

## Bad Love 81

### Chapter 81

"Did you figure it out, Adam?"

He's quiet and standing at the bank of computers in a different room in the medical facility. Everything is white and glass and the space resembles something out of a pharmaceutical commercial.

I'm perched on a stool, watching him.

"The results regarding your cancer aren't available yet. But I do think we'll see a positive effect from the ceremony."

"Is that your Doctor of Medicine degree talking, or just my friend being optimistic for me?"

His smile is crooked, and I see that it doesn't reach his eyes. So

he wants to believe. But he isn't sure either.

"We can bring you back into my hospital in town and run additional scans."

"Not yet," I say absently. I spin a test tube on the lab table like it's some kind of fidget toy. "And, Adam, when I asked if you 'figured it out yet' I wasn't talking about the cancer."

His light eyes slowly raise to mine.

I hold his gaze. "You know what I mean."

He looks away.

I pause the spinning tube and set it back into the rack. "Why am I not a wolf, Adam? What's wrong with me?"

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“Would you quit staring at that screen and zooming in? It’s daytime and thermal imaging works, but not that great.”

James is annoyed.

Wolves run hot. And this is Montana not Florida. They’re way hotter than the external environment. But then...Leah is not a wolf.

AARON

“Get the drones back in position,” I say to James. “And I won’t have to mess with your optics.”

I’ve been glued to this surveillance system for the last two

days. I can trace Leah’s movements through the house and

within her room. She doesn’t spend a ton of time outside. She frequents one building on the west side of the main pack house. A medical facility if our schematics are correct.

On the one hand, her limited exploration of Roberts’ lands is good because I’m not real keen on her interfacing with her pack without a security detail around her. But on the other hand, it’s not a good look for her.

It keeps her brother in his position of power and relegates her to the background.

“What are you going to do about my sister?” James asks

quietly.

I think about that for a minute. We’re overdue to talk about

the past. I’ve been selfish where Jessica is concerned. Keeping her close but not engaging her in a real relationship. These last few years, she’s basically served to make Leah jealous.

I’ve been a real di ck as far as she’s concerned.

“I’m sorry,” I tell James.

One brow wings up. “You owe that to Jess. Not to me.”

Fair enough.

James chokes on a laugh. “And would you look at that, she’s headed in.”

I glance behind me. He’s right.

Chapter 82

James takes off, leaving me in the armory.

Jess strolls in.

She's tall and lean. Her pretty face is a little uncertain, but otherwise, looking as beautiful as she's ever been.

Most males would think her a 10.

But somewhere along the way, I lost my affection for her perfect blond hair and her pale eyes. She's too thin.

Somewhere along the way, I became obsessed with messy dark hair, a riot of curls that are haphazard, and a face that's too stubborn to ever be a classic beauty.

"So I hear you're expecting."

She snorts.

"Was that said just for your Luna's benefit?"

She crosses her arms. "I hate when you call her that."

"It's what she is."

"No. It's what you want her to be."

Same thing, isn't it?

"We have to move on, Jess."

"I agree. She's out. Back to the Roberts where she belongs." She moves across the room and grabs my hands.

There's no spark. Not even a tiny frisson.

"You promised me," she whispers.

I squeeze her hands. "I did. But we were kids then, Jess. Look me in the eyes and tell me. Tell me you feel the same way you did when we were sixteen."

She glances away.

"Is there someone else?" I ask her.

It'd be easier. For damn sure. And she deserves someone.

She shakes her head.

"But you know what I mean though, yeah? It's not the same."

Again she looks away.

"Say what you need to say," I whisper.

This girl is like family to me. I owe her at least some compassion.

"You falling for her... it's a betrayal of our pack. It's a betrayal of my dead family."

I can't change how she feels. And she's entitled to feel that way.

"We're all victims in war, Jess."

"That's easy for you to say. You don't care about anyone. Not really."

I let go of her hands and step back.

"You're cold. The only focus you have is your responsibility. So maybe before you hold up some mirror for me to look inside myself and figure out all 'my feelings' you should do the same. Because you don't care about Leah. Not anymore than you ever cared about me. It's power you crave, Aaron. Any female in your life...she'll just be a means to an end."

She smiles now. Then she turns and walks back toward the door. "I'm sure you think you're capable of love. But I know you. You don't love anybody. And Leah...she's just another tool

to you. It's her power and her title that you crave. Take away that, and she'll be just like me. Forgotten and replaceable."

I open my mouth but I'm not sure what to say.

"Don't say anything," she tells me as if reading my mind. "It's who you are, Aaron. Honestly, Leah being stuck with you is probably the best revenge..."

She reaches into my back pocket and I'm wondering what the hell she's thinking. But when she whips out my wallet, opens it and pulls out my black AmEx, it starts to make more sense.

"I think I'll take a vacation for a while. I've earned it." Her expression is cold. "I played the part you wanted all this time, haven't I?"

My face must give something away. Because it's true. I used her. Countless times to make Leah jealous.

She drops my wallet and walks out of the room.

As she goes, I feel like this moment is pivotal, and letting Jess go... it's going to come back to punish me.

## Chapter 83

### LEAH

It's been another day.

I slept a lot and binged some mindless action series on Netflix. I didn't venture out of my room because I'm not really relishing the idea of strapping a gun or knives to my body. But I'm also not comfortable moving around unarmed.

What does that say about me?

About my pack?

I still want to get into my dad's room, but I've been putting that off too, in case his femme posse is still hanging out, which

is a lame reason, I know.

I don't particularly relish confrontations. I think deep down I'm

a people pleaser, and that's not what my new role demands of

A text comes through and I scramble to grab my phone.

I punch my security code.

exper deep

It's not Aaron.

And this ping of disappointment I feel...I shouldn't.

Meet me in the lab.

It's Adam.

My stomach lurches with equal parts dread and anticipation. This is it. The test results we've been waiting for. I'd like to

believe I'm cured.

That this power actually has some meaning.

Because the nights I've lain awake in bed trying to call on something of this "alpha" lineage, I get nothing.

I can't compel a packmate to do something.

I can't use my energy to force back an object-and I know that

sounds like some full-on Star Wars Jedi stuff, but I've seen

Aaron do it.

He can project his energy into a force that can blast a man

back a dozen feet.

I can't shift.

So I'm left wondering, for the thousandth time, what good is my role as Alpha, if none of the powers actually manifest in

me?

Well, if it heals me, then I suppose it is one gift.

I drag on jeans and a cropped tee and head out of the house.

I pass two wolves that nod respectfully.

And then I see Marla. She waves enthusiastically. I need to warm up to her. She's trying. And I can't be whiny to want

people to welcome me more and then act all standoffish when they actually do.

"Hi Marla," I say. "Want to grab lunch?"

She nods like a seal. "Definitely!"

"Great. I'll be back in a bit."

It's been three days; I need to acclimate. Hiding in my room isn't the answer.

Although, I haven't been hiding as much as waiting for this.

My stomach does that awful swirl again and I feel nauseous.

It's nerves.

I step out of the main house and breathe deep.

The air is cool but fragrant with spring. Flowers are blooming around the yard. It's not manicured and neat the way Aaron's house is. The grass is at least a foot tall. But everything is green and growing and vibrant.

I cut across the lawn toward the left side of the house.

Already wolves are out working. Horses cut across the fields and pastures in the distance. The scent of cattle comes in on

the breeze.

There are families spread out in houses surrounding the main packhouse. My brother's been my father's beta for a long time, and I know he has a separate residence although he's been sleeping in the main house, probably to protect me.

I haven't seen nor heard from Tobin again. And that makes me edgy.

I do see some wolves mulling around, but I can't tell if they're just hanging out or if they're intended as security.

Adam greets me at the door to the medical building. He welcomes me inside.

"Dude, don't drag this

send a friend right now, Adam

Not you in Decor mode

my cancer cured?

He frowns and looks back more

“Dude, don’t drag this out. I need a friend right now, Adam. Not you in Doctor mode. Just tell me. Is my cancer cured?”

He frowns. “No, it’s not Leah. It’s come back more aggressively.”

Chapter 84

My stomach pitches into my throat and I run to the sink.

I’ve had a protein bar and a bottle of water- I vomit them up violently.

Adam comes and holds back my hair.

I run the water and rinse my mouth.

My mouth is salivating and the flood of adrenaline makes it hard to breathe. This is NOT the news I was expecting.

“I don’t understand. I’ve been trying to play it cool, but come on...I was tortured in that Grove and I felt the power of my lineage come into me. What good is being an Alpha if I’m just going to die, and now, what!? More quickly?”

push out of his arms and stalk around the lab. I have to keep moving. This anxious energy is burning through my system and I want to cry and scream.

It’s all so unfair.

For a few days, I dared to dream.

That I was cured.

That I wasn’t a pawn.

That I could wield power and control over my future and family.

But that was all delusional it seems.

“I’m running tests, Leah. I’m trying. Believe me.”

He looks gutted.

drag my hair back and twist it into a messy bun. “I know, Adam. I appreciate everything you’re doing, truly.”

He crosses back to a computer and points to the screen. I see a series of DNA genes, the results of the electrophoresis he

ran earlier in the week. but I don't know what the numbers actually mean.

"I think the issue lies with your wolf genetics. You have all the markers, Leah. But there is something preventing your

true side from manifesting. And whatever that element is, it's attacking your own body too. It's almost like some sort of

autoimmune disease."

He may as well be speaking ancient Greek.

I pace back and forth.

"So this is it!? I just get my affairs in order, huh?"

"You still have some time," he says.

"How long?"

"It's hard to say," he says honestly.

My mind whirls.

My eyes prick with the burn of unshed tears. "I really thought....

Adam..."

"I know," he says quietly. "Look, there are still treatments. We can fight this. We won't give up." He points to the refrigerator at the opposite side of the room. "The chemo treatments are here. You can begin them today."

I put my hand to my head because I feel lightheaded.

All at once, Adam's arm is around me.

He carries me to the nearest hospital bed and sets me on

the mattress, then he props up the bed so I'm sitting mostly upright. "Just take a minute, Leah. Breathe."

He leans over me and I'm hit with the smell of his cologne or

maybe it's his aftershave. The smell makes me gag and I wretch again.

He lunges to the side for a waste basket.

I gag and heave, but thankfully my stomach is empty.

"What happened?" he asks.



I wrinkle my nose. "I don't know. Something about your cologne-no offense."

He laughs. Then quickly sobers.

He runs back to the table and pulls a vial of my blood from a centrifuge.

"Uh, Adam...what are you doing?"

He doesn't answer and that makes my blood pressure spike.

"Have you been tired, Leah?"

"Yes. But it's been a pretty dark time. I always tend to sleep more when I'm depressed."

"Hmm."

"What about your appetite?"

I shrug. "I'm hungry sometimes. Not hungry at all at others."

"Nausea? Like just now?"

"No. I mean, I'll feel sick sometimes when I wake up. But it passes. I've never puked before. Until today, that is."

He's pulling out a dropper and pouring another solution into a petri dish. Then he adds a drop of my blood and swirls before dipping in some kind of litmus paper.

I swing my legs off the bed and start back toward him. He looks genuinely anxious and there is actual sweat beading on his forehead. "Adam, please. What is it? Am I vomiting because I'm in the final stages?"

I don't know much about this type of cancer and I've purposely stayed off Google and WebMD. I'm crazy enough lately, I don't need to read symptoms and side effects or about statistics and life expectancies.

He holds up the paper and it's turned a shade of pink.

"What does it mean, Adam?"

His eyes are big and wide. "You're pregnant."

Chapter 85

"No. That's not possible."

He quirks his head. "Stop me if I'm wrong, but I'm pretty sure your former husband would have s\*x with you."

Yes. All the time.

Sometimes multiple times. Daily.

I gulp.

My hands instinctively go to my stomach.

Adam's gaze goes to the cooler across the room where he's storing my chemotherapy then back to me.

"I, uh, can't take the drugs to kill the cancer without killing my baby."

He frowns. His eyes are so kind. But the pity I see there... it kills

"This particular cancer...no."

I tug out my hair tie and twist my hair.

Adam bites his lip.

"Okay, let's say I put off treatments. If I can carry the baby to five or six months, the child could survive then, right?"

"Yes. We'd likely have to keep the baby in NICU. But the statistics for premature births are quite good." Adam frowns. "But if you forego treatments that long... the cancer will have spread completely. You'd be down to days left on your life, and even if we started chemo, it'd be too late."

"I see." I feel like I'm going to puke again. "So it's me or my baby."

He starts rifling through a stack of papers. I've clearly unnerved him. "I'll confer with Dr. Henley. We can run more tests."

I reach across the table and still his hand. "Hey. We both knew this was a longshot. Can we transfer the embryo? Maybe find a surrogate?"

I can accept that I'm going to die, but I can't bury the compulsion to try and save my baby.

"Active pregnancy transfers of a fetus or embryo are very rare

and high risk. If this was IVF or something, it's actually easier because once the embryo is implanted, it either takes or it doesn't. You already have a successful pregnancy. Attempting a uterine procedure can complicate or terminate that. There isn't enough science. Even at four or five months, we can do more with a premature delivery. The first trimester is a time when most pregnancies either take or terminate."

So I'm high risk to the nth degree.

"Do I have enough time?" I ask Adam.

He nods. "For the baby. But if you delay your treatments that long, your chances for survival..."

Right. There won't be any chance.

The hospital oncologist topped me out at 5% if I started aggressive chemo and radiation immediately. And that was before the transfer of my father's powers that have also boosted the aggressiveness of the cancer, it seems.

“Leah, you need to abort. We can start treatments. There is still a chance that we can save you.”

“No,” I whisper.

“Please.”

I want to ask more questions, but Adam looks positively frazzled, and I’m not even sure what to ask.

I’m pretty shell shocked myself. “Hey, Adam, can we keep this information between ourselves for a minute.”

His brows draw together. Not for the first time, I wonder what my life would be like if I’d grown up here. Would Adam be the father of this child? Would I be si ck at all?

It’s hard to say. Everything happens for a reason, I suppose.

“Adam,” I say again when he continues to stare at me numbly. “Can you respect my right to privacy on this?”

He nods.

“No one can know about this. I’m vulnerable enough.”

He seems concerned, like maybe he intended to tell a few people, but I hold his gaze until he nods again.

“I won’t tell anyone, Lee.”

I don’t know why, I just don’t think this is information that should be out in the world. At least not yet. I have to think things through. See if I can come up with some plan. I have to be smart about this because this isn’t just anyone’s baby.

I’m the Alpha of Pack Roberts.

The Father is the Alpha of the largest pack in this region.

Do I tell Aaron?

Chapter 86

Somedays... I question getting out of bed.

I’d add today to that list because... dying.

And I really don’t want to d ie. But how cr uel is this world that the one thing I wanted... The one thing I hoped could be granted to me finally is.

Only when I’m too si ck to see the dream become a reality.

I think of the little boy or girl who I'll probably never get to hold. The eyes like mine or dark like Aaron's. If they'd have his strength and my compassion. If they'd like chocolate or vanilla

ice cream.

I close my eyes and imagine their laughter. Their first steps.

Seeing them grow up and marry and start their own families.

The hugs and cuddles I'll never feel. The baby I'll never get to feed or rock to sleep.

Every beautiful milestone of a child's life. Walking, talking, learning to read, to ride a bike. Teaching my child to swim and

climb trees.

Holding them in my arms when they're sick or scared.

Telling them I love them each night before they fall asleep.

A hundred thoughts come to me and melt away.

I grab my phone. I scroll to Aaron's contact.

want to call him.

I shouldn't. But part of me wants him to have the truth. To share this joy-however brief it may be for me.

At least...I think he'd be happy.

I probably shouldn't assume.

I don't know that my pack would be pleased. It cements Aaron's claim to this pack through my baby. I touch my

stomach.

So much love swirls in my heart I feel like I can't contain it.

Adam texts me: We need to abort. You can undergo

treatments to combat the cancer. You can try again for a baby, Leah.

He values my life over my child's.

And it's probably the right choice, objectively.

But it doesn't feel right.

This baby deserves a chance.

I scroll through my phone to another name. The one person

who is never far from my mind, no matter how much I need him to be.

Screw it. I hit send.

My call is answered on the second ring. "Hey Leah."

That voice.

It's deep and raspy. A rumbling bass that I can feel to my extremities.

"Hi Aaron."

"You okay?"

My eyes water at him asking about my health.

"There's something I need to tell you," I whisper.

"So come downstairs."

"What?"

"Look out your window."

I scurry off the bed and yank open the blinds. The phone falls from my hand.

Aaron is here. His hair moves a bit in the wind, and his huge shoulders seem to cast a long shadow behind him. He's smiling. Well, what passes for a smile. He sports that crooked grin that means he's amused.

James is absent. Cedric too. He's brought about a dozen men with him and though they aren't armed, they are surrounded by my packmates.

No one has shifted and the situation doesn't seem volatile, but I've seen how quickly that can change.

What does this mean? Why is he here?

I don't bother with socks or shoes, I just take off running. I grab the bannister and run down the stairs and through the foyer to the back of the house. There are several wolves in the kitchens and more seated in the formal living room. I haven't seen them before, and I should stop for an introduction, I'm sure, but just now, I'm too focused on seeing Aaron and figuring out why he came back to me.

Chapter 87

"Aaron, this is a surprise."

My brother is watching me carefully and looking not very pleased.

"Are you sick?" Aaron asks. "He reaches for my arm and grabs my bicep. "You lost weight again." He stares at my brother angrily.

"I'm fine!" I say automatically. From the corner of my eye, I see

Adam. He gives a subtle shake of his head. What does that mean? That he didn't tell Aaron anything. That / shouldn't!?!

"Why are you here, Aaron?" I nod at the guards with him. Men of varying ages that I interfaced almost daily at his packhouse. They smile or incline their heads respectfully.

He looks around, staring pointedly at my brother before

turning his attention back to me. "I came for your coronation, Leah. Nothing went to plan the other night, but the formal ceremony to welcome you to the pack is vital. I missed it. And we've come to pay tribute to--"

"We, uh, haven't gotten around to that part yet," Liam admits.

Aaron growls so low I feel the rumble more than hear it. "She needs to solidify her position and address the pack as

a whole. It doesn't matter that she can't shift, this is about leadership and vision and preserving the peace. Pack Roberts needs to know how she's carried this pack financially all these years... they need to know her strengths and that she's assuaged any collective weaknesses."

Liam bristles. "Don't tell me how to run my pack!"

"I'm not telling you. I'm telling her. This is HER pack." Aaron looks at me. "You're the head of this pack now, Leah. You need to assert your authority."

It's good advice.

Advice I should've heard before now.

I've been here for four days already.

And I've spent that time moping and crying and hiding out in my room.

I've f\*\*ked this up, I reckon, and there is no going back or making a 'new' first impression.

I hate to think what this pack has seen. First, me showing up weak and bloody. Then me hiding out in this mansion and not making any effort to connect with these people or to reassure

them. Hell, I haven't even offered condolences, and I know so many of these wolves loved my dad deeply.

I look at my brother. "Instruct the chef to prepare a feast and ask all the members of this pack to be present for dinner and the coronation ceremony. We'll do it tonight at six pm."

"It's going to take time to plan and assemble everyone," Liam says.

"She's not asking you," Aaron interrupts. "She's telling you. This is an order from your Alpha."

Liam's furious. His eyes flicker to blue then back again. But he doesn't argue. He nods curtly in my direction then storms into the house. The rest of his men-my men-including Adam follow him inside.

"I don't need you to fight my battles, Aaron."

"No? Could've fooled me."

Chapter 88

AARON

"Then get off your ass, quit hiding like a scared little girl, and fight them yourself."

Leah's chest heaves. She's angry and she should be. She's been fighting me for most of her life, why the hell would she start feeling sorry for herself now?

If anything, she should be elated to be back with her 'family'

"Hey," I catch her hand before she can storm off. That spark is there, as strong as ever. "Take a second. I didn't come here to argue with you."

"You sure about that?"

"Tell me what you need."

Her eyes search mine like she wants to say something.

I use the grip on her hand to pull her closer, but she pushes against my chest, blocking me from holding her. "Just tell me the protocol, Aaron. It's been a bit of a slow transition here and I'll be honest, I haven't made a great mark to start. What

would you do in my shoes?" she asks candidly.

"Show your strength, Leah. You're smart. Show your resilience. What does this pack need, how can you provide it? Be

supportive and invite the pack-every member-to contact you directly. I know there's risk with that-"

"Is that what your welcome package was about?"

The guns and knives? "Yeah. Mostly. Speaking of...you're not carrying."

"No. Uh. I saw you and I rushed out without thinking."

Her answer pleases me.

She addresses my men. "It's good to see you all. I appreciate the support and that you'd come this far to help me."

It's not like they had a choice. But several of my guys nod or take a knee. "We're happy to be here," Claudio says.

Another teammate, Benny, says: "It's an honor to attend your coronation, Alpha Leah."

She smiles brightly.

And there it is, that burst of light and life that I'll forever associate with this woman. I've missed it. Missed her.

"Set up a perimeter," I say quietly and four of my guys move to take point. "If you can get the main hall restored to order, that might be the best place. Or we could even look to do a cocktail reception in the dining room."

I eye the vast open yard with its almost calf-high grass. "We could mow this field, I suppose. If you'd rather be outside."

"No," she says quickly.

I agree. The conclusion of one of these ceremonies would typically involve shifting. Leah can't do that. So we don't want to point to reminders of her inability.

I grab her hand again and squeeze it. "This is your show, honey."

She nods. "You'll help?"

"It's why I'm here."

"Let's prepare the main hall then. I think just cleaning out the frat house vibes will make the space more welcoming overall. This is the main packhouse. It should accommodate children and families."

I nod. To my men I say, "Get in there. If we need something, don't waste time asking. Just take the initiative to get it."

The guys file past and into the house.

Leah rubs her arms. "Cold?"

She doesn't reply but I see the gooseflesh rising on her skin. I briskly rub her arms. It's meant to be perfunctory. She's cold. I'm warming her.

Tell that to my dick.

It's been hard since she answered the phone.



And now that my hands are on her skin, it'll take a miracle to stop me from dragging her into the nearest room, closet or nook and f\*\*king her senseless.

I've had fantasies about that stupid twin bed.

But seeing her expression just now...something's not right.

"What aren't you telling me, honey?"

She startles like I've slapped her. "I, uh, should take a shower and make myself look more presentable." She frowns. "I don't

know what to wear."

I nod toward one of several trunks my men carried in. "There are a couple of pantsuits that might do the trick."

She smirks. "Look at you into fashion. We've come a long way, huh."

"Yeah. We have." I can't help but agree.

I ordered the back fields mowed after all. The grass will likely stick to feet and shoes and get dragged inside, but there is nothing to be done for it

We need a place to set up the bars and to move out all the booze. And lest my brother and his packmates freak the f\*ck out, I thought it better to move their stash rather than pour it down the drain.

I'm not sure the kitchen staff is up to the task and the wolffl remembered so fondly from my childhood passed away a few years ago, I'd learned. The chef is a nineteen year old wolf with an attitude and penchant for fusion dishes.

I like that he wants to take ownership of the menu. I think he

was expecting me to boss him around. Instead I shook his hand. Welcomed him to my pack. And told him to make us proud.

We'll see if that results in something amazing or the kind of spiteful coup that might ruin this entire party.

This is a country estate, it's not like Uber eats or Doordash are

Chapter 89

LEAH

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This is a country estate, it's not like Uber eats or Doordash are driving all the way out here.

"Relax," Aaron tells me. "Chef Dom is sending trays of food too."

I still don't know why Aaron is here. Or why he is helping me.

"Is this because you feel bad?" I ask. "About my dad?"

Aaron draws me aside from the flurry of wolves working to clean up the main pack house. We're outside and he points to a set of benches on the side of the back lawn, a good hundred feet from the main house.

After we sit, he says, "Have you checked the books yet?"

"The library books?"

His smile is wry. "Accounting books. The records for Pack Roberts and their corporations."

"No." I've been depressed and dealing with some things.

Here's the moment I can lean into the conversation and just come out and say, "I've been busy with your baby." But of course I don't.

"Leah, your pack's been struggling for a long time. There has been a lot of mismanagement. Your dad was pulling money from the company for years. Your brother... there's evidence linking him to several underground gambling rings and even weapons trafficking."

"You're not serious."

"I am."

"Taking that money from the marked account, that was just one misstep among many." He expels a deep breath. "You should know that my pack has bought up a sizable portion of Roberts Corporation."

I haven't been to our corporate headquarters in years.

I wonder when my brother last sat on the board. "How sizable?"

"We now have a controlling majority."

I gasp. I wrench myself away from him. "Gods, it's always something with you. Just when I think I can start to trust you, you do something awful. Again and again and again."

He grabs my shoulder and spins me back around. "Don't you walk away from me when we're talking."

I shove him back. "I'll walk wherever the f\*\*k I want, whenever I choose."

His eyes flash gold.

"I'm not yours anymore, Aaron." I rub my eyes and try to make sense of things. "So let me see if I understand everything correctly... you set up my father for embezzlement, while secretly buying up shares of Roberts Corporation--"

"It's publicly traded, Leah. Anyone could've bought that stock."

"But it wasn't anyone. It was you. Damn it, Aaron. I always knew you were a ruthless bastard, but can you just leave us alone!? You win. Okay. We're weak, poor and apparently alpha-less."

"You're the Alpha."

"Stop. You know I'm not what this pack needs."

He towers over me. His huge body blocking the sun and overwhelming me with his scent and strength and nearness.

"You want to save your pack, quit feeling sorry for yourself. Be the Alpha they need you to be."

## Chapter 90

I should've known Aaron wouldn't feel sorry for me.

He's too much a wild thing for an emotion as basic as pity. But maybe that's good too. I've got more than enough pity for all

parties.

As the clock closes in on five-thirty, I seek Aaron out again.

I'd purposely told him to leave me the hell alone earlier. And while I don't have the time just now to dig into my packs' financials, that's going to be my first matter of business the moment this ceremony concludes.

In the meantime, I'm putting on a brave face.

He isn't wrong.

I have a unique skill set. I am uncannily accurate with predicting stocks and buying/trading. And, if Aaron is right, that's what my pack needs right now.

Not brute strength.

Not war.

Not masculine posturing.

They just need money.

Lucky for them, I happen to be adept at making it.

I see Aaron at the edge of the yard, his back against the wall

that runs along the east side of the property. I approach him and as I do, he sends off the two guys speaking to him.

"Thanks Hector. Thanks John. I appreciate you both helping me out today."

They nod but don't say anything. They're not huge fans and don't think anyone really appreciates being demoted to a party planner for their enemy pack's new Alpha.

The moment we're alone, I ask: "Are you planning to overthrow me?"

Aaron doesn't say anything for several long seconds. "Do you

recall the Grove-and how I fought for you? Or the peak where four enemy wolves went after you? What about the Council when your own father was willing to throw you at their mercy

to clear his own name?" Aaron stalks me now.

He grabs my chin roughly and tilts up my face so I can't avoid his eyes. "If I'd wanted to hurt you, I could've done it a million times over. If I wanted to crush this pack, I could do it. I don't need you or your permission."

His other hand plays with strands of my hair. It's like his personality is fractured. Half of him dominating me, the other half touching me gently, almost reverently.

"I can't handle these extremes with you, Aaron. Just tell me why you're here."

"I stated my intentions when I arrived, princess. If you don't believe them, that's on you. Not me."

His lips slant over mine in a punishing kiss that's over even before it's begun. Then he strolls off and I'm left standing there in the rays of the setting sun.