

Bad Love 61

Chapter 61

Aaron doesn't budge.

I can feel the tension rising between them.

I smile at my brother to try and lighten the mood.

He mumbles something. I'm not a wolf but I can smell the booze on him. It's like a cloud of alcohol. Well, duh, dad died. Of course he may have gone on a bender. I've never had that luxury. Which is probably a good thing. I keep my emotions walled up tight. One drunken night might crack those walls and I imagine I'll be a mess if I ever let all these bottled feelings free.

I look at Aaron, willing him to back up. He's crowding both of us and it's like a dog marking his territory.

I don't want him here.

But I know if I'm not careful, I might reignite an all-out war.

"Come on, honey," Aaron says. "You should go inside and get cleaned up. You need to rest. To eat."

Honey? Honey?

In the last few days, he's dropped more endearments than in all the years I've known him.

I've had the occasional "princess" but even those were relayed with a sense of derision. The niceties now... There is no cause for them.

I don't care how they make me feel. It's too little too late, and given all he's done to me and my family, there's no resurrecting our relationship.

But I don't say any of this.

I smile sweetly. "Yes, that's a good idea."

Aaron smiles like I handed him the sun.

Liam looks between us, his brow creasing. "Uh, okay. Let me show you up to your room."

As we cross the wide open space before the main house—a massive Colonial with huge white pillars and four stories of brick—I'm caught by the disrepair.

The paint is peeling off the shutters.

The flowerbeds are overrun with weeds.

What used to be a wide expanse of manicured lawns is sparse and patchy.

Aaron walks beside me. His presence is big and looming, dangerous. But I don't feel threatened, at least, not immediately.

His dark eyes are sharp and they're assessing...everything. I see

him analyzing windows, doors, points of entry. He even turns backwards at one point and scans the buildings in the distance, likely judging which angles would befit a sniper.

War is so ingrained in this man.

It's sad really.

"Hey," I whisper.

He catches my hand, squeezes.

I'm not looking for tenderness, I just want him to quit accusing my family so much. It hurts the way he views them as enemies. His judgment of them is a reflection of me.

When I step inside the great house, into the main foyer and follow my brother into the great room, I'm inundated with shock by what I see!

Chapter 62

AARON

Holy shit. I just walked into a frat house.

That's my first impression of Pack Roberts' main hall.

There are pool tables and flat screen tv's. Bars with cases of alcohol stacked haphazardly. At least a dozen empty kegs are lined like silver building blocks along one wall.

Couches have cigarette burns and look old, the leather faded and cracking.

I stare into the far right corner. Thinking I must be wrong about what I see.

But. Nope. It's right there...

A stripper pole.

Naturally.

And the whole room bears an unforgettable stench.

It's stale beer. Smoke. S*x.

This place is a hot mess.

I glance at Leah.

Her mouth is open and she's openly staring. Her pretty face is contorted with a measure of shock and then she snaps her mouth shut and forces her face into a pleasant expression. The shock and revulsion are hidden behind her 'nice' facade.

I've seen that expression one too many times before.

I move until I stand beside her. I address Liam: "I imagine this hit your pack hard."

He nods. "You have no idea."

Leah takes in this trashed room. She has an idea.

But unlike Leah, I can sense deeper.

The scents here are layered. It's not a one-night bender that tarnished this space. It's years of decadence.

Not for the first time, I think maybe it was some small miracle that Leah came to live with me. I can't imagine her fate had she grown up amid this chaos and debauchery.

"Uh, come this way," Liam says.

He holds out his arm for Leah to precede him.

I stay next to her.

She casts me a dirty look.

It's fine. She's pissed. I get it.

But she can't think that I'm just going to abandon her. And she's got to know that even though she is the new Alpha, she's a female, a human, and my wife.

Those are three pretty major strikes.

Liam leads us into the west wing of the house. He opens two heavy oak doors, sliding them apart. He moves across the room to sweep aside the heavy curtains. Light streams in, making all the dust shine like sparkles in the air.

Again, Leah can't scent the staleness.

But I can.

I'm thinking this room hasn't been used since the 1990s.

I arch a brow at Liam. "Maybe we should rest outside. Give everyone a chance to wake up, maybe prep the house for Leah's arrival."

"Oh no, no," she says immediately. "Everything is lovely. You know me, Liam. I don't worry about little things. I'm just happy to be home and for us to be reunited." She realizes what she's said and quickly adds: "—I just wish it was under better circumstances..."

He nods solemnly. "Why don't both of you relax here for a few minutes. I'll rouse the kitchen and we'll have breakfast." Liam

frowns at me. "I'm sure you'll want to eat before you get back on the road."

It's a not so subtle reminder to leave.

Too bad for him, I'm not going anywhere.

Chapter 63

Leah sits at the dining room table. She runs her finger along the surface and it leaves a big streak in the dust.

"I'm thinking this place might need a woman's touch," I say.

She arches a brow at me. "Why? Because women are meant to 'clean houses' and be subservient? What the hell, Aaron!?! Sexist, much?"

Christ. That didn't come out right. "I didn't mean for you to clean. Or other females. Just for someone to run the place. A bunch of males left to their own devices..." I shrug. "They might be eating raw slabs of beef and only changing their socks once a week."

She makes a gagging sound. It ends on a bit of a laugh.

I grin.

Damn, she's pretty when she smiles.

Her whole face lights up and her eyes... her eyes shine with such energy it's like the whole meaning of life is wrapped up in that sparkling glint.

"I'm gonna miss that," I whisper.

She looks at me sharply. "What?"

"You. Your laugh. Your smile. The way you can make the best of the worst situation and find the good in everybody."

She blushes.

I cross the room and stop in front of her.

She tenses.

But the pulse is ticking in her throat and her pupils are dilated.

Hmmm. Interesting.

I take a chance and clasp her hand.

And then I feel it. That spark.

It's always there. Like a low-level hum of electricity in my blood.

I look at this woman. Her hair is a tangled mess. Her eyes are big and wide with shadows beneath them. And there are blotches of blood on her face and neck and chest.

"You look like hell, honey."

She snorts. "Yes, well. You never were one for flattery."

Is that where I went wrong? Not giving her the words?

“Words are empty, Leah. It’s actions that have meaning.”

And I’ve fought for her.

Bled for her.

Killed for her.

On more than one occasion, I’ve nearly died for her.

She looks at me sadly. “Yes, you’re right. Actions speak far louder than words.”

I realize she isn’t seeing my good deeds. Or my sacrifices.

For her, there are only the bad times.

I sigh. “I want to go back to the way we were.”

She snorts again. It’s an adorably obnoxious sound. “You mean when I was a captive in your home?
Thanks but no

She slides her hand out of mine and crosses her arms. “I’m home and safe here, Aaron. You should go.

“What if I don’t want to.”

Her eyes well with tears.

She shakes her head. “I-I can’t forgive you. These crimes... how you betrayed and used me... there’s no coming back from it. And what about your baby-”

Chapter 64

“Jessica isn’t pregnant,” I blurt.

“Oh?”

I drag a hand through my hair. “I mean, she could be, but if she is, the child isn’t mine.”

Leah nods. It’s the equivalent of ‘that’s nice.’

I know she doesn’t mean it and I can’t even fault her for doubting. I’ve rubbed her face in things many times before.

Part of me will always resent her.

I can’t help that.

It’s in her blood.

Maybe that’s why I was so adamant about enforcing the blood oath each month.

But seeing her now. She looks so small and frail.

So innocent and vulnerable...

It has me rubbing my chest.

My wolf wants out. Now.

He wants to check her himself and then stand watch over her. Every second we spend in this cursed place has him clawing at my ribs to be free.

I thump my chest. "Ease up, will you?"

My wolf growls but doesn't relent.

She looks around the room, at anywhere but at me. "So, uh, thank you again for delivering me here."

There she goes again trying to brush me off.

I grab her arms and pull her out of the chair. The momentum of the move brings her body slamming into mine. I latch my arms around her and hold tight.

I find her lips.

The kiss is gentle. Comforting. A brush of lips and a moment for our bodies to align, and all that f**king incredible tension that we keep banked, yeah, I need a second to let those feelings rise to the surface.

Then my hands are in her hair and my tongue is in her mouth, because I nearly watched this woman die tonight, and it's like my wolf wants to devour her because of it.

I hold her face and angle her head. She makes this little hum in the back of her throat that goes from her mouth straight to my dick. I'm rock hard in seconds.

She makes that soft sound again as I grind against her.

The moment her arms twine around my neck, I savor the victory.

It's better than killing Brian.

Better, even, than defeating her father.

Having this woman succumb to me is everything.

She gasps and I...

Chapter 65

I grab her ass and lift her up. Her legs wrap around my waist.

I sit her on the dining room table.

Her hands are pulling at my shoulders, tugging at my hair. She wants me close, close, closer. I get it. I do.

I'd have us naked and f**king too right now, but I'm not so mindless in this moment as she is.

Just the fact that I can roll her back under, wash away her resistance like a storm coming over the mountains...that.

That's enough for me.

I'll have her body too.

She talked about Jessica being pregnant.

But it is Leah.

Come hell or high water, Leah will have my baby.

I'll make sure of it.

Abruptly, the doors to this grand dining room slide open again. There is a muffled gasp. Then a voice yells, "Are you f**king kidding me!?"

Liam trudges back into the room. He drops a tray of food on the table. The cups rattle.

There's a pot of coffee. A plate of toast.

Two dishes with scrambled eggs and some burnt bacon.

As far as breakfast goes, this is a pretty pitiful spread.

Leah scrambles out of my arms and sits back down. "T-thank you, Liam. I'm hungry."

"So I saw," he says drily.

She blushes bright red and I stalk her brother. "Don't you dare shame my wife."

I'm deadly calm.

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But Liam has to know... he has no power now.

My pack can crush his. And through my marriage to Leah, I have direct access to everything he owns. Everything I haven't bought up already, that is.

"Aaron!" Leah yells. "Please. Stop."

She wrings her hands.

"It's been a long night. Can we just have a bite to eat? Then I'd really like to go to sleep. Ok?"

I nod reluctantly. I glance at the food. I'm not eating that sh it.

Another thought occurs to me and I call my wolf to the surface. My eyes flash yellow, sharpening my vision. Fur sprouting on my forearms.

"Aaron?" Leah's eyes widen with alarm.

I sniff the food. I don't detect any obvious poisons or toxins. But... "Eat some," I tell Liam. "A bite of each thing."

"You're serious!?" Liam is incredulous.

“Deadly serious.”

“Aaron!” Leah looks horrified.

“Are you actually implying that I would poison my own sister? You sonofabitch!”

Leah slaps a hand on my chest. “That’s uncalled for, Aaron. Stop.”

“Let him eat the food, princess.”

“Oh whatever!” Liam snarls. He snatches the fork out of Leah’s hand and stabs eggs and a whole slice of bacon into his mouth. “Satisfied?” he asks while chewing.

“And the toast.”

“”

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A deep growl comes from Liam.

“This is unnecessary,” Leah says.

But Liam complies and grabs the toast. He chomps down and eats the whole slice in three quick bites.

When he’s finished, he throws the fork down on the table. “I love my sister. You’re way out of line. Accuse me again, not herfucker, and see what happens...”

“Sure. No problem.” I laugh. “How’s this for an accusation: I think you’re a liar and a cheat and a threat to Leah. What are you gonna do about it!?”

Chapter 66

LEAH

He’s about to lose it again.

Aaron is quick to anger and his temper is legendary.

But fighting benefits no one.

And I haven’t spent the last ten years as a veritable prisoner only to have this wolf undo that peace in a matter of minutes.

“Why don’t you check in on James and the rest of the guys,

Aaron?”

“Naw. I’m good.” He rolls his shoulders. “I have some unfinished business with your piece of shit brother.”

Liam lunges and I leap in front of him. “Stop!” I glare at Aaron. “Give me a minute with my brother, please. What you’re doing right now...it’s not helping me.”

He doesn't budge.

"Seriously," I tell him. "Take a walk. Go cool down."

Aaron looks between me and Liam for several fraught seconds. "Harm a hair on her head," he threatens my brother, "And I'll tear your lungs out." Then he turns and walks out without saying another word.

The threat hangs heavy in the air.

Liam sits in Aaron's vacant chair. "Your husband is an asshole."

I take a sip of coffee. "He's just trying to protect me."

I know that deep down. Aaron's motives may be questionable, but apparently, when it comes to this wolf, it's okay for Aaron to abuse me. Just not anyone else.

He's saved me though, countless times.

I'm not really sure why.

His life would be much easier without me in it.

Something swirls in my chest when I acknowledge that. My husband has protected me, even at risk to his own life and pack.

I take another sip of coffee. My lips feel swollen and sensitive and the hot beverage only heightens the sensation.

It was that kiss.

Aaron has a way of kissing that can make me absolutely mindless.

That was always the problem I think.

I'm too wrapped up in that wolf.

"I don't understand your relationship with him," Liam says.

When I look at him, he looks so much like my father. Thick hair pushed back. Close-cropped beard. Strong, lean body. The kind of smile that puts you at ease.

"Eat," Liam tells me. "You're too thin. You need your strength."

I take a few bites of toast. Then a forkful of eggs.

"Did it happen?" he eventually asks.

"What?" I don't think he wants to hear about me absorbing dad's powers.

He had to have thought those powers were meant for him.

Always, he was my father's right hand.

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I still don't understand why dad chose me over him.

"Did your wolf surface?"

I shake my head.

He frowns.

His new Alpha is a human female.

It's like adding insult to injury, I imagine.

"It's not good for our people. It's a slap in the face."

I shove my plate away from me. "Of all the sexist, ignorant things to say--"

"Whoa, whoa, whoa! What are you talking about?"

"It's not my fault I'm not a wolf, Liam."

He shakes his head. "I wasn't talking about that. I was talking about Aaron. He is not good for our people. He is an insult..."

"Oh."

"Seeing him is going to trigger our pack. No one here has forgotten him or the things he's done."

It was the same in Aaron's pack. Their resentment of my father and Pack Roberts, it never faded.

He reaches for a piece of bacon, takes a bite and then sets it back down. "Our Pack...they think he's going to make a play on us-and use you to do it. You need to divorce him. We have to sever ties to ensure Pack Roberts' safety."

It's a valid concern and echoes what I think and feel.

"We can prove to the Council that your marriage was never valid in the first place..."

Which makes me the "adulteress" one. And to think, I'd called out Jessica for trying to seduce my husband.

It's hard to accept. These last years, when I thought myself married... to realize now that the vows we exchanged were never real...

"He's here with only a handful of wolves, Leah. We can overpower him. We can kill him before he leaves this compound."

I swallow hard and set my coffee aside. These aren't angry words or airing old grievances. My brother is proposing murder.

“Just say the word, Leah. You’re the Alpha now. You need to do what’s right for our pack. One word and we end this war forever... This is your first decree as Alpha. You’re in power. You can get justice for Dad and M om, for everyone we lost to this ba stard. What’s it going to be?”

Chapter 67

I don’t move or say anything for several seconds. There’s a moment, where, objectively, I consider what Liam’s asking of

It would be a decisive victory. It would eliminate a threat that has loomed over Pack Roberts for close to a century. This war has raged for so long. It began generations before any of us were even conceived.

“Give the command, Leah. You don’t have to worry about anything else...I will take care of it. I’ll take care of everything.”

There is a thrill that comes with knowing such power is at my fingertips. The power to control whether someone lives or dies.

But could I?

I’m not coldblooded. And Aaron...for years and years I’ve loved him.

I touch my lips and Liam frowns.

His face contorts.

I know what he sees. And it disgusts him.

I clear my throat. “If we are going to take out an enemy, we won’t do it with deception or a bullet to the back. That will only

prompt more retaliation and I assure you, Aaron’s pack is vast and strong. They outnumber Pack Roberts three-to-one.” I take a sip of coffee to distract his attention. “I appreciate the suggestion, but we won’t resort to murder today.”

“Murder!? Oh, dear. Am I interrupting something?”

A female lingers in the doorway. She looks to be my age, maybe a few years older. Her eyes are bright. Her reddish brown hair is long and sleek, with these big s*xy curls at the ends. She looks polished and perfect and her smile is bright.

Liam laughs easily. “My sister is bloodthirsty. But she’s a wolf committed to the Old Ways.”

By Old Ways, if he means fighting with honor and not staging assassinations, then, yes, I guess I’m old-fashioned that way.

“Come here, Marla. Meet my sister Leah.”

“It’s a pleasure,” she says, holding out her hand as she enters the dining room. “It’s such an honor to meet you. I’ve heard so much about you.”

I wonder about that. My brother hasn't visited me...I don't think ever. And the last few times I came here, he was offlands.

We don't talk or text. Well, unless he needs something.

"Are you part of this pack?" I ask.

Her blue eyes cut to his. "Not yet, but hopefully soon," she says expectantly, staring at Liam.

Okayyyy.

"I noticed Alpha Rathborn and his men in the main hall. Will they be staying here too?"

Liam stands and extends his hand for me to go with him. "Nice of you to mention our guests, Marla. It's probably time we got back to them."

A moment later, we hear glasses shatter and wolves snarling.

Chapter 68

I hurry back into the communal hall, expecting all hell to break loose.

Aaron remains standing. He looks tense.

Has he always been so big, so imposing?

He's huge and muscled and, damn it, he's handsome. His eyes light up when he sees me. Then he does a quick skim of me from head to toe as if to make sure I'm okay.

"I'm fine," I tell him.

It's more than I can say of my brother's packmates. Er, my packmates.

At least four males are sprawled on the floor.

No one looks seriously injured, which is a blessing. But there are busted beer bottles and glasses. Poker chips and playing cards scattered around like confetti.

Fighting here. Now.

That's a bad, bad idea.

"Seriously Aaron!?"

He tucks his hands in his pockets and looks sheepish. "They started it."

James snorts. He's across the room, leaning against the wall, arms crossed.

"I expect this of him," I tell James. "But you know better."

He frowns and looks suitably chastised.

"Walk with me, Aaron."

“Where are you going?” Liam asks.

Marla stands beside him. Her arm through his. They aren’t blocking my way into the main portion of the house, but they are a unified front standing before me.

“I’m going to my old bedroom. I need clothes. Is that a problem?”

He shakes his head. “No. No. Of course not.”

“If you need clothes, I can bring you some,” Marla offers.

She’s all boobs and probably a size three.

Even weak and dying...I’ll never be that skinny.

Aaron moves until his shoulder brushes against mine. He does this a lot, I’m realizing. He uses touch and nearness to ...affect me. His wolf does it too.

“It’s this way,” I say, leading him out of the main hall.

One of my first priorities is going to be cleaning that mess. I’m kind of horrified at how they’ve let this place go, but maybe that is to be expected. A bunch of guys. No Luna.

I try not to be judgmental about it.

We go up a flight of stairs and down a long hallway. My father’s room is on the opposite side of the house. My mom had a craft room and a nursery in this wing. She wanted more babies. I had a younger brother, but he died in an accident. I don’t think she ever got over that.

I’m not sure that ‘replacing’ him with another child was the answer, but I stop that chain of thought instantly. Families are meant to grow. People are meant to love. Even in the face of death, the living...they have to keep on living.

I’m saddened, acknowledging that I’ll probably never have a baby of my own. Maybe it’s a blessing that mom and dad died first, that they won’t have to bury me.

I push open the door to my old bedroom and freeze.

Chapter 69

AARON

Leah’s room looks like it’s been ransacked. Clothes are strewn across the floor and bed. The closet is open and hangers are at twisted angles. Books are everywhere. And boxes. There are cardboard boxes piled in row after row, almost from the floor to the ceiling.

I rock back on my heels.

I’m not sure what I’m supposed to say or think about this.

I glance at Leah.

Her lower lip trembles.

Oh for f**k's sake.

She survived an attack by a ruthless Alpha hellbent on killing her to claim her lineage. She's put up with me for years. And now, because her ol' man and her di pshit brother let her room go to h ell, now...she's going to start crying?!

"Hey now." I drag her to me.

She fights. But I close my eyes and hug her harder. Not so hard as to hurt her, most of her body is bruised or sporting some kind of injury.

Just to use my strength to calm her.

For about the thousandth time...I wish she had her wolf.

Because then she'd respond to these touches and sensory cues. Our wolves are simpler. Touch, scent, s*x. My closeness would calm her. Reassure her. Solidify our connections as a pack.

But she has no wolf.

So mine can't commune with her.

She can't understand what she means to me.

"You can let me go," she grumbles. "You're suffocating me.

I do. Then I tuck her on the chin so I can see her eyes.

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She wipes beneath them and then shows me her hands. "It's good. I'm fine. So they turned my old bedroom into a storage closet. No biggie."

It also looks like they ransacked the place, but if she wants to overlook that I can too.

At least temporarily.

"The main hall was messier than this," I tell her. "Don't take it personally. Your pack...they slobs, Leah."

She rolls her eyes, and I'll take it. Better annoyed or amused

than crying. I stand back as she picks through some clothes on the closet floor, finding a pale blue t-shirt and a pair of drawstring linen pants.

She changes in front of me.

She isn't trying to turn me on or do any sort of striptease, but the way she shimmies out of those jeans, bending over so her round as s is in front of me...

I like that. A lot.

Her shirt gets pulled off and it lifts all her hair, letting me see the muscles of her back, the taper of waist, the curve of her hips. Then all that thick hair tumbles down, like a go ddamn photo sh oot just for me.

She doesn't turn, so I can't see her breasts, although from the side, I catch the jiggle of one.

If she's trying to turn me on, she's doing a good job of it.

"Why did you really bring me up here, honey?"

Chapter 70

LEAH

Wow. The nerve of this Alpha.

"Aaron, we need to get something straight."

"That your family's a bunch of hoarders?" He looks around the room. "Yeah. Got that."

I shake my head.

"Aaron, there is no future for us. Not anymore." I hold up my hand. "Don't start spewing reasons or excuses or anything else. It's repetitive and it's not going to change anything."

I take his hands and hold them.

For the last time.

His hands are big and callused and strong.

"I let you go with peace, Aaron."

"What the f**k does that mean?"

"It means I don't want to fight. Or cast blame. I just want to let the past go."

He nods. "Yeah. Okay. We can do that. A fresh start." He eyes the room. "You can't stay here."

"I can clean out this stuff."

"No," he says. "It's not defensible. This is a second story room. It's easy enough to scale. You need to be on the third floor or higher. Preferably only one window."

"W-what?"

"We can replace this Queen bed with a King. I don't mind cozy, but we need more room for the two of us." He jerks his head toward the books. "I should've known you'd have piles of books here too. He moves to look out the window. "Our men can set up an immediate perimeter so this main house will be secured. Once we assess the extent of the security, we can make additional accommodations--"

Does he really think he's going to move in here-with me!?

"No," I cut him off.

"What?"

He's doing what he always does. Steamrolling me. And it'd be easy. Too easy. To let him take control and make all the decisions. But we can't go backwards.

“No to any of it. No to all of it.”

I storm out of the room and back down the stairs.

Aaron catches up to me and grabs my arm.

And what he’s proposing...”Aaron, this isn’t good for my pack. What you’re suggesting, that’s not going to be well-received.” He doesn’t realize that a few minutes ago, my brother suggested murdering him and the packmates he came here with.

It’s as much to save him as it is to free me.

I need to be diplomatic. “Thank you, Alpha Aaron Rathborn, for your support last night during the ceremony. And for escorting me to my pack and family. Thank you for the many years we had together. Now, I’m sure you can understand that we want to use this time to rebuild and to grieve. Safe travels back to your home.”

Aaron’s hands flex and open at his sides. I’ve seen this wolf angry on many occasions, but never, never as furious as this.

And that’s saying something, because we’ve recently gotten into some tough situations.

“Are you... dismissing me!?” His voice is dangerously low.

Oh. Sh it.