.

Brian's remaining packmates are constrained or killed.

My pack forms a wall around us.

"It's okay. You're going to be okay, honey."

She shakes and writhes, her body enduring an infusion of power that is a lineage of wolves back to the beginning. It's painful and slow.

As the minutes pass, I eye her warily.

The agony she's experiencing right now... it is just the beginning. Chapter 52

Leah's body arches, bowing so sharply it's a wonder her spine doesn't crack completely.

I wince.

Around me, the wolves gathered sit on their haunches. They watch. Others shift back to their human forms. Tobin comes and stands a few feet away from me. Karolina, the wolf from the Council, she and three other females move to the opposite side.

They're not dead. All of them.

Blood stains skin and the flames from the fire flicker over their bodies.

Leah screams.

A few of the wolves wince.

Tobin is expressionless. His eyes are pale and cold and unflinching.

Karolina is quizzical, her face reminds me of a hawk, even her movements seem sharp. She watches Leah like a bird-of-prey.

"It's all right. I've got you," I whisper.

Leah whimpers, but doesn't cry.

The pain of absorbing Alpha powers is indescribable.

I thought I was going to die on the day I obtained mine.

And I was a wolf in my prime.

Leah... she is human and sick.

I kiss her head gently and hold her tighter. She can't be sick. I can't wrap my mind around that.

She shudders and if I could, I'd take her pain onto me.

My arms are wrapped around her so she can't flail, but her body is bucking and convulsing and I'm having to exert far more force than I want to. Just when I think the worst of it has passed, another round comes.

At one point, James approaches me with a tree branch. It's maybe three-quarters of an inch in diameter. He snaps the limb and hands me a piece that's maybe five or six inches long.

"For her teeth," he says.

Oh. Yeah. With the way she's clenching her jaw there's a chance it'll crack or she'll shatter her molars.

"Open, honey," I whisper, trying to give her something to bite down on. I force the stick into her mouth and the pressure is astonishing.

She's sweating and so am I. And the next wave that crashes over her is more powerful than the one before. I glance at James, he subtly shoulders his way closer and the rest of my men close in in a tighter wall behind me.

I'd push back Tobin and his pack, if I could. Karolina too.

Because we're all feeling this influx of power.

And as Alphas... we crave more of it.

Leah is human. And very vulnerable.

Normally the person receiving such power would shift during this ceremony because the wolf side has a far greater threshold for pain and the connection to the wolf-and its pack-is amplified during it.

But Leah has no wolf.

If she can't withstand this transition of her father's Alpha lineage, then she will die, and by rights, one of the people in this clearing will be able to channel it. Because that's the thing with power... it can be given. Or taken.

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At any moment, any wolf in this circle could lunge for her, and in killing her, that transfer would be complete.

"Don't even think about it," I warn no one in particular.

But instead of the threat pushing everyone back, the wolves inch closer.

I growl.

All at once, a strong wind gusts through the trees in the Grove, shaking the branches and leaves in an eerie, haunting clamor.

And everyone freezes.

Wind whips through the rows of trees again. As if the spirits of her ancestors are rushing through the forest to possess her body.

The fire continues to crackle. Clouds move across the starry sky. Time passes slowly.

As the surges of power go on and on, Leah grows weaker.

Not stronger.

And I'm hit with the knowledge that I may have saved my wife, only to have to kill her myself... Chapter 53

LEAH

The pain is unbearable.

It's like fire burning my body from the inside out. Everywhere. Every cell, every limb, every hair hurts.

Whatever is happening, it's hitting my nervous system.

I bite down on this stupid stick and try to block out the next blast.

After tonight, childbirth will be a breeze.

If I survive this, that is.

And the cancer.

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And the mob of power-hungry wolves encircling me.

And find a male to give me a baby.

I glance up at Aaron. He hasn't left my side. He fought like a madman to prevent Brian from killing me.

I'm not sure how he found me. And truthfully, given how I told him I was done, I'm surprised he came at all.

But then, maybe I shouldn't be surprised.

This is about power—an indescribable amount of it.

If Aaron were to absorb mine, it'd be the ultimate coup for his pack, and he's always been focused on his pack above anything else.

"You've got this, Leah. Stay strong."

I've been married to this man for years, and I swear I wonder if I know him at all. Who is this Alpha holding me and cheering me on? A week ago, I would've laid odds that he would've torn out my throat with his own teeth to claim this victory.

He'd find a dozen ways to justify it, of course.

As another flood hits me, I shudder and lose my thoughts. I can't worry about what's happening around me. I can't even care about being a spectacle to no fewer than thirty or forty wolves.

I'm just trying to survive.

I'm cold despite the fire blazing in front of me. My mind and body feel detached.

Aaron starts to rock me. The motion is gentle and subtle, hardly any movement at all, but I feel it, and I count each sway. It gives me something to focus on.

Something other than the pain threatening to kill me.

The next wave...it's less.

And the one after that, it lessens too.

Aaron heaves a big sigh of relief.

His arms loosen marginally.

It's maybe another thirty minutes before the last pulse fades. Even after it passes, I still don't move for several minutes. Every muscle aches. My bones feel brittle. I'm not sure what sensation I should be feeling, or if the transition even really worked.

Someone must've undone those shackles at some point because I'm able to move my feet. I stand very slowly. My knees give out and Aaron's arm is the only thing holding me up. "Take it slow," he tells me. But I want to run away from this place and all these wolves who watch me.

I keep testing my body for physical changes. But I don't feel any stronger. My mind can't connect to Aaron's or anyone else's-at least that I'm aware of. And though I search deep into my soul, there is no howl or growl or rumble of my wolf within me.

Maybe it didn't-

"It worked, Leah. You survived."

I guess

that I'm alive means the power has transitioned to me? Funny. It doesn't feel like it.

"You all right?" Aaron asks.

I look at him. "You saved me."

He nods. "Let's go home, honey."

"I'd like that," I say.

He smiles big and it reaches his eyes. This smile is maybe the first genuine one I've ever seen.

Aaron smooths back my hair and kisses my forehead. It's tender and sweet. And his packmates cheer.

The other wolves, they just continue to watch everything.

Aaron lets his hand slide down my arm and he twines our fingers.

But when he tries to guide me toward his pack, I dig in my heels.

"Leah?"

I turn away from him. "Councilwoman Karolina, will you escort me?"

She quirks her head, but nods. "Of course."

"Leah?" Aaron's brows draw together. "What are you doing?"

"I said I wanted to go home, Aaron, but that didn't mean with you." Chapter 54

Holy sh it, you can hear a pine straw drop in this clearing.

Not a single wolf moves. I'm not even sure anyone breathes.

Then the huge, surly wolf near Karolina starts laughing. It's a big, rumbling laugh, that has him doubling over and holding his belly.

Which is when I see he's na ked.

And I see everything.

My eyes jerk back up and while no one seems to be concerned-there are dozens of na ked people surrounding me at the moment-being that I don't have a wolf, I don't shift and run and feel quite so comfortable clothes-less.

It's like I'm standing in the middle of a fri gg'in' nudist colony.

Aaron growls. He lunges toward the wolf with the brownish-red hair. That only makes that male laugh harder.

Karolina tugs me away from all of them. "We'll escort you," she says easily.

"Get your hands off my wife."

It's the voice of an enraged Alpha. Karolina smiles. Her back is still to him, but she turns slowly.

"Alpha Rathborn, do we have a problem? Leah Roberts has requested to go home. As the Alpha of Pack Roberts, that is her right."

"Leah Roberts Rathborn is my wife and she isn't going anywhere without me," he says.

He's practically threatening her, and I fight old habits to try and calm him. Making an enemy of a Council member would be the worst thing for him.

But I remain silent.

It is because of Aaron that my father is dead.

There is no way to come back from that.

"My wife stays with me," Aaron reiterates.

"I say otherwise," Karolina taunts him. "Unless you were thinking of challenging me?"

James slams a hand on Aaron's shoulder.

That new wolf, with the reddish brown hair, he chuckles even as he shoulders himself in front of Aaron, blocking him from me.

And from Karolina.

I take in all these wolves. Strangers, some familiar from Council events, and Aaron's packmates who fought to save me.

"Thank you," I tell them. "All of you. Thank you for coming to my aid and for protecting me."

And not killing me in these last few hours while I was immobile and fighting to absorb whatever this is that my father bequeathed to me.

"Leah..."

I take off my wedding band and hand it to Aaron. "It's over," I tell him.

He catches my hand and doesn't let me go. "Think it through," he warns me. "Think of where you're going. Who will be there." He lets his gaze slide over to Karolina. "I saved you. I protected you. Who are you going to trust, honey? Your husband whom you've known since you were a kid-or these other wolves?"

Who, indeed?

Chapter 55

AARON

Leah doesn't say anything for a long, long time.

"Think of the consequences to our peace treaty. Our union holds our packs at peace, Leah."

Her lips purse. I'm not really worried about the peace right now, and I'm pretty sure that Leah knows that. He'll, she's an Alpha, she can make her own terms for peace with me now.

I'm trying to give her an out though, and to avoid insulting Councilwoman Karolina. Because for Leah to ask for Karolina's

help and then snub her- because she's worried that Karolina might turn out to be an even bigger threat than me... That won't be a wise move for her.

Karolina's the most bloodthirsty bitch in North America.

Eventually Leah nods. She looks around the clearing at all these wolves assembled. Any one of them could attack her. They're all seeing and probably thinking the same thing that I am:

Leah is the new Alpha of Pack Roberts.

And she's about as powerful as a kitten.

Leah bows to Karolina. "He's right. I have to consider the treaty and blood debt."

Karolina shrugs. "You'll find your way."

Leah bows again and walks back toward me. Smart girl. She has to know that traipsing off with anyone—even Karolina and her pack—could still be very dangerous.

Any wolf could kill her and potentially claim her power.

And that wouldn't be deadly just to her. It would endanger all of Pack Roberts and her whole family.

"I still want a divorce," Leah mumbles.

It's said in an angry whisper. Not that it matters.

These are wolves. Some of them are still in their true forms. They hear anyway.

"For f**k's sake, Leah."

This is not the time nor the place.

Her eyes narrow angrily.

She's furious. And I'm pissed too.

Nothing like airing all our laundry in front of the Council and Tobin and my own pack.

"Think it through," I tell her. Again. Only this time, I'm referring

to her relationship with me.

She stands beside me while I drag on clothes. One of my men even brought over my shoes.

"Fine," she says. "You can escort me to my brother's—to my lands," she corrects herself. "But I don't need you to stay or play watchdog, Aaron. Pack Roberts is my blood. This is my family."

I'm not convinced. But apparently, she doesn't want to heed my warning. I rock back on my heels.

"Okay, Leah," I relent.

This night has been long as f**k.

I'm tired.

And I'm over it.

What I have to say to her isn't meant for this kind of crowd, and the sky is growing lighter, we're not too far from dawn. We all need to get out of here.

"Madam Councilwoman," I address Karolina. "You have my sincerest thanks." I turn to Tobin. He's a bonafide pain in my ass. Not quite an enemy but not a true friend either, our relationship is long and complicated. "Tobin." I nod.

He snorts.

No 'thank you's' or even 'you're welcomes'—because we both know what his presence signified tonight.

He came here and helped me defend what is mine. Maybe he'd plotted something different. But in the end, he had my back.

There will be a price for it though.

Just how steep...that remains to be seen.

"Let's roll out," I tell my men, and they're already shifting into action, the vehicles are tearing up the dirt roads into the clearing.

Councilmember Karolina arches one imperial brow and then she and the females surrounding her shift.

They take off into the Grove with a dozen wolves trailing them.

"Threatening a council member...now there's a bold move," Tobin says.

"Shut up."

He fist bumps James and then strolls off in the opposite direction. Tobin is a wildcard, and his wolves are among the fiercest on the continent. I think about that for a second. Two of the most vicious packs in

existence assembled here tonight.

I'm not clear how the Council knew, or how Tobin or Karolina assembled teams so quickly.

But there's no way this is a coincidence.

James shakes his head. His face contorts into a wry expression. No doubt he's thinking the same thing as me.

When these other wolves finally leave, he expels a low whistle. "Well, that was exciting. You do know how to keep things interesting, Leah."

She rolls her eyes.

"Patch her up," I tell my men. It's been hours since Brian mauled her and her wrist is caked with blood and her leg too. She's a collection of bruises and cuts and scrapes.

Hugh comes forward with a med kit and starts field-dressing her injuries. He'd treated the one big gash on her leg already when he removed the shackles, but he makes sure that there aren't any other wounds that he may have missed while I was constraining her.

"Thank you," she tells him.

Hugh smiles at her.

There's nothing sexual about it but the attention from him—he is, from all of these other wolves tonight—makes me edgy.

"That's enough," I say. "Sun's rising. We need to leave." Chapter 56

LEAH

When I get into the vehicle, I lie out on the back seat. I stretch my legs and fold my arms under my head.

The SUV is new and the leather is expensive. It has a distinctive smell.

Aaron moves to slide in beside me.

"No," I tell him.

Just that one word, but it has force behind it.

He pauses.

So do James and Cedric. All three males glance at each other.

"Leah," Aaron says quietly. "Close your eyes and look deep."

"If my eyes are closed, I can't 'see deep' into anything, Aaron."

He stands in the car door. He's angry. "Search in yourself, Leah. Do you hear your wolf? Do you feel her?"

I don't feel anything.

I'm just tired.

I think if I closed my eyes, I could sleep for a week.

"Maybe this will cure your cancer," he says quietly.

Hope floods my body, but I tamp it down and say casually, "What cancer?"

He frowns.

"You're sick. Adam told me so."

I laugh. "I never thought you were gullible. I'm fine, Aaron. There's nothing wrong with me."

His arms flex where he holds the door. "So that blood you spat up and the flat-lining... all of that was what?"

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I sit up slowly. "You'll have to be more specific. Which time, Aaron? When I was attacked on your lands, or when the news of my father's suicide crippled me?"

He looks contrite.

"Or maybe we should add a third time, when you starved me for a week? I didn't die that time, but it sure felt like it." I cross my arms. "Did you ever think that maybe Adam said those things to try and protect me? Or to get you to finally let me go?"

James clears his throat, reminding us we're not alone.

Well, whatever.

This beta knows too much about me anyway. And the rest of the pack, they all know how Aaron has treated me.

"Slide over," he tells me.

I don't want him near me right now. He spent hours in these woods holding me. And even if he did hold me together in the literal sense, the reason he had to... it all stems back to the vicious way he tricked me, manipulated me, set up my father and all but pulled the trigger himself.

He killed my father.

Before I can say, get the hell away from me, he lifts my legs to move me out of the way.

I slam them back down on the seat. "No."

His eyes go full gold.

"What are you going to do, challenge me?" I taunt. It's a stupid move on my behalf but ... "You do realize that's the most fucked up part in all of this. Because even though you came here, killed Brian and saved me, that whole time you were holding me...I was more afraid of you than anyone else."

He jerks back like I've struck him.

But he needs to hear the truth.

"You're a killer, Aaron. And you're merciless. And I know. I know in my heart that there was a chance that you would end me."

"Is that what you think?" His voice drops to a growl that is more animal than human, as he leans into the car threateningly... Chapter 57

"It's not what I think. It's what I know, Aaron. And deep down you do too. Admit it."

He growls again.

"Boss," James interrupts. "We should head back."

Aaron straightens.

"You'd be lying to me and yourself if you said the thought didn't cross your mind. Because I'm just a possession to you. A means to an end. You don't love me. Come on, Aaron, I don't think you even know what love is..."

The door slams.

It slams so hard I'm amazed the glass didn't shatter.

Aaron stalks around the front of the vehicle and gets into the passenger seat.

"Drive," he orders James.

I catch James' gaze for a second in the rearview mirror, then he's churning up dirt as he tears out of this place.

This place where my mother died.

I didn't forget that detail and I still want to know what happened. But these last few hours I've just been busy trying not to die.

I don't feel the chill leave my body until we're out of this stretch of land and back on a paved stretch of highway.

I rub my arms to dispense the feeling.

In the Grove, when that power came into me... I felt things. Like a thousand spirits were moving over and into me. I didn't subscribe to ghosts or that sort of thing, but I suppose some of that is true, since it was the energy of my pack ancestors that passed into me.

I close my eyes and concentrate. "Hello?"

Honestly, I don't want to hear 'voices' or anything creepy like that.

But if ever there was a moment for my wolf to rise, this is it.

"Hello. Are you there?"

I flex my hands and focus on the sensation of my fingers opening and closing. I've never been much good at meditating or even yoga. I can't seem to still my mind enough for that sort of thing. Maybe that's always been my problem?

"If you can hear me, I really need you to show yourself."

James gets on the interstate after about thirty minutes of driving and then he accelerates. Of course, he's eager to get rid of me.

At one point, I notice black SUVs on either side of ours.

"Take it easy, Leah," Aaron tells me. "Those are our Guards."

I gulp.

Things must be pretty bad if he has an armed escort following us.

I stare at the dash and watch the minutes tick by as we race toward my pack's lands. I can't quite wrap my head around going home. About reuniting with my pack.

And as their Alpha, no less.

Female rulers are scarce. Karolina is one. There's another Councilwoman named Aemilia. She rules a pack in the

Northeast.

But traditionally, packs are male-dominated and it's pretty hard to avoid the patriarchy.

My eyes moisten with tears. It means a lot that my dad would entrust me with his pack. Everything he did was for them.

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Over the next hour, the landscape gradually changes, all the fields and cattle ranches yielding to county roads that veer off through forests and wind up mountainsides. The sky brightens to a shade of blue that reminds me of the lilacs I'm leaving behind at Aaron's. I'll never go back to my room. Or

Aaron's bed. Or race up and down those endless stairs. There won't be any more walks through the woods. Or seeing the flowers I planted in my mother's honor.

"You need to come back home with us," Aaron says quietly.

But I can't. I won't.

"I don't. This situation arose from the need for peace. I give you my word as the Alpha of Pack Roberts, that I will honor that peace between our packs."

"Come home with me, Leah."

"It's not my home anymore. Besides, Jessica told me she's expecting. You'll want to be there for her.

Now that she's having your baby." Chapter 58

"What the hell are you talking about?" Aaron snarls.

James is hard-eyeing me in the mirror too.

But I've said enough.

I don't care anymore. "I'm not your secretary. Ask her yourself."

James and Aaron exchange harsh looks. I don't care about that either.

I've been carrying around a lot of pain these last years. The culmination of being rejected and taken for granted, and never really loved the way I deserve to be.

My cancer prognosis put that in a crystalline perspective.

So much time. So much love.

Wasted.

But no more.

And now that I'm finally in a position to make decisions for myself I'm not about to relinquish control again.

I gaze out the window and ignore both males. Or try to, anyway. Aaron's presence calls to me. It's like some damn invisible string

that I can't seem to cut. His scent fills the vehicle and his presence seems to reach out to me. Is my sense heightened?

No, I don't think so.

It's always been this way. And I don't want to go back to that.

I can't go back to that.

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Because as far as this Alpha is concerned, he consumes me. I lose myself in him and even when I hate him, when I want to tear out his heart and make him suffer as I have suffered, part of me can't bear to do it.

It's the worst kind of weakness.

I can't even blame Aaron for that.

It's all me.

I'm like some pathetic puppy that gets kicked around but who keeps coming back, desperate to please.

I'm in love and it doesn't matter that it's bad, I can't seem to let

go.

The road winds up a high swath of mountains, the temperature dropping as we climb. It's spring but there are patches of snow on some of these cliffs and that's not even unusual for out here. As we approach my father's-my-packlands, I'm hit with a sense of foreboding.

I don't know how to describe the feeling. Nervousness, maybe?

Sadness? Dread?

We pass beneath the huge gate with its R-A insignia and we clear the first gate. It lifts automatically as we approach.

Perhaps another mile up the road is a second perimeter. This one is manned by several wolves and the guards here patrol an eighteen-foot fence that's topped with barbed wire and giant dome lights.

Additional guard towers are inside the wall, with gun stations and watchpoints.

My packlands always looked more like a military installation than a 'home.' I see that now.

But war changes and shapes things that way.

James pulls to a stop and rolls down his window.

Behind us, the two other SUVs that escorted us here, stop and wait.

"Beta James Summerlin. We're not taking visitors today. Turn around. You can try again next week."

He's young, maybe eighteen or nineteen and he looks uncomfortable. Not sweating or twitching but his eyes dart around quickly.

"On whose authority?" James asks calmly.

"The Alpha's," this guard replies.

"Well, that's ironic. Because Alpha Roberts is in this vehicle with me." Chapter 59

"Well, this is awkward," James says bemusedly.

Aaron leans across the console to be seen. "You know he speaks the truth. Alpha Leah Roberts Rathborn is here. The transition of power is complete. Open the f**king gate."

The guy stands stock still for a few seconds, frozen with indecision.

Then he ducks back into the guardhouse, grabs the phone and makes a call.

A few seconds later, the gates roll open and he flags us through.

"What was that about?" James asks.

What indeed?

Aaron leans around the seat to eye me. It's not an "I told you so" but it's in the vicinity.

"Radio our men in cars two and three. Tell them to be ready for anything."

James messages them with one hand, while maneuvering the SUV ahead slowly. It's another three miles to the main house and the communal halls. The houses we pass now are spaced out with white picket fences and flowers blooming in the front yards.

There are kids playing and dogs barking.

It looks like something out of some old sitcom tv.

James reaches beneath his seat for a gun and hands it to Aaron. Then he opens the console, pulls out a 9mm and extends his arm back to me.

"Take it," he says.

"I don't need that." This is my family. "You're overreacting."

And our packs have been enemies for generations, it's not a surprise that they wouldn't want to welcome James or Aaron. These are turbulent times and they're acclimating, still reeling from the loss of my father.

I'm still grieving and I barely had contact with the man.

I can only imagine how hard this must be on the rest of my pack.

"Take the friggin' gun, Leah."

It's an order and it makes me bristle. I want to toss it back at Aaron on spite.

James clears his throat.

Aaron mutters a curse. "I mean to say, please. Please take the weapon, Leah, so you can defend yourself. It's better to be prepared and not need it, than to need it and be unprepared."

It's kind of hard to argue with that logic. Same principle as carrying condoms or breath mints. Only, you know, a little more life-threatening.

I grab the gun and my hand sinks to my lap. It's heavier than I expected.

I'm familiar with firearms and had basic training with handguns, rifles and even bows. Aaron insisted on it. In his pack, every member-male, female, child-has to train. He said it was because preparedness kept everyone safe.

But safety doesn't come from fighting.

War begets more war.

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I contemplate that as I roll up into my pack with their enemy in the front seat and his contingency of guards escorting us. And what was all that back at the guardhouse about Alpha's orders' – I'm the Alpha.

What did they mean?

I'm here to assume control.

They all hate Aaron, I know.

And now I have to wonder... how do they feel about me!?

Chapter 60

We pull up to the main house. James spins the car and backs in so it's facing out and ready to tear out of here. The two support vehicles do the same. It's a tactic that I know makes sense, but it heightens my concern.

For all of us.

"This is my family. Will you two calm down, please. You're overreacting and that's going to make things worse."

"Don't be so naive," Aaron says dismissively.

He gets out of the car and opens my door. He holds out his hand to help me down.

Now, the chivalry.

I ignore his outstretched hand. I look past him. "Liam!"

My brother runs to my side and hugs me hard. Aaron doesn't move back. If anything, he crowds us. I roll my eyes at him.

"I can't believe he's gone," Liam whispers.

"I know. I'm so sorry."

The words come automatically and I tense. Because I mean them in a very literal way. It's because of me that father did

what he did.

Me and my 'husband.'

Liam shudders. "We were already shifted. I didn't even think anything of it. I just assumed you'd arrive and stay at the main house while we were out running during the ceremony. I had no idea you were in danger--"

"There was nothing you could do. And I'm fine now. It's okay."

Liam nods, but a tear slips free. He's devastated over losing dad. "I still can't believe it." His voice is hoarse and his big body trembles again as he holds me.

He'd been so stoic at the hospital, but I think it's finally hitting him now.

"We're going to get through this, Liam. We're together. And we're going to make sure this pack succeeds."

He nods and draws back. He squeezes my hands.

Then his eyes narrow. "You, uh, you're a mess."

I glance down.

There's blood on my arms, legs, clothes. Probably some on my face.

"It was an interesting night."

He arches a brow. "Yeah. So I see." Then he turns to Aaron menacingly.