



Priest

ALPHA KNIGHTS MC BOOK FOUR

LEIGH KELSEY
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PRIEST

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FOUR**

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This book was written, produced, and edited in the UK where some spelling, grammar and word usage will vary from US English.

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FREE ALPHA KNIGHTS NOVELLA!

Meet the Alpha Knights Motorcycle Club in this spicy story.



Mercedes

For thirty-one years I thought I was a beta, until one night my temperature sky-rockets and slick drenches my core. The only thing that will soothe me is an alpha—and fate leads me right to Winner, a grizzled, older biker who vows to protect me.

Winner

I never thought I'd be given a soulmate, but when Mercedes runs in front of my bike with a cry for help, everything in my life shifts. She's not just an omega, and my mate—she's in heat.

I'll give her everything she needs to get through the mating frenzy: my touch, my heart, and as many climaxes as she can handle. Now I've found her, I'm never letting her go.

The Alpha Knights MC is perfect for lovers of protective alpha males, fiery damsels, and romance that's equal parts sweetness and heat. These alpha bikers will fight for their club and their omega women, and they're not afraid to get their hands dirty to keep their families safe.

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BLURB



Luna

No one knows what the Hunters did to me, and I need it to stay that way. If I pretend everything's normal, I might be able to hold my shattered life together.

There's one problem: Priest, the sweet, caring biker who found me in a room full of vile alpha pheromones and got me out.

He won't let me suffer alone, and he's a comfort I desperately need, but the closer we become, the more my secret is in danger of getting out.

Priest

Luna can never know she's my mate.

She's been through enough without thinking I'll demand a single thing from her. All I want is to protect her, keep her safe, and give her everything she needs.

But how can I do that when keeping this secret is a scar on my soul, and every day I watch her suffer more?

Telling her could ruin her sense of safety, but keeping it secret could ruin every chance we have together.

Please read the note in the beginning of the book for TWs!

The Alpha Knights MC is perfect for lovers of protective alpha males, fiery damsels, and romance that's equal parts sweetness and heat. These alpha bikers will fight for their club and their omega women, and they're not afraid to get their hands dirty to keep their families safe.

NOTE



The second chapter of this book contains on-page sexual assault—if it might trigger you (and you’ve read book three, Astrid’s story) you can skip this chapter and still have a good understanding of Luna and Priest’s story. Just be aware there will be references and minor flashbacks throughout the full book.

This book is omegaverse, which means that though the characters are humans living in a contemporary world *almost* the same as ours, there’s a wolf-like hierarchy among them, and other elements like mate bonds, biting, and knotting.

The Alpha Knights series is dark, but not pitch black, and the heroes in these books only rescue and adore their mates, and never hurt them. But be aware there will be mentions of abuse, violence, and assault that could be triggering for some readers.

Leigh & Phoebe



Luna

A cold warning crept down my spine, making me shudder as the bus doors slammed shut and left me on the roadside. It was only a ten minute walk to my studio, but I cast a look around the empty warehouse area as I hurried away from the road.

I was being paranoid. But my sister was attacked at the bank where she worked, so I could hardly be blamed for paranoia.

"It's just the wind howling," I murmured to myself, tugging my coat closer around myself. I ducked my head against a sudden gust, crossing the little spit of grass that led to smaller, even quieter roads.

It was even more deserted than usual out here—I didn't know what the warehouses held, but I'd never seen the owner take anything out of them and there was clearly no reason for them to be here this early. I wouldn't have been here at 5:25 either, but I couldn't sleep and there was no point lying awake in bed to think of all the awful things that could have happened to my sister if her biker mate hadn't shown up.

There had to be some sort of destiny at work, moulding our fates into happily ever afters. No way did *her mate* just happen to show up in the rescue party. It was like the start of a modern day fairy tale, and my heart tightened. I wanted that too, wanted someone to share my life with. I loved my family, but sometimes I just wanted to snuggle up to someone who knew even the secret parts of myself that I hid from everyone else.

If I kept locking myself in my studio away from humanity everyday, I'd never meet anyone. But I had a slew of failed relationships to remind me why to keep to myself, even if I fiercely wanted the connection.

The second anyone found out I had an omega sister, they stopped seeing any interest in me. I was beta—ordinary, boring. And usually, by that point in the relationship, I was fucking *furios* at the way they saw Astrid. She was a person, not a shiny toy. I'd kneed quite a few dicks to ram that point home.

No, it was better to be alo—

All the hairs rose on the back of my neck; my breath caught. I felt the presence for several long excruciating seconds before footsteps scuffed the pavement behind me.

It was probably someone going to one of the warehouses, I reasoned. Or walking their dog in the park.

But there were no houses around here, and there was no tap-tap of claws on the pavement behind me.

I got my phone out of my pocket and increased my pace, scanning for somewhere I could vanish and lose my pursuer. If they were even pursuing me. I was probably overreacting, but I'd rather be safer than sorry, so I sped through my contacts and phoned Astrid.

I couldn't call Dad; he'd go ballistic. I didn't want him to worry himself into a heart attack.

But guilt struck as the call began to ring. Astrid had barely recovered from her attack; I shouldn't be putting this on her, too.

Too late to back out; the ring ended and her sleepy voice answered.

"Luna? It's ... what time is it?" she grumbled. "Half past bloody five."

"I think someone's following me," I rushed out in a whisper, my heart beating faster, harder. I wanted to look behind myself, but that would make it real. And it would tell whoever was following me that I knew they were there.

"*What?*" Astrid demanded, the sleep leaving her voice. "Where are you?"

"Heading to my studio."

"Shit, okay. Go in anywhere; a bakery, a random business, a fucking *house*—just get in somewhere."

I began to shake. "There *isn't* anywhere. I'm still a few minutes away, Astrid. Other than warehouses, there's *nothing*."

"Okay, okay," she gasped, sounding as freaked out as I felt. "Then *run*, Luna. I know they'll chase, but they're already following you, so *run*."

I nodded even if she couldn't see me, my braids brushing the back of my neck and making me jump until I realised it was my own hair, not grasping fingers.

Astrid was right; I needed to run.

I kept the phone to my ear as I kicked from a fast walk to a full-out sprint, my breath scraping up my throat as the person behind me began to run, too.

I was definitely being followed. There was no doubt about it now.

"Oh god," I choked out without meaning to, running as fast as my jelly legs would carry me down the road.

I could see the blocky studio building, once a mill but now converted into airy, open spaces, the glass front doors glimmering with almost-dawn light.

A stitch pulled across my side, but I didn't slow, let alone stop.

A distant rumble of noise coming from behind me. Oh, lord—a growl? Betas like me weren't as susceptible to an alpha growl as omegas, but we could still be taken down by a particularly powerful one. We could still be growled into submission; it just took an extra determined alpha.

"Keep going," Astrid urged shakily. "Just keep running, Luna."

I raced closer to the mill, but—what if they followed me inside? There was a back exit, but I wasn't a hundred percent sure *where* it was. What if I led myself into a trap? What if I caged myself with an alpha bold enough to stalk me to work? What would he do to me?

I veered to the right at the last minute and burst through the black scrolling gates of a big, grassy park that stretched between two grey warehouses. The chances of losing my stalker in here was low, but at least I knew where the exits were.

And if my pursuer wasn't local, they might not know where to find the gates. I could get out, run back to the main road, and disappear into the warren of streets on the other side. I vaguely thought there might be a new, trendy coffee shop there. It wouldn't be open, but there might be someone baking pastries? Maybe?

Oh, please.

"Luna?" Astrid demanded.

"Running," I choked out, racing down the park's thin path, open grass on either side of me. Trees would have been better; I could have hidden. Could have climbed one.

The gate creaked, and I gave in to the frantic need to look behind and see who followed me.

Fuck, there were two of them—a man and a woman—and one glimpse of their faces told me enough about what they planned for me. Nothing good. The same as the Hunters who'd grabbed Astrid and tried to abduct her.

I whipped my head back around, facing the park as I pushed my body to breaking point. My feet slid on a patch of dew-slick grass at the same moment one of the alphas released a devastating growl.

I felt it in every bone, like the epicentre of an earthquake.

My knees buckled, dropping me to the ground hard. My phone shot out of my hand, sliding through the grass, and I choked on a cry, tasting early morning air, damp grass, and burnt meat—one of the alpha's scents.

No, no, *no*—I needed my phone, needed the lifeline.

I fumbled in the wet grass, dew soaking my knees, but the savage growl came again from behind me, and this time my arms buckled, sending me face-first into the ground.

It wasn't a singular growl; it was both of them at once. And it took me down completely.

I shook, struggling to breathe, fighting to push-up from the cold grass, but I'd lost every bit of strength.

A rough hand grabbed the collar of my red coat and it was the woman who dragged me up, pressing her cold nose to my throat to draw a long, sickening breath.

I realised all at once why they wanted me.

"This is definitely the scent on the omega, Anatoly," she said to her partner in crime. "I could smell her even from the back of the bank. Finally found the bitch."

The other one laughed—and laughed deeper, harsher when I struggled to escape the alpha holding the collar of my coat.

"Get the fuck off me," I growled, but a beta growl was worthless against an alpha—*powerless*. Even the omegas they saw as submissive toys had more power in their growl than me.

"Aw, come on now, beta," the bitch holding me purred, making me shiver

and pant for breath as she pulled me off the ground with immense strength. "We'll take good care of you."

They wouldn't. Every instinct in my body screamed I was in danger.

"How about you tell us where to find that omega," the man said, getting in my face. All I saw was baby blue eyes and a glimmering smile. "And we'll have no use for you, so we'll let you go."

They wanted me to lead them to Astrid?

Rage gave me the strength to spit in the alpha's face. But when a matching fury filled his blue eyes, I began to shake. I struggled against the other alpha's hold, but his hands moved from my coat to my arms, helping her pin me in place.

"Fine, have it your way," the blue-eyed alpha growled, leaning forward until shaggy blond hair covered half his face. It made him even more menacing. I was going to be sick. "I'm sure we can find some use for you."

I shrank away as he lifted his hand to my face, stroking when I expected a slap.

"Pretty thing like you..." he purred deeply, making my eyelids heavy even as I tried to fight them, to get my arms free and break their noses. "Yeah, I bet you'd be real useful to have around."

I batted uselessly at him as the purr worked through me, far more powerful than any I'd felt before. It loosened the knot in my chest, uncurled my fists, and made me slump instead of struggle.

"Knock her out, Mads," he told the woman.

Terror helped me fight the haze of growls and purrs; I jammed my elbow back into the alpha's stomach, kicked her leg.

She grunted, but the sound became a growl. She let go of me only to curl her fingers into a fist, spin me, and punch me in the head.

Blackness exploded quicker than a gunshot.



Luna

I was torn out of unconsciousness by a growl. A vile combination of scents stuffed up my nose, coating my tongue as I wrenched off the mattress—and choked on a vicious cough when leather cinched around my throat.

"Wakey, wakey."

My eyes flew open, first landing on a handsome, blond-haired male alpha and then skittering to the dark, grimy bedroom. Fear made me sicker with every detail I noticed: peeling, once-cream wallpaper, tattered curtains covering a small window, stains on the ceiling, an empty light fitting hanging above the bed, and the alpha crawling onto the mattress.

He had an attractive, symmetrical face, his skin golden and smooth and his eyes a beautiful baby blue—and when he smiled, he might have been one of the most handsome people I'd ever seen. But he was rotten inside; I sensed it even before memory slammed back into my bruised head.

The chase, the park, the two alphas, and the bitch who'd punched me in

the head.

They wanted to know where Astrid was. I'd rather die than give up my sister.

I tried to move again and choked as something tightened around my throat. Panicking, I flung my hands up, grasping at the leather band around my neck, fingertips tracing the cold chain attached at the back.

"Leave that alone," the alpha growled, and my hands snapped down to the cheap material of the plain grey bed sheets.

No, I hissed at my hands, lifting them to resume scratching at the leather band choking me, desperately trying to *get it off*, to gasp down air.

"If you stop pulling on it, you'll be able to breathe," the alpha drawled, as if I was stupid.

Warm hands knocked mine aside. My skin crawled at the contact, the prickling sensation travelling to the rest of my body. I remembered his name just as Anatoly shoved me down on the bed with a hand spread on my chest.

I twisted on instinct, kicking out at him as he crawled closer, covering me, the desperate reality of my situation making me shake all over.

"There," he murmured, smiling a perfect smile. "Now you can breathe. Be a good beta and don't fight, and I won't have to hurt you."

I tried to scramble away, but rough hands gripped my hips and pressed me to the creaky mattress.

"Well, not *too* badly anyway. You might still be able to walk away." He laughed as if it was a good joke, confirming all the tainted cruelty my instincts warned of. "Now be a good beta and lie back."

I was too scared to speak, but I shook my head—and realised I had my hands free. Without hesitation, I whipped them up and boxed his ears in a mindless panic of blows. I wished I'd taken more than four self-defence lessons; I wished I'd trained to become a damn jiu jitsu master.

My hits did nothing except enrage Anatoly. He let out a terrifying growl that rattled my ribs, and I cowered away from him, my hindbrain screaming I was going to die.

He and the woman, Mads, might have growled at the same time in the park, intensifying the effect on me, but it was clear this man held most of the power. And I'd just enraged him, ensuring he was going to take that anger out on my body.

"Please," I breathed, shaking hard as death entered his blue eyes—no, something worse than death I realised as he ripped the scratchy covers away

and began tearing at my clothes, ignoring my weak struggles. "I'm sorry, I'm sorry—"

"You will be," he grunted, his blinding smile long gone as he wrenched at my jeans. I grabbed the waistband, refusing to let him remove them. "I could have killed you; any other alpha would have. What's the point of a beta girl? You can't take a knot like an omega, your purr's weak as shit, and you don't produce slick."

I shook my head, wishing I could block out the words. But he was too close, his voice too forceful and loud, and the only other sound was my ragged breathing and the rasp of denim as we fought over my jeans.

"You're lucky *I* see some value in you," the alpha went on, yanking until my fingers slipped off the fabric, allowing him to tug my jeans down my kicking legs. "I'm not like those other alphas; if you give me what I want, I'll take good care of you."

A tear slipped out of my eye, my breathing shorter, raspier. "I'm not telling you where to find my sister."

His blue eyes flashed. "Sister. Mmm, I've never had two sisters before."

He emphasised his vile statement by grabbing my shirt and ripping it open, buttons popping everywhere. I whimpered, trying to crawl away. The collar yanked on my sore throat.

"You'll tell me where to find her," he disagreed after a moment, holding me captive by a bruising grip on my hips. My jeans tangled around my knees. He hadn't even bothered to remove them. "You just need a little incentive, hmm, beta?"

I shook my head, choking on tears. "No."

"That's my least favourite word," he muttered, and flipped me onto my front, the chain pulling at the collar around my throat until I choked, gasping for air.

"Whoops," he laughed, untangling the chain until I could breathe shallowly. "Don't want you to suffocate before I've got what I need, do we?"

Oh, god.

I kicked behind me, but I couldn't do much with my legs knotted in denim, and then his jeans brushed the backs of my thighs as he loomed over me. A rough hand pressed my chest into the old mattress. I choked on the smell of stale fabric and Anatoly's scent of burnt, blackened meat. I'd never eat meat again. If I survived. If I ever got out of here.

Chained and collared like this, he could keep me here for days. Weeks.

Longer.

My stomach cramped, bile splashing my throat, but I pressed my lips together and refused to be sick. I had nothing left except my dignity and an iron-willed refusal to put my sister in danger. I couldn't stop the tears spilling hot tracks down my face, but I could hold back the vomit. If only because I knew what was about to happen—and could find no way to stop it—and I didn't want my face pressed into a pool of vomit while this monster violated me.

"Stay still," he growled so loud that my breath caught, my tears flowing faster, and my body betrayed me, going deadly still. "Now *relax*, beta. This'll make you feel good, promise."

The sound of a zip made my heart stop.

I shook my head, pulling against the collar around my throat, not caring if I choked, just needing to get away, to run, to do *anything* in my power to stop him—

A hand slid under me and pawed roughly at my bra, yanking it down to squeeze my boob; his body arched over me with a purr.

My body dropped flat to the mattress with an automatic gasp, but there was nothing comforting in the sound, no reassurance, only a cold determination. And a command that I relax.

"Come on," Anatoly muttered, yanking down my underwear and ignoring my choked sob. With his purr, I was too weak to get up, to push him away, but I tried, batting uselessly at his thighs as they knocked mine apart. "Get wet, beta."

I choked on a sob, a plea for help whining out of me when he purred louder. The sound was so deep and all-consuming that my breathing fell apart and I burst into wrenching, awful tears.

"Fun fact," Anatoly murmured, grabbing my hips and dragging them up off the bed, propping my knees against the creaky mattress. "Tears turn me on."

"Please," I rasped weakly, my eyes screwed shut and vomit on my tongue.

"You'd better get wet, beta. Not for me; I couldn't give a shit. A hole's a hole. But don't scream when it hurts; that's Mads's thing, not mine. Too fucking loud."

"Please," I begged again, trying to crawl across the mattress but only gaining two inches before he gripped my hips and hauled me back.

"Fine. Your choice."

I bit my lips together, refusing to give him the cries he liked. But when he finally forced into me, my lips parted on a violent scream and Anatoly answered with a growl that promised I'd regret the sound.



Priest

*M*y heart drummed against my chest as I waited by the front door of the Hunter's house. Guardian hovered beside me, his hands flexing at his sides and his back rigid with stress. These rescue operations were never easy, but no matter how haunting they were, it was the right thing to do. As alphas—and the betas among us—we were in a position to get people away from their abusers.

If my niece Lavinia hadn't been abducted and raped, I might have turned out like one of those alphas inside. I'd had the right cocktail of circumstances; I came from a low-income, morally grey family of criminals and bastards. By the time I was twenty, I'd already been in jail twice.

But finding my niece the way I did, and then seeing her unravel afterward changed me in ways I was still recovering from twenty years later. If there'd been someone like the Alpha Knights MC back then, it might not have taken my family as long to find her. We might have been able to help her before hopelessness covered her like a funeral shroud.

We might have been able to stop her killing herself.

Without the knights, so many people—so many women—would be lost. Including the woman I sensed inside the house, a furious cocktail of rage, fear, and desolation. She felt like waves crashing against grey, barren rocks.

"Guardian," I murmured, swallowing my panic. The scents coming out of this place—rotten arousal, violence, sex, and worse fluids I didn't want to think about—clouded my mind until I was close to seeing red.

"Yeah?" Guardian asked, turning to look at me and frowning at whatever he saw on my face. Or whatever stress I was emitting in my scent.

Guardian was a lot like me; not overly vocal in his dominance but steady, always there to back up the other guys. He was a good friend, and right now I needed to tell someone that the woman whose scent we'd been following called to my soul like no other I'd met before.

"Priest?" he prompted when I was quiet.

I curled my hands into fists and released them. I almost lost my nerve.

"The woman in there," I breathed, nodding at the closed front door that muffled the growls and crashes inside. "She's ... I can feel her, man. Her fear and rage—I can *feel them*."

Guardian's blue-grey eyes widened and he took a small step, grabbing my shoulder. "If you can feel her emotions, then she's—"

"My mate," I blurted. "What the—what do I do? Only god knows what's happened to her inside there and—"

A double knock came from the inside of the door—our signal to go in while the Hunters were distracted.

"The most important thing is to get her out safely," Guardian said, grabbing the door handle and giving me a calm look. "She'll sense you, too, and whether she believes it or not, her instincts will tell her she's safe."

I swallowed. Nodded. "Thanks."

Guardian clapped my shoulder and pushed open the door.

I took a tight breath, and almost choked on the vile scents. Oh god, my mate—*my mate* was in here suffering. Maybe she was one of the women I could hear screaming on the floors above.

"Up there," our redhead, fierce-eyed president barked, pointing up the stairs. "There's only Hunters down here, and we'll keep them busy."

"Thanks," I breathed, and ignored the strange look Prodigy gave me before he headed back into a shabby living room. He unleashed a growl so powerful that even my knees buckled. It was a rare growl that could take

down another alpha, but I knew our president's could. I'd seen it in action.

"I'll go first." Guardian headed up the tight staircase that hugged the right wall of the shitty little hallway, the steps bare and worn in the centre.

How many people had come here to abuse the people above us? Fifty? *Hundreds?* My stomach twisted, especially as the screaming grew louder.

Was it ... was that Luna?

I tasted bile when we reached the landing and a door suddenly slammed open.

Cobra came rushing out of the vile-smelling room, his fists locked around a big, brunette man's throat, the other alpha trying to rip out fistfuls of Cobra's long black hair.

"In there," Cobra bit out, throwing Guardian a look. Our sergeant-at-arms was the one who usually handled the rescuing; his gentle energy and calm put people at ease despite his massive size and tattoos, and it was strangely easy to trust him.

"Omega," Cobra clarified, kneeing the alpha in the dick. Ouch.

I shouldn't have let out a rough breath of relief that the screaming woman wasn't my mate. A woman was hurt enough to be screaming at the top of her lungs; there was no relief to be found here.

"Keep going," Guardian quietly ordered me, pointing at the other doors on this floor. There was another level above us, too.

Fuck, were there victims in every room? My gut soured, the painful scents thickening around me.

I pushed open the next room, relieved to find it empty even if it stank of sex and blood, but the final room was occupied—and every part of me stiffened with a growl.

It wasn't my mate, but an Asian man in his twenties was crowded onto a disgusting, slick-covered bed, his body limp and eyes staring blankly at the ceiling as a slim alpha with a ginger beard rutted into him.

A protective growl tore up my throat and lashed through the room, and I was moving before the alpha stiffened in response.

Was the omega even alive? His black hair was missing in patches, like it had been ripped out, and his body was covered in bruising. *God, please save this omega and give him the strength to endure his injuries.*

I grabbed the alpha's shoulders, and wrenched him off the omega as carefully as I could. I thought the pale, unmoving man was dead until he winced when the alpha's cock left him. Alive, but empty. I kept praying for

him as I threw the alpha against the floor and laid into him with my steel-toed boots.

"You're safe now," I assured the omega. "We're here to get you out of here. Just hold on, okay?"

He didn't respond; I gave the alpha another vicious kick, satisfied at the crack of ribs breaking, and jumped in surprise when a shadow fell across the door.

Shade—a knight with near-black skin and exceptionally deadly skills he'd learned in SAS—stepped into the room and assessed the situation.

It was a rare occasion when Shade spoke. The guys joked he was like a ghost, silent and watchful and so fast that we hardly ever saw him move.

"I'll get him out," he offered, his face tight with rage as he scanned the omega, seeing every bit of damage.

I almost argued—his intensity was freaking me out, so it must have terrified the omega—but he slid the leather jacket off his arms and unzipped the hoodie he wore underneath, approaching the omega and draping it around his body.

"I've got you, Kaito," he breathed, reaching up for—oh, god, there was a leather collar around the omega's neck.

"Do you know him?" I asked, shaken.

Shade nodded. "He's the reason I joined the knights. Go, save the others."

I abruptly understood the intensity in Shade's black eyes; it was the same urgency I felt to leave the room, something visceral tugging me upstairs.

I left them, and left the red-haired alpha unconscious on the floor, to follow the fierce tug in my chest.

What if—what if I had to pull an alpha off her, like I had with the male omega?

My heart beat faster, furious, but my stomach whirled with violent sickness. No matter how rough and lawless my family were, *nothing* had prepared me for the strength I needed every time I entered a den like this.

"God give me strength," I murmured as I reached the third floor.

I knew which door to open without questioning it, even though I picked up a different scent, too—bruised lilies instead of Luna's bitter orange. This close to my mate, there was no way I could turn away.

I reached for the door and steeled myself, building a wall around my emotions so I didn't make whatever situation I found inside worse.

I sent up another prayer as I opened the door—and staggered back when

her scent slammed into me with all the force of a kick to the balls.

I'd picked up her scent on her phone, and followed it all the way here, but this room ... it was *saturated* in her scent, only twisted with sex and cum and the tang of pain.

There was no alpha rutting into her, but she didn't respond when I stepped into the room, leaving the door ajar. She wouldn't feel safe alone in a room with a stranger, even if she *could* sense my soul was entwined with hers.

"Luna," I murmured, crossing the room and wincing. The covers were slung half on top of her, the other half bare, already beginning to bruise where someone had handled her roughly.

I had to pause and take slow, grounding breaths, reciting a bible verse in my head.

Someone had—they'd—

"It's going to alright now," I promised gently, crossing the room slowly, so she could see me approach.

But she didn't look at me. Her eyes stared at the wall, so similar to the male omega's that she reached into my chest and strangled my heart.

She didn't so much as twitch as I neared, didn't respond to my scent or recognise me as her mate.

What had been done to her?

No, I knew. It was all over this room, the truth heavy in its scents.

"Where are your clothes, darling?"

I hunted around the floor until I found a bundle of fabric—a red coat, thin black blouse, jeans, bra, and—oh god. Underwear, but soiled, like the alpha hadn't fully removed them before...

I twisted away, my stomach clenching with sickness, bile in my throat.

Get it together. She needs you.

"It's alright now, Luna," I breathed, leaving the underwear in the corner and half wishing I'd brought a lighter so I could burn them. "Here, darling, let's get you dressed, yeah?"

She didn't respond when I gently lifted her arm to pull it into her sleeve, nor as I propped her against me and pulled the soft fabric across her back, buttoning it over her bare chest and trying not to look too hard at the patches of redness all over her skin. They would be purple, blue, and black by tomorrow.

An instinctual purr of reassurance and comfort vibrated my throat as I rested her on the bed and reached for her trousers. Luna burst into movement

as if she'd just woken up, and I jumped in surprise.

"Stop," she rasped, her voice hoarse. "Stop it, I don't want to—"

I quickly backed up until I was by the door, blind rage filling me at the terror in her eyes.

I'm your mate, I wanted to blurt out, but she'd just been raped until she was near-catatonic, and the last thing she needed was another alpha expecting anything from her.

"I'm not here to hurt you, Luna. I'm with the Alpha Knights; we're a motorcycle club who get people like you out of places like this."

She glared at me, suspicious, but she grabbed her trousers where I'd left them on the bed and shoved her legs into them. Fuck, she was beautiful. Even shaking and terrified, with tears in her brown eyes, she was the most beautiful woman I'd ever seen. My heart ached.

She tried to get up and I realised what I'd missed before: the band of brown leather around her throat, and the chain attached to the back that kept her bound to the bed.

"Fuck," I choked out, and rushed across the room.

She flinched, and I could have cursed myself for the abrupt movement, but I was quick unbuckling the collar from around her throat.

My purr rumbled louder, promising she'd always be safe with me, relaxing her until her eyes fluttered—and then flew open. Her hand snapped out, and a punch hit me squarely in the gut, drawing a grunt. I stumbled back, pain pulsing hard. Fair enough; she was scared and a stranger had touched her.

But *fuck*, it hurt. I wheezed for breath, my purr raspy.

"*Stop it*. Stop purring; I won't do it," she hissed, her eyes shifting from me to the open door when a crash sounded downstairs.

I cut off my purr instantly, the sick realisation that an alpha had used their purr against her ... it made me desperate to gather Luna in my arms and protect her from everyone else in this fucked up world.

"I'm not going to touch you," I promised, trying to catch her gaze. "Your sister sent us to find you; we're here to save you, Luna."

She choked on a gasp, her watery gaze snapping up to mine. "You ... *what?*" Her breathing escalated, her face crumpling. "Astrid sent you?"

Her teary gaze searched for the patch on my jacket, the insignia of the knight's helm and red plumage.

"You're Giant's friends," she breathed, dragging shaking hands over her

face. "That's the same symbol he wears."

"The Alpha Knights' emblem," I agreed gently, my voice pitched even quieter than usual. "He's my brother—in the biker sense, not the blood sense. This is what our club does; we hunt abusive alphas and rescue their victims."

"I'm *not* a victim," she snapped hoarsely, teeth bared on a growl that made me blink.

She wasn't empty and staring like the male omega. Haunted and suffering without a doubt, but her fire was still burning hot. I'd never been so relieved to be snapped at in my life. I sagged against the door frame, watching her frown at me.

"I'm Priest," I offered, grasping for something to say, desperately wanting to purr for her and reassure her that everything was going to be alright.

She blinked, her eyes resting on the clerical collar under my leather jacket. "Priest. Okay. No actual name?"

My lips quirked despite the fist squeezing my heart. "Luke."

She nodded, staring at the open door behind me as another crash came from downstairs.

"That's just my brothers dealing with the Hunters. We'll go out when they're contained."

"Right," she breathed, and clutched her throat as a coughing fit shook her.

"One second," I murmured, and ducked into the hall to hunt for a bathroom.

I found a glass and filled it with water, relieved as hell to return and find her standing at the foot of the bed, shifting her weight from foot to foot. But she moved gingerly, like she was tender—and in pain.

I wanted to gather her into a hug, but I forced myself to only hand over the glass of water. She downed it with a rasp of thanks, her red, marked throat bobbing with every swallow. I was glad she'd drained the whole glass; I would have insisted on it anyway.

"Thanks," she said again, her voice clearer.

"Anytime, darling," I replied, softer than I should have spoken if the sharpening of her eyes was anything to go by. But her stare fell on my collar and she seemed to relax. It wasn't the first time someone had trusted me merely because I was a holy man; I was glad to offer her that scant comfort. "Is there anything else I can get you?"

She shook her head, thin black braids falling down her back as she glanced around the room. "I'm fine."

She was far from fine.

"Don't—don't tell Astrid about this," she blurted suddenly, turning to pin me with an intense look that reminded me uncomfortably of Shade. "*Please*. I don't want her to worry about me, and this ... I know you can smell it. Just ... keep it secret, okay?"

"Luna," I breathed.

We both flinched when a fierce shout came from the room beside hers—the one with the lily scent.

"*Come any closer, and I'll cut your balls off!*" a woman screamed in a throaty voice.

I blinked.

Luna snorted, a brief glint of humour in her beautiful dark face. "She's got the right idea. Tell anyone what happened to me, and I'll cut your balls off."

I sighed sadly. "If you keep this secret, you won't get the help you need, Luna. If you keep this bottled up—"

"What would *you* know?" she demanded, stalking a step closer, her shoulders rounded and fists clenched. "*Nothing*. So mind your own fucking business, and keep your mouth shut."

My eyes widened, my heart skipping. She was still weak and shaky, but God was clearly listening to my prayers because she had strength in spades.

"Ah shit, I just swore at a vicar," she groaned, rubbing her face and then wincing at whatever she smelled on her wrist.

"All clear," Prodigy bellowed from below.

"Swear at me all you like, Luna," I said, trying to smile without it wobbling. "You've been through an ordeal; I think you're due a swearing session."

"Stop saying ordeal; I'm not a victim," she huffed defiantly. "And I'm *fine*, so stop looking at me like I'm a breakable doll."

"It's okay if you're not fine," I replied gently, earning a glare.

"Just take me to my sister, and don't tell her what happened. Consider it a confession."

I wanted to argue, but that wouldn't be helpful to Luna right now.

"I'm here whenever you want me to hear another confession," I offered, and led her out into the hall, down the stairs, and to where Astrid waited outside.

It was painful to hold my tongue, but I wouldn't betray Luna's confidence.

"You alright?" Guardian asked from the hallway behind me.

I turned and offered a shrug.

My mate was raped, and she was going to bury that trauma where it would grow, fester, and build until it could break her.

I honestly didn't know.



Luna

I called Astrid's name the second I saw her, stumbling outside and ignoring the breathless, raspy quality of my voice. I'd screamed myself hoarse, not that it had saved me. Anatoly might have disliked screaming, but it hadn't deterred him.

Vomit rushed up my throat as Astrid threw herself down the path towards me, her arms open. The closer she got, the worse I felt. Part of me wanted to go back inside so she'd never know what had happened to me. She must have been able to smell the alpha's scent all over me. Unless the rank odour coming from the house covered it...?

I stumbled forward a step, wanting to hug her so badly, needing that comfort more than I could say, but so afraid that she'd take one look at me and know. My whole body shook when I finally collapsed into her arms. Sucking down gasps of her familiar scent, I finally accepted what Priest had told me inside the house.

I was safe.

Tears spilled from my eyes as Astrid murmured, "It's okay, you're okay, I'm here now."

I shook harder when her arms tightened, her worry for me obvious.

"Come on, let's get you home," she said, stroking my arm.

But if we went home, she'd know something was wrong with me. She'd smell the change in my scent soon enough, even if she hadn't realised Anatoly's vile smell covered me yet. It tainted deep inside me, where I could never get it out. All my muscles tightened at that thought.

Astrid had been through enough, and ... I didn't want her to look at me the way Priest had upstairs. I didn't want her to call me a victim or say I'd been through an ordeal. I just wanted to go back to normal, and shut out everything that had happened in that sickening room on the third floor.

Priest had offered me somewhere safe to stay on the way down the stairs. The Alpha Knights had a place that was surrounded by an electrified fence and guarded day and night. Anatoly wouldn't get anywhere near me.

I knew I was hurting Astrid by leaving her, but I was protecting her from the truth, too. And protecting my own pride.

I paused when she guided me to the gate, swallowing the lump in my throat when she gave me a look of confusion.

"I'm..." I wet my bottom lip, my mouth dry. "Astrid, I'm gonna go with these guys."

I glanced at the bikers waiting on the pavement, watching the road with alertness like they were a leather-clad army.

"They're your mate's friends, right?"

Astrid nodded, watching me too closely, seeing too much.

My skin itched. I wanted to run, to hide from everything.

"Good," I breathed, swallowing. "Okay. Then we can trust them. They ... I can go back with them and stay at their place. Apparently there's a fence and guards and everything."

I tried so hard to smile, to show her the Luna I'd been before I was grabbed in the park and chained to a bed so an alpha could—

"That all sounds pretty damn good to me," I finished, trying to be light. But judging by the brittle quality of my sister's expression, and the way her eyes were wide with sympathy and dread, I'd done a shit job of it.

"I'm fine," I lied, rolling my eyes as if she was overreacting and not rightfully worried about me. "Really. I won't be gone long. And anyway," I added, hooking my arm around hers, the red of my coat as violent as what I'd

just been through.

I guided her past the gate, giving some of the bikers a wary look and making sure they were keeping their distance. I spotted Astrid's mate, and I knew Priest was still at my back, a silent, supportive shadow.

I joked, "I'll be surrounded by big, muscly, protective men. It's not exactly a chore."

That was the old me talking, but instinct told me I wouldn't be at risk with the knights. If I was, Giant would have hurt Astrid by now, and Priest would have taken advantage of me being chained to a bed.

"I'm coming with you," Astrid blurted when I took a step back, and my stomach cramped in horror.

"No, Astrid, I'm fine—" I needed space to compartmentalise what had happened so I could function again. As awful as I felt for thinking it, I needed time away from my family.

Fuck, if Dad ever found out...

No, he could *never* find out.

"I—ah." Astrid shifted her weight from foot to foot, her face flushing. No, she was already flushed, the stress making her face bead with sweat, too. "I need to go to the compound anyway," she murmured.

Panic hit so strong that I stumbled, and Priest's hand momentarily brushed my back, shoring me up with an instinctive comfort I couldn't put my name on.

"What, *why*?" I demanded, but a moment later I registered her scent—thick and sweet, almost cloying.

Oh, my foolish sister...

"Astrid!" I grabbed her shoulders and felt the tiny shudders moving through her. "Tell me you didn't come here when you're in heat. Tell me it broke and you're not doing something so supremely stupid."

Her nose scrunched, eyes squeezing shut. I knew that guilty look.

My sister was here, suffering through a heat that had to be demanding, probably painful—for *me*. My chest tightened, my eyes stinging, but worry made my voice sharp instead of wobbly when I ordered, "You go home and get laid right now!"

"That's the plan," she agreed, her eyes averted with self-consciousness. "But not at home. Oh god, with Dad in the next room?"

Oof, yeah. That was not an option. "Good point," I said, trying to laugh. "So ... we're going together, then?"

My stomach sloshed with vomit and dread, but she'd be locked in her heat for *days*; that'd be enough time for me to bury my emotions and get back to normal. I'd be fine.

Astrid nodded. I knew by the way her brown eyes hardened and her mouth parted that she was going to ask a question I did not want to answer. My shoulders bunched, airways tightening.

"Luna, what happened in—"

"Nothing, Astrid," I said too quickly.

I scrambled for something to say so she'd drop the subject and never bring it up again. "You got here in time. Some of the other girls weren't so lucky."

I had to get out of here before I threw up, or before I snapped at my sister to stop her pushing for answers. I felt the impulse rise like poison, trapped between my teeth for now. But for how long?

I spun and walked away, heading for the row of bikes where a scowling, dark-haired man leaned. If I had to steal a bike just to escape, I'd do it. I could figure out how to drive one. Probably.

"You can ride with me if you want," Priest offered calmly, an ever-present shadow behind me. I wasn't sure if he was a stalker or reassuring back-up yet.

He was the only person who knew what had happened, other than me and Anatoly. I had to keep him close, and make sure he kept my secret.

I sensed Astrid's eyes on me as I climbed onto the black and chrome bike Priest pointed out, but it was better for both of us that I didn't tell her anything right now. Maybe ... maybe in a few months or years when the memories had begun to lose their cruel sharpness, I could hint at what had happened.

"You want those guys in there dead?" the dark-haired, mean-looking biker called. It took me a moment to realise he was asking *me*. "Say the word, and it's done."

Did I want them dead? Yes. Badly and shamelessly. But I didn't want anything to do with a single one of them? I wanted to forget they'd ever existed.

I held the biker's dark stare, long enough to make him uncomfortable. "Do what you want with them, I don't care."

He nodded, contemplating me. "I'll make it hurt, then."

A sick thrill moved through my belly, joining the sickness there.

"Good," I muttered, and caught my breath when Priest stepped closer to

his bike, hovering, watching.

"Shift back so you can hold onto me, darling."

I gave him a sharp look at the term of endearment, but his unflappable expression didn't change. I shuffled onto the back of the seat and held my breath when he threw his leg over the bike, sitting in front of me. His scent invaded my senses, as much a relief as it had been in that fucking bedroom. Clear, fresh water washed away every other scent until I could breathe a little easier, the tight sickness in my stomach relieved a tiny bit.

Waiting for the okay to ride away was pure hell. So was seeing the omegas brought out of the house, only one woman alert enough to still look human. The others were skeletal, barely alive creatures.

That could have been me. It *would* have been if not for Astrid, her mate, and this biker club.

I'd stopped believing in magic and happily ever afters at some point while Anatoly rutted into me. Probably when he pulled out of me and I thought it was over. He'd merely flipped me onto my back so he could watch me cry, and so I could choke on his scent, unable to escape.

But there was no denying a higher power existed. Fate, destiny, magic—*something* had led Giant and Astrid together so his friends could rescue me. Or maybe this was all God's hand.

I'd gone to church since I was a toddler, Astrid and I holding Dad's hands as he led us down the pews. Even now, when Astrid stayed home to sleep in after an exhausting week at the bank, I got up early on Sunday mornings and went with Dad to church.

Had God heard my prayers, recognised me as a loyal follower, and intervened today? I trailed my eyes down the back of Priest's jacket as if I could see his collar. God had sent a holy man to my rescue.

"Ready to go, Luna?" he asked, turning to look at me.

I swallowed, my heart skipping for reasons I couldn't quantify. "More than ready."

Priest nodded, holding my gaze. "You're safe now, Luna. I promise."

"I know," I murmured, tasting clear, open water with every breath.

With Priest, a literal gift from god? I knew I was safe.

It was everyone else I couldn't trust.



Priest

Luna had stopped shaking by the time we rode through the compound gates and parked in my usual spot. I wished I'd thought to bring a helmet so she didn't have to ride without one. Her safety had gone from a distant concern when I left the compound to so important that my instincts were fucking haywire.

"What is this place?" she asked, releasing my waist and climbing off the bike. "It's massive."

I turned off the engine and grabbed the key, watching her to make sure she was okay as I swung my leg over and stood.

"This is our compound. This building here is the clubhouse; all our bedrooms are in here, as well as the kitchen, dining room, bar, and some offices. That over there is the garage where a few of the guys fix up cars and bikes, and the tiny building next door is my chapel.

"I know your name's Priest and all," she replied, looking at the small, grey-brick building and lingering on its steeple, "but I didn't expect a biker

gang to have a literal church."

"Club, not gang," I corrected.

Luna frowned, giving me a look like I was mad. "So no illegal stuff, then? How do you guys even make money? I'm guessing the church doesn't pay you a salary to tend to your biker flock."

I laughed, beyond pleased at her sense of humour, but I was distracted when the clubhouse doors flew open the second the gates locked shut. Everyone had received a *lengthy* lecture from Prodigy about that particular timing. With Hunters circling, and a traitor found among our own brothers, security had tightened immensely. *No one* got past those gates without clearance or a good reason, and none of us were allowed out unless the fence was locked and electrified.

"No wage, but we trade in legal shipments—and we own more businesses and bars than you'd expect. The revenue from that gets split between running costs of the club and an allowance for each of us. And whatever you guys need, too."

"Huh," Luna murmured, watching Vienna come down the stairs, her blonde hair slapping her shoulders. Beside us, Guardian climbed off his bike to embrace her, and a seed of envy throbbed in my chest.

"Come on," I murmured to Luna. "I'll show you the sanctuary. You've seen the gates; those will stay shut until one of us needs to leave, and then they'll only open for half a minute."

Luna nodded, her dark eyes flickering as she watched my brothers climb off their bikes, others aiming for the garage to stow them inside.

"At least the Hunters will never get past all of you," she said, and followed me up the stairs to the squat, grey clubhouse.

She snorted inexplicably when we reached the open doors, and I spotted her sister Astrid, so similar looking that she could have been Luna's twin except for the difference in hairstyle and clothing. And the fact she was clinging to Giant.

"I bet you they disappear to a bedroom within the minute," Luna said, throwing a smile that tried its best to cover up her trauma.

"I'm not taking that bet," I huffed. I'd lose.

"Oh—Mercedes," I called, spotting the middle-aged black woman crossing the corridor. Her green dress swished around her knees as she spun to give me an expectant smile. "This is Luna; she's here to stay for a while. Do you know if there are any rooms ready in the sanctuary?"

"Of course. The red room just got cleaned out yesterday. It was getting stale, and we could smell the mustiness in the nests down the hall."

"The red room," Luna echoed quietly but with dry amusement. "Tell me I won't go through some horror film shit in there."

Mercedes laughed, her kind eyes crinkling. "The creepiest thing in there is a giraffe lamp base."

Luna's eyebrows shut up. "Wow, classy."

"Thora lost a bet; it used to be her room before she claimed one of the bigger bedrooms near the gardens. It's a mystery why she didn't take the lamp shade with her," Mercedes chuckled.

"Don't worry," Luna replied, more life in her voice than I'd heard yet as she managed an almost-smile at Mercedes. "I'll take good care of him."

Mercedes beamed, delighted. "You want me to show you where the red room is, or are you okay with Priest?"

Luna glanced at me, and I stood straighter under her assessment. "I'm fine with this guy. He's—"

Astrid went racing down the hall with a purr, Giant tearing after her, and I laughed—but inside I was dying for Luna to finish her sentence. I was *what*?

"New omega?" Mercedes asked, that warmth in her voice making her brown eyes sparkle.

"My sister," Luna answered, scratching the back of her neck. "Giant's her mate. Oh, and she's in heat so..."

"Say no more," Mercedes laughed, her eyes creased. "Omega here, and I know exactly what that's like. My first heat..." She shuddered, wrapping her arms around herself and giving a theatrical wince. "Thank god Winner, my mate, found me. It was hell. Your sister's lucky to have Giant; he's a good man." She leaned closer and whispered, "And a total softie and romantic. He'll take care of her."

Luna nodded, her shoulders relaxed like she'd been a little worried.

"I'll let you get settled in," Mercedes offered, taking a step back, her skirt whooshing. "If you're up to it, we're having a barbecue in the garden this Saturday. We'll all be there, so if you're not good with alphas there'll be a buffer. And burgers and booze; lots and *lots* of booze."

Luna smiled. "You had me at booze; count me in."

Mercedes smiled brighter, gave me a matching smile, and walked backwards in the direction of the bar. "Take care, Luna. Nice to meet you. And I better see you at the barbecue too, Priest, you could do with a few

quarter pounders in you, skinny man."

I rolled my eyes, but a flush of warmth moved down my chest. Mercedes was as much my family as her mate, and it felt like being fussed over by an aunt or older sister.

"I guess I could be persuaded," I replied, as if there was even a *chance* I wouldn't be out in the garden with the rest of my family.

"Good," Mercedes said firmly. She gave Luna another smile, and ducked into the big bar room.

Luna shook her head and resumed walking, and I fell into step alongside her.

"This is not the vibe I was expecting. I'll be honest, I only came here for guards and a fence but ... it's nice? The building's bright and not claustrophobic, and I'm pretty sure that woman just adopted me."

I laughed, a weight sliding off my chest. "Welcome to the family, Luna."

I wanted to blurt that I was her mate, and she was a real, tangible part of the Alpha Knights' big, welcoming family, but I trapped that truth under my tongue. She'd been through enough; she didn't need a bond forced on her, too.

Luna shoved her hands into her pockets of her red wool and gave me an inscrutable look. "Why are you being so nice, anyway?"

"I'm a vicar," I offered.

She blinked and straightened, her smile faint but genuine when it graced her lips. "Right. I keep forgetting that because you're so..."

"Tattooed and motorcycle-riding?" I offered.

Luna nodded, but I swore she muttered, "Handsome," under her breath, and I preened, my chest puffed out, pride forging through my blood like amber.

"The red room's this way," I said, reaching out to guide her down an interconnecting hallway but not touching her, just hovering over her arm.

I was lucky she let me stay close to her.

I hoped, deep down, she knew I was safe, and I'd do anything to care for her, as her alpha, as her *mate*.

But I knew I was just deluding myself. She had no clue what I really was to her.



Luna

I deserved a medal for holding my shit together the whole way across the city and now through the clubhouse. The red room was as crimson as its moniker suggested, the sheets silken, heavy curtains currently pulled open to flood the room with sunlight. Those were the only details I saw before I shut the door and the tears I'd been holding back burst, flooding down my cheeks.

My breathing shattered, and I covered my face as I shook with jerky, halting sobs. I could still smell Anatoly all over me, could still *feel* him forcing his way into me. The bruises across my body, around my neck, and inside me throbbed a discordant, cruel symphony. Never letting me forget.

I stumbled blindly across the floor, the only sounds in the room my struggling breaths, and threw myself onto the bed, curling into a tight ball. I needed to scrub the top layer of my skin off, needed to clean inside myself, get rid of every trace that monster had left and I—I needed to—needed to acknowledge that I—that he—

I gritted my teeth against the keening cry, and buried my face in a soft pillow. I shook so hard my teeth nicked my tongue and copper filled my mouth.

I'd tasted blood when he—when *that* happened too, and the metallic taste threw me back into memories until the alpha was bearing down on me, his sweaty chest flush to my back, coating me in his vile burnt meat smell.

My hand shot down my body, and I patted at my sore pussy, assuring myself I was *empty*, that there was no cock stretching me ruthlessly open, ignoring my begging whimpers to stop.

"Enough," I rasped at myself, at my memories, at the world.

Enough, it was fucking *enough*.

Knuckles rapped gently on my door, and I stiffened. Priest—he'd come back.

I wanted to be left alone, to deal with this in peace. I needed to bury the memories without being watched and judged, without that purr. God, that purr... It was nothing like Anatoly's; it swept me up with comfort, made everything feel okay for a little while. But even as I relaxed, I remembered the way the alpha purred to force me to accept him in me.

"Friendly neighbourhood busy-bodies," a female voice called through the door.

"We can smell your tears, sweetheart," someone said, both creepy and caring.

"If you don't let us in, these fuckers will break down the door," someone drawled.

"Go away," I groaned, drying my face with the sleeve of my coat even as more tears poured from my eyes.

"Come in?" the drawling voice said. "Thanks; I will."

"ChaCha!" someone cried, but my door was already opening, and then a bright purple head poked through the opening, followed by a pretty brown face, big chocolate eyes, and a mouth pressed thin.

"Anyone order a gang of girlfriends?" she asked, widening the gap in the door and walking into my room. Not that it was really *my* room. But still, the invasion made my hackles rise.

"No," I growled, my eyes narrowing. "I want to be left alone."

"First of all, you're crying, so there's no way these two goody-two-shoes will leave you to suffer alone," the purple-haired woman said, stalking closer. She was around my age, in her late twenties, but where I preferred to move

slowly through the world to appreciate its details, she blasted through it like a sandstorm.

"What about me?" a dark-haired woman in a leather jacket demanded, entering my room after a diminutive blonde woman in a pretty dress and a curvy woman with golden brown hair who met my eyes with sympathy that made me want to growl.

I startled when I realised the brunette in the leather jacket carried a knife. The handle was steel and carved with peonies.

The purple-haired woman—ChaCha, had someone called her?—made a thoughtful face. "You're too stabby to be a goody-two-shoes, Lynn."

Lynn rolled her eyes, her hair slapping her shoulders as she stormed across the room. I realised the distraction had stopped me crying, so my vision was no longer tear-blurred.

"This is for you," Lynn said and—and offered me the dagger. "Everyone here's decent, but I know what it's like."

She didn't elaborate.

I reached out slowly and took the knife, thinking of the way Astrid had stolen Giant's knife and carried it around the whole day afterward. I felt weirdly better with the warm metal in my hand, and I gave the previous owner a nod of gratitude.

"We brought supplies," the small, blonde woman said, perching on the end of my bed a good distance away. "I know you don't know any of us, but we're like a huge support network here."

"A family," the warm, brunette woman agreed.

"So you don't have to be alone," she finished.

"Unless you want to," Lynn added, leaning against the wardrobe across from me, arms crossed over her chest. "Give me the word and I'll muscle these fuckers out of here."

"*That's* what you are!" ChaCha said, snapping her fingers. "You're the bodyguard."

Lynn scowled as she contemplated it, but then smiled, brightening. "I like it. How many skulls do I get to crack?"

"Uh." The blonde woman winced. "None?"

Lynn went back to scowling.

"I'm Vienna," the small woman sitting on my bed said without a discernible cue. "This is Jessia/Jessa, Lynn, and ChaCha. And *this*," she murmured, setting a tray on the bed, "is the ultimate aftercare kit."

"You're such a good dom," Lynn purred, earning a *shut up* glare from Vienna even as the fair woman blushed.

"Ice cream, cookies, chocolate, peppermint tea," Jessia reeled off, giving me a soft look that made me want to crawl out of my own skin. Like she knew what had happened. *No one* was supposed to know. "Strawberry laces, three packets of crisps, and carrot sticks with hummus because we didn't know if you're one of those health nuts."

I couldn't help but snort at her tone.

"*And* all this," ChaCha input, watching me, *measuring* me, as she emptied the pockets of her grey hoodie. "We didn't know if you'd need anything; if you were fine or not fine or—*you know.*"

My shoulders tightened as I watched her produce plasters, bandages, painkillers, antiseptic, and a little sewing kit."

"I'm fine," I ground out, my chest filling with pressure until I worried I'd explode. "You don't need to fuss."

"We weren't sure if..." Jessa murmured, her eyes big and swelling with sympathy.

"*No.* Nothing happened."

Vienna exhaled a breath of relief, smiling. "Thank god for that. Here, eat some chocolate if you're not lactose intolerant."

I accepted the snack mostly because my body was screaming and pained, and I hadn't eaten anything since the cereal this morning. I didn't even know what time it was. It had been daylight when Priest drove us here, but it felt like I'd been in *that house* for hours.

The women watched me unwrap the foil cover and break off a KitKat finger, relaxing when I ate it—all but Lynn who watched me with narrowed eyes.

I tensed again when she opened her mouth. "We're not medics, but you know who is? Giant, one of the guys in the club. Good man, decent nurse."

"He's my sister's mate," I said, suspiciously watching the woman who gave off *don't fuck with me* vibes.

Jessa squealed so suddenly that I jumped—and then bit my lip as pain flashed through my pussy. "Giant has *a mate*? Oh my god! This is amazing!"

Vienna laughed at her friend's outburst, but she was nodding.

ChaCha let out a low whistle. "What's she like—your sister? Does she cry over animal rescue shows too?"

"Fierce," I replied, the thought of Astrid making my stomach unclench

just slightly. "She's like a wildfire."

"Ha!" ChaCha barked, grinning so big her brown eyes sparkled. "Giant won't know what's hit him. Lynn, stop stealing the care package!"

Lynn snorted, flicking her friend a look as she pocketed the supplies. But she gave me a stare that made me squirm—and then hiss in pain at the movement. "These are for our new buddy. Come on, you're going to see Giant," she told me.

"Uh, I think he's a little busy with my sister right now," I said.

"Not if I know him," Lynn huffed. "He'll be playing Mother Theresa to the omegas the guys rescued today." She held my gaze in a clear challenge—and an order. "A check up won't kill you."

But it would reveal what had been done to me. To Astrid's *mate*.

Lynn's mouth pressed thinner as she stalked closer, pockets full of snacks, and grabbed my arm to haul me out of bed. I snarled as much as a beta could, but she bared her teeth and snarled back.

"Lynn!" Vienna cried, flying off the bed to grasp her friend's arm. "I'm so sorry, Luna. Lynn, leave her alone."

But Lynn didn't release me; she lowered her lips to my ear and so only I could hear, said, "When I got here, I refused medical help, too. My insides were so screwed up by the time I finally gave in that infection had set in, and I needed a surgery. Now I can never have kids. Don't be like me, Luna."

I jolted back, sucking in a sharp breath. She couldn't ... because she was—like me?

I swallowed, and then had to swallow again because my mouth was so dry. To never have kids? Ever?

"I'll go," I said, my voice as hoarse as it had been when Priest first found me.

"You don't have to do what Miss Bossy Bitch says," ChaCha offered, frowning at both me and Lynn.

"No, it's fine," I murmured, climbing out of bed and trying not to tip the tray of supplies off the edge of the mattress. "She's right; a check up wouldn't kill me."

Their scents had invaded the room, filling my senses with delicate florals, sweet spice, and something suspiciously like gunpowder. I'd smelled it once, when Mum took us to a ren faire when I was a kid; there was no forgetting that scent once you'd smelled it.

"I'll show you where the clinic is," ChaCha offered, angling her purple

head at the door. "We'll leave this care package shit here; it might come in handy."

"And if you want any real food," Vienna said, to instant complaints from her friends, "there's a kitchen at the end of the hall, as well as a communal area you're welcome to use. There's a TV and every streaming app you can think of. You don't need to get permission; this space is yours now."

"Thanks," I rasped, fighting back tears. I might have been angry and stressed and on the verge of a minor breakdown, but this morning I'd been a dreamer who saw so much beauty in the world that she had to paint it and ... that part of me was touched beyond measure.

I hadn't come here expecting friends, but I was glad to have found them anyway.

"I appreciate all of this. Really. Sorry if I snapped."

ChaCha shrugged. "We've all snapped at some point."

"Some more than others," Lynn drawled.

"So don't worry about it," ChaCha went on, a fierce grin splitting her brown face. "Until I wake up at three in the morning with a knife at my throat, I won't hold it against you."

I blinked. Until what...?

"It was four a.m.," Jessa laughed, her eyes crinkled. "Right, Lynn?"

Lynn grunted her agreement. I wasn't entirely sure who'd done the threatening.

The four of them herded themselves out of the red room when I aimed for the door. I hadn't even taken my coat off before collapsing onto the bed, and my boots were still buckled around my feet, so I just hovered awkwardly for a minute before pulling the door shut behind me. I hoped I could find my way back here; all the doors on this hallway looked similar.

"Oh, Luna," Jessa said in her sweet, smoky voice when I turned towards the hallway. "We have self-defence classes every week. There's one tomorrow morning if you feel up to it."

Her eyes drifted to my neck, and I went as stiff as a lightning rod, crackling with shame and rage and dread. Her eyes would soften; she'd give me a look of pity and pat my arm and tell me *everything would be alright*. It was the last thing I wanted to hear. It would *never* be alright.

"Maybe," I hedged, turning away—and sucking up every ounce of my courage to spin back to face them.

They were a strange mix, Lynn tall and as deadly as a gunshot, Jessa

curvy and gentle, Vienna utterly beautiful but kind when she had every right to be smug and superior, and finally ChaCha as vibrant and charismatic as a carnival.

Kind, friendly. Not judging.

So I blurted, "Does anyone have a scarf I can borrow?"

"One sec," Lynn replied instantly, as if she'd been waiting for me to ask, or at least already contemplating it.

She ducked into the room beside mine and returned with a scarf in the same bright shade as the rest of her outfit—which was to say pitch black. Tiny skulls and crossbones decorated it, and made me feel just a bit fiercer as I tied it around my neck.

"Thanks," I murmured, my ears tingling with heat.

Lynn made a throaty sound, waving her hand. "We're lovey-dovey best friends around here. My shit is yours."

"Even your knives?" Jessa teased.

"Not a chance in hell," Lynn snapped, dark eyes flashing and making me laugh so abruptly that it surprised me.

I'd ... needed this. A distraction, and camaraderie. I needed Astrid, but I was too selfish, too afraid, to let her close just yet. Too protective, too. The second she found out what happened to me, she'd blame herself.

I made sure my new scarf was in place when ChaCha fell into step beside me, guiding me to the clinic where I'd have no choice but to face the nightmares stalking me.

But if I didn't do this, I might be like Lynn. I could ... I could lose the ability to ever have kids. I didn't want them *yet*, nowhere near soon, but one day—when I was stable and safe and had someone to share it all with.

I wanted children. And the thought of losing that made me sick.



Priest

I groaned and rolled over in bed for the fifth time, slitting my eyes open to glower at the blackout curtains of the small window of my chapel bedroom. Trying to sleep was useless.

Emotions thrashed in my chest, fear crashing up only to be replaced by blinding panic and then dreadful resignation. Over and over, all night. Luna thrashed in the latent bond until sweat covered my body, and worry for her made me restless.

I'd managed to sleep a couple minutes every now and then, but staying in bed while she suffered was driving me *crazy*.

But what could I do? Knock on her room and say *sorry to wake you, but I can feel your nightmares through our mating bond and the need to comfort you is strangling me until I can't breathe?*

If Giant hadn't been locked away for Astrid's heat, I'd have knocked on his door and urged her to speak to her sister, to comfort her the way I wished I could.

My own damn secrecy had done this to me. If I'd just told her we were mates, seeing me at her door at four-thirty might not have freaked her out. I could have drawn her into a hug and soothed the jagged edge of her terror until she felt safe. I thought I'd done an okay-ish job of that in the Hunters' den. She'd certainly left it with more fire than the empty-eyed woman I'd found.

At just after five a.m., I gave up on catching more sleep and threw the covers back, switching on my heater as I moved around, gathering clothes. I was already shivering, sensitive to the cold. Even though I was alone, I could practically hear my younger brothers teasing me for being an old man.

Not that I was that *much* older than them. I might have been forty-eight, but I could still run a marathon as well as I could in my twenties, and my growl was as strong as it had ever been—the sign of an ageing, weakening alpha. I just liked to be warm, and *sure* I preferred to stay in and watch TV instead of partying at the clubhouse bar, *and* I was partial to a mug of hot chocolate, and I owned a pair of slippers but I wasn't *old*.

I was practically twice Luna's age, though.

I dragged my fingers through my hair, heading into the tiny bathroom attached to my bedroom, and running the shower until the room steamed.

I left my pyjamas—a matching T-shirt and cotton pants from my mum a couple Christmases ago, probably stolen—on the floor in a heap and climbed into the steaming water.

By the time I got out, I'd made a plan. It involved waking and pissing off two people, but they'd forgive me.

I dressed quickly in grey jogging pants, a black T-shirt, and a hoodie, and crossed the tarmac between the chapel and the clubhouse as fast as I could without running. Another thrash of panic and terror hit my chest. My heart twisted.

The clubhouse was completely quiet when I let myself in, needing a key at this hour. I made sure to lock the door behind myself before striding down hallways until I reached Guardian's room. A knock drew a growl from within, and then low voices spoke words I couldn't pick out before heavy footsteps approached and the door opened.

"What is it?" Guardian muttered, rubbing his jaw, his eyes barely open.

"I'm sorry to wake you," I said quickly. "I wouldn't usually ask but—"

"Oh," Guardian murmured gruffly, his eyes clearing. "Has something happened with Luna?"

"I don't know." I shifted my weight to my other foot. "I don't think so. But she's *terrified*. And I was wondering if Vienna would go check on her? I can't—she doesn't know..."

Guardian nodded, and reached out to squeeze my shoulder.

"Already getting dressed," Vienna said when Guardian turned to ask, his mouth open. "And don't worry about waking us; Luna's one of us, so I'll always help. Same goes for you, Priest."

"Thank you," I replied genuinely, offering her a relieved smile when she came into view, a jumper thrown hastily over black leggings and her fair hair sticking up on one side.

Guardian chuckled and reached out to flatten the unruly strands, leaning down to meet her for a quick kiss. "Be careful," he murmured.

"I'll be fine," she sighed.

"If you get triggered—"

"I know how to come out of an episode," she replied, raising an eyebrow.

Guardian kissed her again and stepped back without arguing the point. I got the sense this was a familiar subject.

"I didn't mean to risk—" I began, but Vienna gave me a wry look.

"I *can* make decisions for myself, you know? Strangely enough, I have a mind of my own."

Firmly chastised, I rubbed the back of my neck. "Right. Of course you do. Thank you again."

She shook her blonde head as I backed up to let her into the hall. "You don't have to keep thanking me, Priest. Like I don't have to ask how you know Luna's scared, even though curiosity is *killing me*."

I gave Guardian a surprised look; he hadn't told her?

"Not my secret to tell," he said, holding up his huge hands. "But Vienna can keep a secret. Isn't that right, precious?"

"I've never told anyone's secret," she agreed, curiosity burning in her blue eyes. "She's your mate, isn't she?"

"Yes," I breathed, hardly daring to admit it. "But I can't tell her, not yet. She's been through enough."

And I'd said too much. *Fuck!*

"With what she saw in that house," I quickly added, saving the situation.

Vienna nodded, something like pride in her eyes. It made me straighten my spine. She thought I was being a good alpha and taking care of my omega, and I was surprised to learn I needed that approval—from both her

and Guardian.

If Guard was my brother, Vienna was like a sister to me. Although significantly less kleptomaniac than my biological sister.

"I'll take care of Luna," she assured me. "Stop worrying; you'll go grey."

"*More* grey," Guardian teased, making my stare flatten.

"Just you wait, Guard. You'll have more grey hairs than me soon enough. You're—what—thirteen years younger than me?"

"Fourteen," he disagreed, as if the extra year made any difference.

"Don't worry, son," I joked, "I've got a walking stick saved just for you."

He snapped his teeth, a playful growl in his throat. "Get out of here. Go wake someone else up."

"Or go back to sleep," Vienna suggested, taking a step down the corridor towards the sanctuary. "You look rough, Priest."

"Thanks," I drawled.

Inside, I marvelled at how strong Vienna was. When she'd arrived at the compound, she'd been skittish, afraid to look alphas in the eye. Now she teased and bossed us around as if we were the same designation. It was good to see. Gave me hope everyone else in the sanctuary could find the same strength and peace.

"You're welcome," she quipped. "And you go back to sleep, too, Abbott; you're practically dead on your feet."

Guardian was swaying, I noticed with a smile.

"Thanks again," I said, aiming in the opposite direction. Not back to the chapel to sleep—I wouldn't get any rest until I laid eyes on Luna again—but to the kitchen.

I needed coffee. Lots and lots of coffee.



Luna

"Good, now jam your elbow back into their gut," Justice, the patient, sandy-haired beta male, instructed the seven omegas and betas gathered on mats in front of him.

This room was around the back of the clubhouse, with windows open to let in fresh air from the gardens, and birdsong that was incongruous with the traumas and disorders packed into the room. We'd all been through something, and come out the other end but not unscathed.

It was both a comfort to be among people who understood what I'd been through—even if they didn't know the details—and frustrating that I fit it so well among the victims. I wasn't a victim, dammit.

"Good—Thora, not so hard. Why are you here, anyway? You could probably beat *me* up," Justice sighed, pinching the bridge of his nose.

"And don't think I won't," a severe omega with short black hair and defined musculature replied. She was like Lynn, but if you turned up the aggression and removed the camaraderie. I'd never seen an omega like her.

I jammed my elbow slowly into Vienna's hold around me and she released me as if I'd put my full power behind it. I was lethargic after a night full of tossing and turning, my dreams filled with that vile room in the Hunters' house, and I didn't really have the energy to be here, practising self defence. But anything was better than sitting in my room with time to *think*.

"You can hit harder," Vienna said, a smile in her voice. "If you bruise me, I'll just repay the favour when it's my turn."

I forced a laugh, and repeated the move with more intention. I felt weirdly ... empty. Especially after Vienna woke me up, like she'd magically known I was wracked with nightmares, and then hugged me without comment.

Maybe she was sensitive to the emotions around her. I didn't believe in full magic, but I knew empaths were real—some people picked up on others' moods better than the rest of us.

"Good," Justice praised. "ChaCha, try straightening the line of your elbow."

"I'll straighten you in a minute," she muttered beside me and Vienna. It was the fifth time the male beta had told her to correct something.

I waited for Justice to snap, but he just rolled his eyes and demonstrated the move with Jessa for us to see it again. She elbowed him hard enough that he grunted, and then grinned with pride.

They were a family. I hadn't realised it yesterday, but seeing the way everyone interacted—the teasing, the lowkey insults, the ease with which they touched and laughed and talked—it was pretty clear.

I was glad in a way. Astrid was as much a part of this family as the men and women around me; I was glad they were decent people.

Thinking about Astrid made me think about her mate, another sore spot I wanted to avoid. What if he told her about the bruises on my neck? If she found out I'd been collared and chained to a bed, she'd be devastated.

"Hey," Vienna murmured, lightly touching my shoulder but removing it when I flinched. "You alright?"

"Fine," I replied as calmly as I could, wiping any emotion from my features.

"You know we're *all* struggling, right? You're not alone."

Everyone kept telling me that, and while it was sweet and well intentioned, it was nothing except a reminder of that day, that house, that bed. That *alpha*.

I put a step between me and Vienna, breathing in through my nose and

out my mouth until I calmed. My fingers itched for a paintbrush, needing to bleed these emotions onto canvas the way I usually did. But normally, my intense emotions were happiness and affection and awe—and occasionally stress when a sale didn't go through, or anxiety when a client was demanding and rude.

"Let's try another hold, and then we'll swap partners," Justice called, meeting each of our gazes. My stomach jolted when he reached me, and I glanced away, irrational fear making my heart hammer my ribs.

Justice wasn't even an alpha. He'd never touched me, never growled, and hadn't looked at me for longer than he had to to instruct us. But my skin crawled, and I couldn't shake off the unease once it formed.

The training room smelled clear and clean, fresh air still wafting through the windows, but the scents of rotten alphas and slick and cum somehow burned my nose.

"Luna?" Justice asked quietly, kindly. It grated. "If you need to step out, no one's gonna judge you."

I straightened my spine in one rushed movement, snapping my head up to glare at him. I didn't need to be treated like ... like I was fragile and hurt and—and a victim. I wasn't a fucking *victim*.

"I'm fine," I said through gritted teeth, bristling even more when he nodded patiently, no part of him aggressive or threatening.

Still, I *felt* threatened.

"Okay," I told Vienna, faking a smile as I turned to face her.

Understanding made her wide eyes luminous, but she didn't question me. She stepped up and took my arm, gently bringing it behind my back the way Justice was demonstrating on Jessa.

"If you get triggered, stop *immediately*," he told all of us. "Don't try to be brave. Only push your body, not your emotional state, yeah?"

"You're a regular guru," Thora, the dangerous omega, remarked with a smirk.

But Justice didn't smile in reply this time. His long, tanned face was stern. "I've seen too many people go through flashbacks; I'd like to never see that again."

I kept my breathing even as Vienna pressed my arm to my back, crowding close to me. For a second I was back in that bed. My arms hadn't been bound then but the feeling of being trapped was the same, and I couldn't choke down even a tiny breath.

But then a bird trilled obnoxiously outside the window, and I snapped back to the training gym. It was *Vienna* holding me, not an attacker. She was helping me learn how to defend myself.

It took me two attempts to follow Justice and Jessa's example, but I successfully broke Vienna's grip and a trembling sense of relief joined the heavy depression in my chest.

I still felt empty, my chest heavy and body lethargic, and my head *pounded*, but by the end of the session, I'd managed to learn a few moves without losing my shit. I didn't flee the room, didn't curl into a ball and cry.

My breathing might have been sharp, and I was definitely shaky, the memory of Anatoly and that room breathing down my neck, but I called it a victory.

"Hey Luna, Sweetie's made paninis for lunch. You coming?" ChaCha asked, slicking sweat-soaked purple hair out of her face, and looking brighter and more lively than she had when she'd walked into the room today.

I wasn't in the mood for idle, inane chatting, no matter how much I liked the girls. I was too heavy, too aching, too ... scared. Ugh, I hated to admit it.

"I'm gonna get a shower instead," I lied, smiling but aware it wasn't convincing. "Thanks for the offer."

ChaCha shrugged. "It's just a panini, and I didn't make it myself."

"And thank fuck for that," Thora muttered as she passed, reaching out to ruffle Vienna's hair. "You can't cook for shit, Chatch."

"Disagree," ChaCha threw back, hands on her hips. "And stop being cute to Vienna; she's my best bitch and you can't have her."

"I thought I was your best bitch," Jessa complained.

My smile this time was a little less strained, but my stomach churned when I realised how difficult it would be to get to where they were—okay, recovering, *healed*.

I wanted to go back to normal, or at least *pretend* everything was normal, but I didn't think there'd ever be a time when I was fully myself again. I'd always carry a piece of Anatoly—bruises and pain now, and ruthless memories later.

"See you later," I said and quietly excused myself, avoiding Justice's attempt to call me over.

I didn't want to talk. I didn't want to acknowledge why I was here, why I didn't feel safe. And no matter how much I couldn't escape the memories, I didn't want to acknowledge what had happened to me.

I was fine. I *would be* fine. Because I would allow nothing else.

I needed to go somewhere no one would bother me, and the kitchen and dining room were clearly not an option. I could go to the sanctuary, but there was always someone there watching TV or reading or just lounging on the big, comfy sofas.

Going back to my room wouldn't offer any peace. It certainly hadn't last night when Anatoly haunted my dreams.

I wanted my phone, but I didn't know where it had ended up after I dropped it. Probably back in the park near my studio.

My studio... What I really needed was to paint, to get some of this darkness out of me and onto a canvas. But I didn't have any of my supplies. So I decided on the next best thing—prayer.

I couldn't quite remember my way through the warren of clubhouse hallways, so I got lost twice before I found a familiar hallway and spotted the big door at the end. A weight fell off my shoulders at the sight of the exit. Maybe what I *really* needed was to get out of this place.

"Luna," a voice stopped me within three feet of the door.

My shoulders stiffened. I turned, and found the red-haired, freckled president of the club leaning half in and half out of the door to the bar, watching me.

My jaw clenched. So I wasn't allowed to leave?

"I didn't realise I was a prisoner here," I snapped, arms crossing over my sweaty T-shirt and a frenetic, thrumming energy filling me. Rage—but not at Prodigy. At Anatoly and his bitch sidekick, and at myself for not learning more self defence sooner. I could have elbowed them in the gut and escaped. I shouldn't have been caught in the first place.

"*What?*" Prodigy's eyes widened comically, and then narrowed in confusion. "Of course you're not a prisoner."

I glared harder, a muscle feathering in my clenched jaw. I was nothing to alphas, not worth as much as an omega, not worth *anything*. I was so sick of them taking over my life.

"I was going to ask how you're doing," he said, sympathy softening his rugged face as he guessed what conclusion I'd jumped to. "You can go wherever you want, just give us a head's up if you want to go out of the gates and we'll make sure you're protected. I wouldn't stop you leaving the building, Luna. Just wanted to check in."

I exhaled a hard breath, wanting to drag my hand down my face but

resisting the urge. I couldn't look weak, not to the people who knew what had happened to me and *certainly* not to someone like Prodigy who still thought they'd got to me in time.

"Sorry. I'm fine."

"I'll take your word for it," he replied dryly, talking to me like we'd known each other for years. Weird. Welcoming, but weird. "If you need anything, just let us know."

I scoffed. "I think bikers have better things to do than run around after a random beta."

Prodigy's laugh filled the hallway, rich and loud. "You'd be surprised. Most of us are alphas, and if there's one thing you should know about alphas, we *love* to be needed. It's a basic instinct to care for the people around us, especially betas and omegas. These bastards, myself included, will do anything you ask just so they can feel useful."

Huh. I wasn't sure I believed him—my experience of alphas was limited—but there *was* an alpha who rented a space in the mill where I had my studio. He ran around after his omega mate every day, fetching coffee, picking up food, driving her around a million places. I'd thought he was an anomaly, but ... maybe he was the standard.

"I'll keep that in mind," I replied after a too-long pause.

Prodigy gave me a blinding grin that would probably have been charming to someone who hadn't been abducted by alphas yesterday.

"Right well," he said, pushing off the door jamb. "Take care of yourself."

I nodded absently, turning back to the front door. Every interaction I had in the clubhouse reaffirmed that I was safe here, and *welcome*, that people were on my side.

It should have been reassuring. If my head hadn't been fucked up, it probably would have been.

But it just made me even more restless. So I opened the door and stared at the tiny chapel across the compound. If God couldn't sort this mess out, no one could.



Priest

There were two types of church in the compound—the chapel where I led worship every Sunday, and the church where Prodigy led our meetings about club business. The latter usually took place late evening, but today Prodigy called us together first thing in the morning which meant shit was going down.

I'd been awake for hours, so I was one of the more lucid people who filed into the room opposite Prodigy's office and claimed a seat at the big, oval table. Prodigy sat at head of the table, with our VP Warning—newly prised away from his mate, Everly—on one side and sergeant-at-arms Guardian on his other side. The other officers—club members with a title and rank—sat beside them.

I took a seat somewhere around the middle, watching Prodigy expectantly as he took out a tablet to scroll through information.

"First of all, in case you don't already know, we've got four new people in the sanctuary. Give them some space while they settle in unless they come to

you; most of them are in bad shape."

"As bad as Vienna?" asked Wizard, our treasurer, who handled the finances of the club.

"As bad as *Lynn*," Prodigy replied, which made everyone wince.

Yeah, those weren't memories any of us wanted to go back to. Lynn was a sister and a friend, part of the club furniture as much as Guardian and Tybalt. Thinking about her being that messed up, both inside and out, had at least two quiet growls sounding around the table.

"Yeah," Prodigy agreed with a strained sigh. "It's fucked up. Secondly, we managed to grab five Hunters from that place and they've been more useful than the guys we found at the bank a few days ago."

Tybalt cracked his knuckles, sitting back in his seat and looking pleased with himself. As our enforcer—and the man voluntarily in charge of torturing Hunters we hauled back to the compound—he was the first to find any snippets of information. He already knew what our president was about to say.

"The place we raided was a den, and it was one of a dozen spread across the country. The Hunters have a stronghold in every major city."

"Shit," Warning, our vice president, growled, raking fingers through his greying dark hair. "Should we contact the Ravens?"

The Ravens of Mercy were a similar MC to ours, although on the other side of the law. The Ravens worked in the seedy underbelly of London, and used drug smuggling, gun imports, and fuck knew what else to finance their operations. They weren't opposed to buying omegas off the dark web just to get them away from their abusers.

"That'll sort out London, or as much as they can cover," Prodigy agreed, scrolling through his tablet. "But I don't know of any organisations like ours in the other cities."

"That's our first task then," Guardian said. "Cobra, I bet you can find them even if they've hidden their tracks."

Cobra made a contemplative expression, scratching his shaved, tattooed head. "Maybe. It's not like we have an internet presence, though—they might not either."

"Police reports, CCTV, hospital records," Warning suggested. "Find the people being mistreated, and it might lead to a rescuer."

Cobra's mouth went thin, his expression swiftly turning dangerous. "Fine."

"You don't have to," Prodigy said calmly, spotting the same thing I did—Cobra had his own traumas, and this would be triggering as hell.

But Cobra laughed, his face twisted in a sneer. "This will save people, so you know *full well* I'll do it. Mind your own damn business. I said fine, didn't I?"

"Do you have locations of the dens in the other cities?" I asked, contemplating just how widespread the Hunters' vile crusade had spread.

"Three of them," Tybalt answered, scowling even fiercer than usual. "But three out of twelve is shit."

"Does that mean there are no more dens in Manchester?" Sweetie asked, his mouth flat behind his thick black beard. He'd nearly lost the woman he loved to the Hunters—even if he was in denial about loving her.

"No dens," Prodigy agreed, a deep furrow between his brows. "But I don't doubt there are individuals who've kidnapped omegas and betas."

"So..." Warning said, arms crossed over his leather-clad chest. "Business as usual here, or do we go to those three dens and break them up?"

"That's why we're here," Prodigy replied, giving us a hard look. "To vote."

I knew what my vote was—to liberate the victims of those dens. It would mean driving to cities we weren't familiar with, and putting ourselves in danger, but it was the right thing to do.

"We'd lose the home ground advantage," Guardian mused, rubbing his jaw. "We'll need more firepower than usual."

"Say no more," Devil grinned. "That I can do, no problem."

Prodigy sighed. He preferred the club to stay out of illegal gun deals, insisting we were safer if we kept our distance from their dealers, but Guardian was right. We'd be at a disadvantage, and we'd need something to level the playing field.

"Let's vote," Prodigy said, standing from his seat to look us in the eye, a grim expression on his stubbled face. "Warning?"

"Fuck, man. I don't wanna leave Everly behind so soon, but it just feels wrong leaving people to suffer when we could change that. I vote we go."

"Tyb?"

"You know I'm soft and sentimental," Tybalt drawled, making us laugh. "Let's go blow up some Hunter asses."

"Explosions aren't on the menu," Prodigy replied firmly, his eyes hardening behind his glasses.

"Maybe they should be," Tybalt challenged with a grin.

"Guard?" Prodigy asked, ignoring Tybalt.

And on and on the vote went.

In the end only three brothers voted to stay, and the majority won. We were planning three raids in unfamiliar cities, on buildings run by ruthless bastard Hunters.

"Get in touch with the Ravens now. Tell them what's going on and say we'll provide backup. I won't lie and say this will be simple, or straightforward. But Warning's right; it would be wrong to hang back when we can do something to help. We're knights, after all. Our strength is our honour."

"Here, here," I chanted, alongside my brothers.

Every person in those dens was like Luna or Lavinia. Someone loved them, missed them, would do anything to save them—and would break when they lost them.

"Devil, get me maps and a clear route of every city; make the ride there as painless as possible. Devil, set up that gun deal but be discreet and *polite*. We don't need a damn gang on our asses. Guard, you work with Mercedes and ChaCha on getting spaces set up for whoever we break out of those dens. And someone get Justice caught up when his class finishes. We'll ride to London in two weeks. That should give us enough time to prepare."

Two weeks seemed like far too long for those victims to wait, but also nowhere near long enough to plan a raid on a new city.

"Church dismissed," Prodigy announced. "Tyb, get Devil those addresses."

"Yessir," Tybalt replied with a sarcastic salute.

Prodigy's gaze narrowed in a way that made me think Tybalt would pay for that attitude later. I smiled to myself as I got to my feet and headed out into the hall, stretching my arms to work out the kinks. It felt like we'd been in church for hours. Hell, maybe we had.

"Hey," Guardian said, waiting in the corridor—for me, apparently. There was a kind but stern look in his eye that made me nervous. "How are you doing?"

I blinked. "Me?"

"Yes, you."

"I'm ... fine. Why?"

He gave me a very pointed look. "It's not hurting you to ignore your

bond?"

Not hurting as such, but I felt every single ache and flinch in Luna's soul and it was beginning to take a toll.

"I'm fine," I repeated. "Don't be such a worrywort."

"Worrywort," Cobra snorted, giving me a sharp grin as he passed. "You're showing your age, old man."

I rolled my eyes. "I could still kick your ass, kid."

Cobra laughed, derisive as always. "As if."

I used the distraction to sneak away from Guardian. I didn't know why he was so worried about me; Luna was the one suffering. Sure, I wanted to hold her and growl away all her enemies and keep her safe and—

Okay, so maybe I was suffering a *little*.

I needed to be close to her; if I was by her side, I knew she was safe. Logic didn't come into it. I knew nothing would happen to her inside the compound. But protective instincts blurred that logic. I needed to be her shield—it was a basic, vital need.

What kind of alpha was I if my mate was terrified and I couldn't soothe her? That was my damn job.

I pushed open the heavy door to my chapel and ducked inside, sinking onto a pew and ducking my head. I needed guidance, and my brothers' advice would only carry me so far. They meant well, but they'd tell me to talk to Luna, spend time with her.

If I did that, it would be increasingly harder to fight my instincts to comfort her. So I sought God's guidance.

His response came far sooner than I'd expected.

The door to the chapel creaked open behind me, soft footsteps padding across the wooden floor, and I lifted my head to see Luna slump into the church, her eyes haunted and her braids gathered into a severe knot on her head.

"Oh," she breathed when she spotted me, freezing a few feet from my pew. "Sorry, I didn't mean to disturb you in prayer. I'll just—"

"Stay," I breathed, invited, *pleaded*.

My heart skipped a beat when she swallowed and slid onto the pew beside me.



Luna

I couldn't explain why I didn't turn and bolt from the church, except an unexpected blanket was thrown over my jagged anxiety, muffling it until my stress was easier to bear.

I slid onto the wooden pew beside Priest, unable to think of anything but the room he'd found me in, naked and bruised and collared. But that blanket still muffled my pain, and I was so damn glad for it.

"I can leave you to pray in peace if you'd prefer," Priest offered quietly, running his hand over his salt-and-pepper beard.

I shook my head. "It's fine."

Back in the training room, I'd felt weak and seen. Not judged, but *seen*, and that was almost as bad.

Here, with the hush of the chapel around us, and only Priest who'd witnessed me in the worst moments of my life ... I didn't know why it was better. It should have been worse. But with the victims—survivors they called themselves—in the class, I'd only remembered being chained to the bed and

ruted until pain was all I could feel. With Priest, I remembered the aftermath too. I remembered him unbuckling the collar with careful fingers, remembered him dressing me and telling me I was safe.

I wanted him to tell me that again, needed to hear it every damn moment of the day.

"I won't ask how you're doing," he began, his tone soft and careful. Or maybe that was just his voice—soft and murmuring with the slight hint of a rasp.

"You better not," I huffed, giving him a stern look that made his beard twitch in a smile. Why was he smiling?

"Are you religious?" he asked instead, which was a smart move. I was sick to death of being asked if I was okay.

I nodded. "Christian."

"Will I see you in church on Sunday?" he asked, twisting on the pew to half face me.

Shock made me stare at him, and I wasn't ready to admit I liked what I saw. Really, *really* liked it. I'd always been attracted to older men; the guys I'd dated of my own age turned out to be immature, rude, borderline controlling, and omega-hunters who were really after Astrid.

"There's a service here? *Really?*"

"Really," Priest confirmed, laughing with a little crease between his heavy brows. "Why? Didn't think bikers were the Christian sort?"

"Um..." It was rude to admit that, right?

He laughed, his eyes crinkling—a bright blue colour I noticed, now I was close to him.

"Don't worry, I was surprised to find out when I first got here, too. There are more god-abiding bikers than you'd realise. We need to believe a higher power is watching over us when we go on dangerous raids."

"Like the one yesterday?" I asked. When they'd found me violated in that disgusting room. I wasn't sure the sheets had even been cleaned before Anatoly ... did what he did.

"Exactly like that one. We're never really sure what we're going to find, or if any of the Hunters will overpower us or bring guns or—you get the idea."

I looked across the church at the small, stained-glass circle above the altar, biting my lip. "It's dangerous, but you still risk yourselves to save omegas?"

"To save anyone who needs it," he corrected, shifting again and sending a rush of his clear water scent towards me. My shoulders dropped, a knot unwound between my shoulder blades, and my jaw unclenched.

Fuck, his scent was magic. Maybe that was why I'd stayed, and why I was still beside him now. That inexplicable sense of safety I'd felt at the house was here too, all around me, blending with the comfort of God's presence.

After yesterday, the safety was irresistible.

"You really are knights," I murmured, moving my attention from the window to Priest. He again wore aged denim and black leather, his hair rumpled and his beard thick, and nothing about him screamed *vicar*—but he fit here in this chapel.

"We try to be," Priest replied with a sigh, spinning a ring around his finger. I discreetly checked if the ring was on his wedding ring finger—it wasn't. "It's not always possible to save some people, and others don't *want* to be saved."

I rolled my eyes. "You just told me you *risk your lives* to get people out of abusive situations. You're knights without a doubt. Accept it."

His mouth twitched into a smile. "In that case, I agree."

"Good."

Silence settled between us, but it wasn't heavy and uncomfortable. I could sense Priest wanted to broach the subject I furiously avoided, though, and I gave him a look. *Don't even think about it.*

"Tell me what I can do," he blurted after a long pause. "Luna, I can't—I want to help you. And if you want to talk about what happened to you, I'm here. Always."

"Nothing happened to me. You got there in time." It was my mantra. My precious lie.

Priest's face hardened. "Luna, I know what I smelled. Don't try to tell me that was consensual."

I winced, my chest compressing into a painful knot.

I jumped when his hand covered mine, and then relaxed all at once with a rough sigh. Fuck, he really was magic. Was this some elite priest training? I'd never calmed down so quickly before.

"Talk to Trick, darling. I know it'll be painful at first, but it'll help, I promise. I've been to see him a few times."

I shook my head hard enough to knock a few braids out of the coil on my head, and stood in a rush. "I'm managing; I'm fine."

I did *not* want to talk to a therapist. I wanted to bury my memories, not rake them up.

"Luna, you're struggling. I can sense it and—let me help. Or help yourself. But don't let this rip you apart when there are people who'd help shore up the cracks."

"I'm. *Fine*," I growled, breathing hard and fast. Couldn't he *see* I didn't want to talk about this?

I tore away from him and out of the pew. I shouldn't have been snapping at a vicar in God's house, but I *couldn't*. I couldn't say aloud a single thing that'd happened in that fucked up house. So I stalked away.

"Okay," Priest breathed, almost *pleading* as he hurried after me, his scent enveloping me until I wanted to drop all my guards and sob.

I shored up the walls so they were even higher and clenched my hands back into fists.

"I won't push," he called down the aisle. "I'm sorry. I'm just—I'm worried sick, Luna."

I paused by the door, giving him a weird look. "About..."

"About *you*," he breathed, still pleading, his blue eyes wide and imploring as he came closer. "I'm the only person who knows what happened, aren't I?"

The only person who knew *a hundred percent* of what happened. Lynn had guessed, and Guardian knew I'd been bruised and collared but...

"Yes," I admitted tightly, stiffening when Priest came even closer, but less because I was scared of him and more because I was scared of what he'd make me face.

"Then talk to me," he offered, holding his hands in front of him. "If you can't talk to anyone else, fair enough. But it'll fester inside you, Luna." He said my name so softly that my eyes stung. "And I don't want—if it pushes you to breaking point, I—"

He shook his head and swallowed, and all the screaming inside my head went quiet. I wasn't the only one battling demons; I saw it in his shadowed eyes, in the stress lining them, in the way he dragged his hands through his hair.

"Did something ... happen to you?" I asked, tiptoeing around the question with caution.

"Not me." Priest spun the ring around his finger and met my eyes. "My niece, she ... she went through the same thing you did. For weeks. When we finally got her out of there, I thought she'd be alright. She was home, so of

course she'd be fine, right?"

I nodded slowly, still a little frozen inside.

"She took her own life. She couldn't handle the memories; she wasn't even convinced she was home and safe. So with you, I—"

"You're worried the same thing will happen to me," I guessed, my shoulders slumping and fingers uncurling.

He met my gaze, searching—I wished I knew what he was looking for. "If it gets bad—"

"I'll talk to you," I murmured, swallowing my nerves. "Not ... in detail. And not today, I'm too—I'm not great."

It was hard to admit it, and even harder to hear the words echo through the chapel.

"I know, darling," Priest murmured, smiling sadly. "For today, how about you tell me what would make your day easier to endure? I'm a dab-hand in the kitchen," he said, ignoring the twitch of my mouth at the phrase, "and comfort food is my speciality. Or I can pick you up something else; I'm going shopping in a bit, so if you want ice cream, or brownies, or a cake, or—you get the idea."

My heart lifted at the offer, at his *kindness*. And even though my paranoia said he must have wanted something in return for his generosity, my logical side argued that he was a vicar, and he was just doing his job. And he was a good man—that much was clear.

He didn't want me to be driven to the same dark end as his niece, and at least that was a motivation I could understand. I'd lost my mum; I knew how grief stuck with you. And Mum hadn't killed herself; she'd been struck by a bus in a car crash.

So I blurted, "I want—art supplies." I shook my head as the words echoed. "No, that's too much to ask for, I shouldn't—"

"Yes, you should," he argued, stepping close but not too close. "I was serious when I said tell me whatever you need. If you needed a Gucci bag or a joyride in a Ferrari, I'd make it happen."

I shook my head, but I was laughing, and my chest felt lighter than it had been all day. "I'm more of a Vivienne Westwood kinda girl," I said, but quickly added, "please don't get me anything crazy expensive. I owe you enough anyway."

"You owe me nothing," Priest disagreed softly, some of the haunted darkness lifting from his eyes. "And as for art supplies, I'm pretty sure there

are some in the sanctuary. Tiny went through an art phase for a few months when she first got here."

"Tiny," I echoed, trying not to laugh at the name.

"An omega we brought in six months ago; she's aptly named but her full name—and I did not tell you this—is Clementine."

"Aw, that's cute," I said, smiling.

"I know where the supplies will be," he told me, gesturing towards the door. "I'll show you."

"Priest," I murmured, my fingers on the handle. "Can I come shopping with you?"

"What? I—if you want," he laughed, right behind me as I pushed the door open and sucked down a lungful of fresh air. Strangely, it wasn't as reassuring as the scent of the chapel. "It won't be very exciting, but you're welcome to tag along."

A smile crossed my face, deep and real. "Thanks."

"Just tell Prodigy, in case he panics that you've gone missing—or your sister comes out of her nest."

Ah. The last thing I wanted was for Astrid to freak out when she couldn't find me.

Priest threw me a strange look as he led me to the clubhouse. "But be warned; it won't be a badass ride on the back of my bike. You'll have to take a hit to your pride and come with me in *that* monstrosity."

He pointed to a rusted old van with flaking red paint.

My eyebrows shot up. "Uhh..."

"Tell me about it," he laughed. "But the shopping won't fit in my saddlebags."

"Does it even run?" I asked dubiously, taking the steps up to the clubhouse's front door and becoming strangely aware of my ease of speaking to Priest.

"It might break down halfway to the supermarket," he remarked.

I froze on the threshold, giving him a wide-eyed stare.

"Kidding," he said.

But I didn't fully believe him.



Priest

"Tell me this rust bucket has a name," Luna said with a low laugh that made my jeans uncomfortably tight. Fuck, she was beautiful, and especially because this was the first time I'd seen her relax. Her brown eyes were brighter, like sunlit quartz, and the haggard quality to her face had begun to fade. I knew it would return, but I was glad to give her an hour of peace.

I'd never been more grateful that I was the nominated food shopper of the club.

"*She*," I replied, emphasising the word and alright fighting laughter, "is called *Pamela*."

"Pamela," Luna repeated, blinking.

I couldn't stop grinning, but I forced my eyes to the road in front of us even if I wanted to stare at the beautiful woman beside me all damn day. "I'm told when Winner first got her, she was a bright, sexy red colour, hence the name. They're his words, not mine."

I stopped at a red light and caught her confused frown. Adorable.

"The colour of Pamela Andersen's swimsuit in Baywatch," I explained, a deep laugh rumbling through my body at her eye-roll. "I know, it's ridiculous."

"I thought a biker would call her Butcher or Shotgun or something cool."

"Nope," I chuckled. "Pamela."

Pamela grumbled at me putting my foot down when the light turned green, and with a little coaxing, I drove across the city to our nearest supermarket. There'd been a closer shop a couple years ago, but lawless alphas burned it to the ground in protest of omegas employed there. I wondered if the Hunters had incited it.

"Does your bike have a name?" Luna asked, watching me from the corner of her eye.

"Lavinia," I replied instantly, guiding us around a corner and into the supermarket car park. "After my niece."

"Oh," she murmured. "That's really sweet. So her memory lives on."

I nodded. "That's why I gave her that name."

I mentally growled when I couldn't find a parking space. But judging by the way Luna stiffened and her breathing quickened, I might have growled *aloud* too.

"Sorry," I rushed out. "Sorry. You're safe, I'd never hurt you."

She swallowed, glancing out the side window instead of looking at me, twisting a braid tight around her finger. "It's fine."

"I'd never be annoyed with you, Luna, it's this damn car park."

She laughed softly when I drove in a circle around the place again. I drew in a deep calming breath, expecting to taste the bitterness of her fear. Instead, her citrus scent was cut with smoky arousal.

Oh. *Oh*, my growl ... turned her on.

I didn't draw attention to that fact, even if it inflated my ego to *extraordinary* proportions.

"Are you okay to go shopping now?" I asked gently, finally finding a parking space and killing the engine.

"Yes!" Luna replied at lightning speed and flung her door open before I'd even grabbed the keys from the ignition.

More than a little amused, I followed her out and locked the car—manually, of course, since this thing was ancient.

Not commenting on Luna being flustered, I led us across the tarmac

towards the trolleys, slipping a pound coin out of my wallet to unlock the chain.

"Alright," I said, putting my game-face on like I was preparing for battle. "Unless you're opposed to the idea, I'm putting you on steering duty while I grab the food we need."

"Works for me," she agreed, her cheeks still pink-tinged brown. I glanced away so she didn't see my expression soften with affection.

I cast a casual glance around the car park to make sure there were no Hunters lying in wait, relieved when I only found a man loading plastic bags into his boot and two women trying to wrangle an unruly toddler into their car.

"After you, madame," I said to Luna, sweeping my hand out.

"Wow," she drawled, but steered the trolley through the automatic glass doors. "You sound like one of those fake gentleman creeps."

I winced, the insult landing, and she laughed brightly.

"Don't worry," she murmured, "I know you're the real deal."

And just like that, my ego was back at crazy levels. I knew my spine straightened and I watched my chest puff out, but there was little I could do about the ridiculous response.

"That's pretty high praise," I said, stifling a purr.

Luna shrugged her slim shoulders. "You've earned it, Priest."

I got the shopping list from my pocket—yes, I was so old fashioned I wrote on paper instead of using my notes app—and smoothed out the creases. "Right then. Ready for war?"

Luna snorted, her cheeks rounded with a smile. "Against food?"

"Against the other shoppers," I whispered conspiratorially, glancing around to assess the competition.

"You're ridiculous. But yes, I'm ready."

I urged her onward, spotting the lettuce and adding four to the trolley. Bikers and salad weren't synonymous, but there was a barbecue on Saturday and I was under *strict* orders from Jessa and Vienna, who were helping out Sweetie in the kitchen. After them, it was tomatoes and peppers, cucumber and salad dressing. Luna and I fell into a pattern, an easy calm settling over us, only broken when Luna darted forward to grab the last three loaves of bread before a battle-hardened mum could claim them. The two of them had a silent stand-off.

When Luna wheeled the trolley away with her prize, I wanted to purr and

tell her how proud I was, even if it was only fucking *bread*. But my purr scared her, so I throttled the noise in my throat.

Instead, I guided us to the next aisle and picked up a 4-pack of chocolate dessert packs when I saw her eyeing them. She never asked for them, and she didn't comment as I added them to our cart and kept moving down the list.

"We've only got booze left and we're done," I sighed half an hour later, although there was no *only* when it came to a motorcycle club and alcohol. "Are you doing alright, Luna?"

She nodded, throwing me a true smile. "I'm good. How about you—you're the one whose foot got run over."

Said foot throbbed viciously thanks to a kamikaze old man with a trolley, but I'd be fine. "I've had worse injuries. Told you it was a battle," I added with a wink.

Luna rolled her eyes, but she was blushing again, and her scent was smoky with desire. In my chest, our bond still thrashed like a deadly sea, but there was something less violent in the waves. Something more compelling, tempting.

"Alright," I huffed, when we reached the final aisle. "You go grab three bottles of vodka, and I'll get all the beer this place has to offer."

She laughed, thinking I was joking, and wheeled the trolley down towards the spirits. She seemed comfortable enough, so I scanned the shelves in front of me for the best offers on lager. We went through crazy amounts on a normal week, but with a barbecue too, we'd need even *more*. I kept telling Prodigy we should invest in a brewery.

I'd just decided on six 24-packs when blind panic cut through the bond, my air cutting off with a savage grip.

Shit. *Luna!*

I abandoned the beer and raced down the aisle, a growl in my throat as I assessed the threat and prepared to kill to defend my mate.

But all I found was a male beta reaching for a bottle of whiskey on the top shelf. He was a little too close to Luna, but not threatening, just going about his shopping.

Yet Luna was *terrified*. She'd frozen in place, completely still. But with how intently I scanned her, there was no missing that she shook so hard her teeth rattled, her breathing coming in short gasps.

I choked off my growl and met the bewildered look the beta gave us, a warning scowl narrowing my eyes. He quickly hurried on.

"You're safe, Luna, you're safe," I murmured, wrapping her up in my arms and tucking her face close to my neck where my scent was the strongest. "No one's going to hurt you."

Her breathing was a jagged mess, but her fingers found the shirt under my cut and clutched me hard. Was she stuck in a flashback?

"It's Priest, it's Luke, I've got you. Do you remember me, darling?"

She nodded, and in a small voice replied, "You found me in that place."

I held her tight with one arm and stroked her back. "You're in a supermarket; no one's gonna hurt you here. I won't let them."

"I'm fine," she mumbled, struggling to free herself. I let go, but caught her cheek in my palm, looking deep into her eyes.

"You don't have to be fine. I wouldn't be. I know you're strong as hell, but you can be weak if you need to be. I've got you."

Her head thudded back onto my chest and she hugged me tightly. A tremor went through the bond, and this time I was pretty sure *I* made it. She sucked in a breath as if she felt the shudder, but she didn't say anything about it.

"There's good news," she rasped after a while, drawing away from me with a shadowed smile. "Vodka's three pounds off this week."

I stroked her cheek before dropping my hand, matching her smile with my own. "Let's finish up quickly and go home. If you think *this* was the fun bit, wait until we unpack this in the kitchen."

Luna stared at the overflowing trolley in horror.



Luna

I should have stayed at the compound today. That was now painfully clear; even an hour after Priest and I got back and found somewhere to put the food in the huge kitchen, I was *still* unsettled. A door slammed deeper in the compound and I jumped, my fingers slashing a violent line through the blue sky I was trying to paint.

The painting didn't look right; something was missing. Not an element in the composition so much as ... a soul. A *perspective*. I'd seen the sky when Priest drove us back, and captured it as inspiration, but now that I was here, perched on the edge of the bed in my room with an easel set up in front of me, I couldn't summon that same feeling.

My inspiration was dead, and the blue canvas filled with fluffy white clouds was ... inane. Flimsy and transparent.

I grabbed a palette knife and squeezed a darker blue onto my palette, mixing until the colours were moodier. Maybe the clouds just needed shadows, something to make them less ... bland. Ordinary.

I began etching shadows, switching for a wider brush and scooping more and more paint, shading in wide, cathartic slashes. I squeezed out a blob of black and layered more ominous darkness, breathing fast as my brush dragged and slashed and stabbed, a thing wholly independent of me.

I leaned too close to see the bigger picture, painting details in the clouds like black veins of lightning, adding a stormy quality to the sky —except for two vivid blue sections in the middle that glared as brightly as the sun. They defied the dark storm.

It should have been a glimmer of hope, but when I sat back, my eyes aching from concentrating so hard, I caught a full glimpse of the painting and my stomach roiled.

The piece was full of blackness and ominous shapes, the sort of sky that crashed ships into rocks, and plucked planes from the sky to send them hurtling to their deaths. Those two whorls of brighter blue weren't glimpses of hope in the darkness—the darkness was bleeding *out of* them, infecting the rest of the painting.

It was the same shade of blue as Anatoly's eyes.

I scrambled off the bed and away from what I'd painted, what I'd accidentally given physical form to, but I couldn't stop *staring*. That was what lived inside me, bleeding its poison into my soul, infecting every part of my nervous system.

One second I was in the sanctuary room, staring at the painting in horror. The next, I was back in that vile Hunter den, with heat stabbing my skin as the alpha bore down on me, those blue eyes bright with satisfaction and victory.

I howled and tore free of the memory, and spun, slamming my fist into the nearest thing: the wardrobe. It was too solidly built for me to damage anything except my hand, but at least when pain blazed through my fist, I could catch a breath and escape those memories.

With my throbbing hand, I turned the easel to face the wall so I wouldn't have to see it again, but there was no undoing the damage it had already caused. Painting was my escape, the place I could disappear to when everything else became too overwhelming. But there was no comfort to be found here anymore.

There was no comfort to be found anywhere.

What I really needed was to drown out the memories, and if nothing else worked, at least there was always alcohol.



Priest

I wasn't proud of it, but I followed the dark flow of my bond with Luna to the bar, and pretended to be there for my own reasons.

"You fleeced me last week," I told Wizard when he raised his eyebrows at my arrival. "You didn't think I'd forgotten, did you?"

"Here to pay up a second time, Priest?" he threw back, running a dark hand through his shaggy black hair and sitting back in his chair to give me a smirk. "By all means ... hand over the rest of your savings."

I rolled my eyes, helping myself to a seat at the table he shared with Cobra and Sweetie.

"You're going down, Priest," Sweetie taunted, smirking behind his bushy beard.

My mouth curled in a grin. "I didn't realise we were betting sexual favours. If that's the case, count me out. I'm not interested in whatever you've got crawling around down there."

"Hey," Sweetie growled, his dark eyes narrowed but a smile flickering on

his face. "You'd be lucky to get anywhere near me, I'll have you know."

I snorted, secretly angling myself to watch where Luna sat near the bar with ChaCha—secretly watching Sweetie—and Thora—downing vodka shots like it was her paid job. Luna was paler than usual, but that could have been the shitty bar lighting that Prodigy claimed gave the place *ambiance*.

"Subtle," Cobra remarked with a smile sharp enough to cut. "You pining over the new rescue, Priest? That's not usually your style."

I narrowed my eyes in a clear warning, checking the hand Wizard dealt me. I hid my reaction to the cards behind a steely stare at my younger, volatile brother. I was probably gonna lose this hand, too. Fuck.

"I don't poke my nose into *your* business," I said pointedly to Cobra, watching a muscle flicker in his sharp jaw.

"I don't *have* any business," he shot back, sneering and defensive.

"Huh," Sweetie said before I could reply. Just that. Just *huh*.

"You got something to say, Sweets?" Cobra demanded, leaning across the table, his cards tipped to give us an accidental glimpse. Maybe all hope for this hand wasn't lost, because Cobra had *shitty* luck.

"It's just strange," Sweetie said nonchalantly, pretending to assess his cards. "I could've *sworn* I'd seen Lynn leaving your room a couple times this week."

I took another quick look across the bar. It wasn't massively busy tonight, but there was still a decent number of knights and rescues as Cobra called them. I double checked I knew every single person—we couldn't be too careful after a Hunter got in a month ago, and scared the shit out of Vienna.

Luna's clear brown eyes were glassy as she laughed at something Thora said, but it was a vacant sort of laugh, nothing like the way she'd laughed earlier. Before the episode in the supermarket threw her back into her trauma.

I watched her throw back a drink, pick up a shot, and down that, too. Fuck, she was trying to get completely wasted.

"Leave her be, Priest," Wizard said, shaking his dark head at me. "Pining will do you no good."

I pressed my lips into a line. "I'm not pining; I'm worried about her. You've seen what the Hunters do to people; she was in that house long enough to witness those horrors. I don't want her to—suffer."

To end up like Lavinia.

I knew it was my fatal flaw; I thought I could save everyone. To make up for failing my niece, I'd save everyone else.

"Did they ... y'know?" Cobra asked, his eyes as black and glaring as ever but something brittle and understanding in his expression.

I wanted to say *no*, but lying to my brothers left a queasy feeling in my gut. Instead I murmured, "I don't know."

"Ah, shit," Sweetie sighed, raking a hand down his beard. "I'll give her double portions at breakfast."

We all laughed at that, even if it was a subdued response. Sweetie's answer to everything was always food.

"Head's up, Priest," Wizard murmured, his brown face tight with a new concern as he jerked his chin at something across the room.

I turned—and my stomach tightened with a sudden cramp. Luna raced past the tables to the small corridor of the toilets, not something extraordinary in a bar, but her body was taut and locked and her pace itself was cause for concern.

I tried to reach through the bond, wishing I'd asked Guardian how to use the tether between Luna's soul and mine properly, and inhaled sharply at the crashing storm of violence and terror.

"You leave, you fold, Priest," Cobra reminded me.

Sweetie held out a hand to me. "Give 'em here, I'll play both. But you owe me, Priest."

"Thanks," I said genuinely, patting his shoulder as I got to my feet. "The usual price?"

"A bottle of the finest truffle oil you can find on the internet," Sweetie agreed, his eyes glinting. "And I'll know if you skimp on it."

I huffed a weak laugh, clapped his shoulder again, and headed after Luna.

Vienna was halfway to the bathroom, but she caught sight of me and a look of understanding crossed her face. I was Luna's mate—even if she didn't realise it, I had an innate power to soothe her. Vienna gave me a double thumbs up and went back to her table.

I moved quickly down the corridor to the bathroom door, putting my ear to the wood. My heart crashed at the short, gasping sobs on the other side.

I said a silent prayer, asking God to give her strength and comfort, and knocked softly with my knuckles.

The sobs stuttered.

"It's Priest," I called, reaching out through the bond to give what comfort I could. "Let me in, darling."

"I'm fine," she replied, thick with tears.

"I'm not going anywhere; I'm very stubborn. I can either wait out here for you, or you can let me in and I can give you a hug."

"I'm really fine," she insisted.

"And I'm really good with hugs," I countered.

"You've already hugged me today," she muttered, close by the door now. I could just about smell her bitter orange scent through the cracks around the door.

"Exactly. Why not make it twice?"

She groaned, and then the lock clicked, and Luna drew the door back enough for me to step inside.

"I'm okay, really," she insisted, but she melted into me when I wrapped my arms around her.

"You don't have to be okay," I said, resting my chin on her head and holding her tight. "You wanna talk about it?"

"No. I—" She paused, as if she remembered our conversation in the church, and then sighed. In the quietest voice, she breathed, "I can't get away from the memories, Priest. They're everywhere. Even now, I can—I can feel it. *Him*."

My stomach knotted, and rage blotted out the rest of my emotions before I got them under control. Still, there was a growl in my voice when I asked, "What can I do, darling?"

"Make—make me forget," she pleaded haltingly, her voice thin and the thrashing sea of her soul tremulous.

I only caught her meaning when she pressed against me. My heart plummeted, a sick feeling inside me. I didn't want to only be a coping mechanism for her, but I didn't know how to say that.

"Luna," I murmured, and jolted when she pulled away sharply at my tone of voice. "I'm not rejecting you," I said quickly. "Far from it, darling. If you want me, I'm yours. But not like this. Not when I'll throw you into a flashback."

Luna winced, her dark brow knotted like she was in pain. "I'm sorry. I—I don't know what to do, Luke."

Responsibility and weight settled on my shoulders at the sound of my birth name, not my road name. I couldn't let her down; I had to help. I couldn't *stand* her pain. I'd always thought I was strong, but seeing her hurt and struggling made me so damn weak.

She peered up at me, her crystal brown eyes brimming with tears, her face

reddened and shiny. I tucked a braid behind her ear, my fingers lingering on the warmth of her neck.

"You want to forget?" I asked.

Luna nodded instantly, her breathing beginning to calm.

"Wanna go on a ride? I can't promise it'll wipe out the memories forever, but it could clear your head for a while. Give you a distraction."

She swallowed, still looking at me with desperate relief. "A distraction sounds good."

I stroked my fingers down her neck, marvelling that she let me touch her at all. "When you're ready—really ready—I'm here waiting. Okay?"

"Okay," she agreed, and followed me without complaint when I unlocked the door.

The trust in that gesture knocked the breath out of me.



Luna

I wasn't sure how, but by the time Priest had driven us around the city a few times, my stomach stopped whirling, my mind stilled, and even the panic in my chest lightened. I wasn't truly settled—far from it—but at least I wasn't going to throw up and burst into sobs simultaneously.

He left me at the clubhouse door, ignoring the invitation in my eyes. I knew what I wanted: the calm that surrounded me when I was with him, the soft affection I saw in his eyes, the way I felt something close to safe. Safety was a precious luxury.

I knew he thought I couldn't make a clear decision right now, but what was wrong with wanting sex and closeness?

I meant what I said—I wanted to forget what happened. And maybe he was right, and it would remind me of that bed and that alpha, but maybe it would burn the memory out of me and replace it with something good.

When you're ready—really ready—I'm here waiting.

I sighed, walking past the still-rowdy bar and deeper into the clubhouse to

the sanctuary. Priest said he wasn't rejecting me, but he was still keeping me at arm's length. Even if I understood *why*, it was still confusing. If he wanted me, why wasn't he coming back to my room with me?

"Stop obsessing," I muttered to myself. But at least it was something new to obsess over.

Today had changed things, taken Priest from my one-time rescuer to someone I could rely on when I was thrown back into those memories; someone who'd hug me when I broke down and not judge me or look at me with that awful, aching pity. He was caring, steadfast, and perceptive, and that was hot as hell.

It didn't hurt that his arms bulged with muscle, he had tattoos, and he was as hot as hell. Ironic for a vicar.

My stomach growled, reminding me of more important things than my rapidly growing interest in Priest, and I glanced up when I reached the sanctuary's living room. A few people I didn't know yet were lounging on the big sofas, watching a film, but Lynn was in the small kitchen area with a bottle of tequila in her scarred hand.

She glanced up when I approached, a swift smile crossing her face. She lifted her glass. "Want one?"

"Desperately," I agreed, matching her smile as I opened the fridge and surveyed the contents. My eyes fell on the little chocolate pots Priest had put in the trolley this afternoon. I knew he'd seen my eyes drift to them. They reminded me of the carefree life I'd lived days ago, before the Hunters grabbed me.

I kept trying to pretend that everything was normal, but after today it was undeniable that I'd changed. But if I couldn't block out the memory and go back to how I was before, what was I supposed to *do*?

I yelped when a sharp fingernail rapped on my forehead, then I narrowed my eyes at Lynn.

"Talk," she barked, and placed a Tequila Sunrise in my hand.

"No, thanks," I replied quickly, taking a sip of the drink—it was as powerful and deadly as I'd expected from Lynn, and I almost coughed.

"Did I say it was optional?" Lynn narrowed her kohl-lined eyes. "*Talk*. I'm not a therapist, but keeping all that shit inside is destructive. Take it from someone with experience."

I couldn't help but remember what she'd told me. She couldn't have kids because someone had hurt her that badly.

I glanced over at the people watching their film, but it was a Marvel film and it was right in the middle of an action scene, with copious explosions and shouting. They couldn't hear me.

Still, I lowered my voice and glanced at Lynn from the corner of my eye, not brave enough to meet her full-on.

"I keep telling everyone the knights got to me in time."

"But they didn't," she replied bluntly.

I shook my head, and turned to the fridge again, grabbing sliced ham and not bothering to find bread to make a sandwich. Some nights called for sliced ham applied from the packaging directly to your mouth. Tonight was one of them.

I dared to whisper, "No."

"Drink," Lynn said, nodding at my cocktail. I took another drink and shoved more ham into my mouth. It wasn't a good taste combo, but I didn't care. "You need to say it out loud. *I know*," she muttered when I gave her a scowl. "It fucking sucks. But you *need* to. Don't ask me why; someone told me the same thing and ... look, it will always live inside you, no matter what you do. So accept that. But if you say what happened to you, it lets a tiny bit of it *out*."

I looked into my glass, so reluctant that I felt sick. But hadn't I *just* accepted that there was no going back to the way I was before? I couldn't be normal again; my normal had shifted. Right now, normal was nightmares and flinching and memories so dark they bled into my art.

"I don't want to make your trauma worse," I settled on finally, because it was a good point. "I don't want to trigger you."

Lynn waved a hand. "Don't worry about me; I've got my own coping mechanisms."

I raised an eyebrow. I badly needed a coping mechanism.

"I relive it, over and over," she explained, and smirked when I blanched. "But safely, and in a way that puts me in control."

Holy shit. She willingly put herself back in that place?

"That ... doesn't sound right for me. But I'm, ah, glad you have something that works."

Lynn shrugged, leaning against the counter. "What I have is a man that doesn't mind when I get defensive and stab him. Try finding your own," she suggested seriously.

"I'll take that under advisement."

Lynn snorted, taking a deep drink. "Go on, then. Say it."

My nostrils flared as I dragged in a breath. I didn't want to say it. I really fucking *did not want* to say anything aloud. It was bad enough that Priest knew; if I buried it, maybe it would—

But that hadn't worked last night or today at the supermarket, and if I was being honest with myself, I knew it wouldn't work tomorrow or the day after.

"I got grabbed on the way to work," I said, ashes coating my tongue; I took another drink and burned them away, heat scorching down to my belly. "Two Hunters, a man and a woman. They knocked me out."

That was the easy bit. Everyone knew those parts.

Lynn nodded, sharp and scowling but encouraging. Supportive.

I glanced over to make sure the others were still engrossed in their film and whispered, "I woke up in a bed and the male alpha had ... he put a collar around my throat. And chained me to the bed."

Lynn's expression didn't change; she didn't flinch. Fuck, I wished I had her strength.

I took another drink, draining my glass; Lynn handed me the bottle of the tequila. Right, the time for cocktails had passed; good point. I was still pretty buzzed from earlier, the ride on Priest's bike only partly sobering me, but not drunk enough to get through this. I took a deep swallow.

"I couldn't get away. His growl was strong, and the collar kept me trapped." I took another drink, tingles and heat moving through me, and I breathed, "I was—he—raped me."

Lynn snatched the bottle out of my hand, slammed it on the counter, and dragged me into a ferocious hug, squeezing me so tight my bones creaked.

"Two things," she said as I hugged her back, tears pooling in my eyes. "*One*, if the knights got hold of him, Tybalt will torture him, and then they'll kill him. So he'll never touch you again—or hurt anyone else either. *Two*, stop being so damn hard on yourself. Stop acting like you're fine when you're fucked up for obvious reasons. Give yourself permission to be completely screwed in the head."

I wasn't sure Lynn's advice was healthy, but maybe she was right. Maybe I *was* being hard on myself, expecting the Luna from two days ago to wake up every morning instead of the Luna who'd been—raped.

God, I'd—I'd been—raped.

"Is she alright?" someone asked, full of sympathy and gentle understanding.

I bristled.

"Mind your fucking business," Lynn snarled, and the random puff of laughter that left my lips dispersed some of the crushing pressure on my chest.

"Has anyone ever told you, you're not very nice?" I teased.

"Several times a day," Lynn drawled and let go of me, taking a long look at my face before nodding at what she saw. "I don't owe anyone fuck all, and certainly not sweetness. This..." She waved a hand. "This shit changes you, in tiny ways and massive ways. Don't let anyone make you feel guilty for being whoever you need to be to survive."

I blinked. Okay, shit, that was actually good advice.

"Don't look so surprised," she laughed, picking up her glass again. "I can be wise."

"Are you sure?" I asked, heavy on the sarcasm, and smirked at her eye roll. This felt ... good. I'd felt slightly better after the time I spent with Priest, but now I felt more settled than I had since I got to the compound.

"Does anyone else know?" she asked, bringing us back to the world's shittiest subject. The person who asked if I was okay had returned to the sofas, thank the Lord.

"Only—one person," I admitted with a sigh, grabbing the last two slices of ham and devouring them. "Priest. He found me in that place. Took the collar off me."

Lynn bobbed her dark head, contemplative. "So what's the vibe? Is he like Jesus for sweeping in and saving you, or do you want to fuck him until you see God?"

I burst out laughing, my face tingling with heat and outrage. "Lynn!"

"What? I've been here a while; those are the only two outcomes. Idolisation or sex. Well, maybe the occasional best friend, but that's rare."

I raised an eyebrow at her caginess. "Which was yours?"

"The latter. Moving on."

I laughed, but let her be. Lynn wasn't the sort of person you pushed until she told you the truth; she was the sort you pushed until she threatened you at the end of a knife. I liked her, I realised. Genuinely. There were no airs and graces with Lynn, and no expectations or judgement beyond her snark and her smirk.

"So which is it?" she asked, steering the conversation back to Priest.

I glanced away. "Both? I don't know."

"Hmm." She glanced into the distance and smiled. "Hey, can you tell me if he's got a big dick? I've had a bet going with ChaCha for years."

"*What?* No!" I laughed, shaking my head. "Not a damn chance."

"I'll give you a cut," she offered. "It's a hefty bet."

I groaned. "What are you doing betting on the size of his dick anyway?"

Lynn shrugged, back to being her indolent self. "No one's ever been with him. Not any of the clubwomen, either. We've got another bet going that he's celibate."

And I'd propositioned him earlier. Twice. Oh, fuck.

I made a face.

"Did you already see it?" she asked eagerly.

"No! Oh my god, Lynn, stop obsessing over his cock."

She snorted. "Fine, I'll let the topic go. For now," she emphasised. "But if you want my advice, ride that vicar all the way to Heaven."

"Stop with the biblical references," I groaned, putting my head in my hands.

"Not a chance," she quipped. "So ... do you *like* him, or is it just a sexual connection?"

"Yes," I sighed, dropping my hand and giving her a warning look. I wouldn't answer many more questions; this was private. Precious. "I like him. He's kind, and he genuinely cares about people. Things feel a little bit okay when I'm with him."

"Plus that beard would feel *very* interesting between your legs, huh?"

I shoved Lynn. Hard. But I was laughing, and it felt so good.

I missed Astrid fiercely. I was scared she'd take one look at me and know what had happened, but maybe that would be okay? Lynn knew, and I had a feeling Vienna did, too.

I just needed to tell Astrid in a way that didn't make her think it was her fault. She couldn't know Anatoly and Mads had picked me up so I'd lead them to her. I'd take *that* fact to my grave.

"Thanks," I said, putting the empty packet of ham in the bin. "I never want to talk about this again, but thanks."

Lynn tipped her glass at me. "Don't mention it. Seriously. If word gets out that I've been nice and given *advice* to someone, my whole reputation will be shot to hell."

I laughed, shaking my head. "I'm going to bed. See you later."

"Eat something more than ham, moron," she huffed, and thrust two

Lunchables at me.

Lunchables which contained cheese ... and *ham*.

Amused, I accepted them and retreated into my room. At least I felt better than when I'd entered the sanctuary; tonight's sleep had to be better than last night's.



Luna

I woke up some time after dawn with a raspy cry, clawing at my throat to get the collar off. Covers tangled as I thrashed, still trapped in the dream until my nails scraped over bare skin.

"Shit."

Sharp panic ate all my air, and I dropped my hands to my chest, pressing hard as if it would fill my lungs. I managed to drag a breath through gritted teeth when an eerie wave of coolness swept through my body, muffling the thrashing in my chest with a pool of calm.

"What?" I gasped, relieved but confused.

I climbed out of bed, the creak of the mattress reminding me too much of the mattress where Anatoly—

I wasn't strong enough to think the word anymore.

With shaky hands, I tore the curtains open and stared out at the long stretch of grass outside my window. There'd be a family barbecue there later, but I couldn't bring myself to think about that gathering now. I needed space,

not people surrounding me.

Mostly, I needed to get out of this room, where so many nightmares filled the four walls. I turned on the red giraffe lamp and hunted down my shoes and coat, not bothering to change out of the neon purple pyjamas ChaCha had gifted me.

I went to grab my phone, and froze.

"Right. Still no phone."

I needed to ask Priest or Prodigy where it had ended up. I knew the bikers had found it—that was how they'd tracked me down. I'd feel safer with my phone. Not by much, but any sense of safety was precious and rare now.

I left the light on when I left. Maybe when I got back, the warm glow would help chase the shadows out of my head, not just the room.

In the hall, I turned to close the door—and jumped when my shoes knocked into something.

"What?" I laughed, shaking my head at the bottle of water and pot of chocolate dessert that had been left outside my door, a shining spoon propped on top of the pot.

I bent to retrieve them, still frowning, but ripped the foil off the dessert and dug my spoon through the rich, chocolatey goodness anyway.

It could have been Lynn; she'd probably seen me eyeing the dessert last night. But something told me it was the man who'd bought the dessert in the first place, and more of that cool water soothed my wild panic.

I'd been meaning to walk around the clubhouse until I could breathe properly, but instead my feet carried me to the front door and across the tarmac to the chapel.

There were no lights glowing inside, but when I pushed the door, it glided open with a creak. Maybe Priest left it open all night in case someone needed to speak to God? Or maybe he was already awake, and he was the one who'd left the chocolate and water.

I closed the door behind myself and found a pew in a circle of faint light from the stained-glass window. Morning wasn't here yet, but there was enough illumination in the church that I could eat my chocolate pot—and see something strange when I scraped the transparent plastic at the bottom.

"Huh," I murmured, my voice hushed within the hallowed halls.

I finished in record time, scraping the last bits of chocolate out and turning the pot over. There was a small post-it note on the bottom of the pot. A scrawl of messy bold handwriting said *don't suffer alone*.

My heart flip-flopped. So it was Priest—he'd told me that exact thing half a dozen times during our supermarket trip. I folded the note into my palm, and wondered if the man was psychic. Maybe he had a closer link to God than most vicars I'd known.

Either way, I couldn't remember the last time I'd been so touched.

"Thank you," I whispered to God. "For sending him to me."

None of this was easy, but knowing Priest was looking out for me put a warm feeling in my chest.

I could have gone back to my room when I calmed down, but I took my shoes off, pulled my knees to my chest, and hugged them as I waited for Priest to come.



Priest

*M*y head was full of the Hunters and the raids we were planning when I pushed open the chapel doors, sweaty from my morning run. I usually slept far later, but ever since Luna got here, I'd been waking at dawn or even earlier, experiencing an echo of her nightmares.

A scuffle drew my head up to the front of the chapel, and I startled at the sight of Luna *here*, in her red coat with purple pyjamas poking out of the bottom, her face cut with lines of strain, and her braids hanging around her face.

"Bad night, darling?" I asked, closing the door behind me and striding down the aisle.

Her humourless laugh told me everything I needed to know, and confirmed what the bond had already suggested. I'd woken up gasping for breath, covered in a cold layer of sweat. If it was that bad for *me* through the filter of a latent bond, how much must Luna have suffered?

I opened my arms when I neared her, and my heart went berserk when

she rushed into them, squeezing me tight. I wrapped her up in my arms, the instinct to purr so sudden and insistent that my chest rumbled before I cut it off.

"I—it's okay," she said, halting but strong. "You can purr. I trust you."

Fuck.

Both those statements hit me like a punch to the soul, and my purr *roared* out of me.

Luna laughed softly, settling her head over my chest. "Damn, you're loud."

I winced. "Sorry."

But I wasn't sure I could choke the sound off now I'd given it free reign. I'd kept this trapped every single time we were together, when my strongest instinct was to purr a promise of comfort.

Luna sagged as the sound finally worked its way into her, and she turned limp in my arms. "Don't be. I like it."

I dared to run my fingers through her braids, keeping my touches light. She didn't push away from me, so I kept my pressure soft as I stroked her back, a tremor going through the bond from my end. Could she sense my reaction?

"It's strange," she murmured, her voice so quiet it didn't echo off the vaulted ceiling. "This is pretty much the only place I feel safe."

She tipped her head back to look at me, her expression wry. "You must have some kind of secret magic."

What I had was a mate bond I was keeping secret.

"What?" she asked, her smile falling.

Shit, was it written all over my face?

Luna drew back, a furrow between her dark brows. "I was joking; I don't think you actually have magic."

I shook my head. I didn't want her to find out, and didn't want to add extra pressure to her shoulders when she was already so stressed. But another part of me desperately wanted to tell her. I was proud to be her mate, and keeping it secret felt like shame.

I swallowed. "It's nothing."

Now her frown deepened and she took a step away from me. "Don't lie to me, Priest. You're not very good at it."

Yeah, I knew that. It was why I preferred the truth; I was a shit liar, and it left a sickly taste in my mouth. I couldn't do it now, either, couldn't pretend or

joke to misdirect her attention. She'd asked me straight, so I had to tell the truth and hope ... fuck, I had to hope it didn't change anything between us.

"If I tell you, you might stop coming to the chapel," I murmured, watching her withdraw into herself—arms crossed over her chest, her lips in a flat line, her brown eyes dull.

"Just tell me," she sighed, shaking her dark head. "I don't like secrets."

I licked my lips, my mouth dry, and tried to catch her gaze, but she evaded eye contact.

"You're my mate," I said in a whisper. "But I—I don't expect anything, definitely not after what you've been through. Just don't stop coming to the chapel when it gives you comfort. *Please.*"

Luna laughed, a soft bubble of sound that reached into my chest and crushed my heart. "Betas don't get bonds. You're wrong, Priest."

"They don't get them *often*," I agreed. "But it's not unheard of. And there's no denying it, Luna, at least not for me. I can feel you sometimes—"

"Okay, stop there," she interrupted, throwing up her hand as if I was going to attack her.

I took several steps back, giving her space. My stomach roiled at the mere thought of hurting her.

"So this—" She waved a hand at me, at the chapel. "All this time, you've only been kind to me because I'm your mate." She laughed again, and there was no way I'd ever describe this sharp slash of sound as *bubbling*. "I thought you were being *nice*, a good vicar."

"I was," I rushed out, aching and sick. "I *am*. But it's my instinct to care for you, Luna."

"Instinct," she hissed, shoving her feet into the shoes she'd discarded beneath the pew. "Instinct got me into this place. Those alphas didn't ignore their *instinct*, and now *this?*"

She swallowed, shaking her head—in anger. Oh fuck, she was angry.

"I thought you were genuine," she said—spat. Her whole body vibrated with anger and another emotion I couldn't place. The bond writhed like a stormy ocean, slamming into my ribs. "I thought you were a good guy. Wait—this is why you sent the water and the chocolate, isn't it? Because you're *my mate.*"

I nodded, twisting my fingers in front of me and gripping hard. I didn't know what to say, what to do. She was furious, and of all the responses I hadn't expected this. I thought she might be afraid, or intimidated, or even

relieved. She didn't have to shoulder her pain alone; I'd be with her.

But she resented the bond.

A part of me shrivelled up and howled in pain.

"Luna," I tried, but she shoved past me and up the aisle. "I just—you—you're recovering from a brutal assault. Forcing a bond on you is the *worst* thing I could have done."

She laughed, bitter and low, and turned when she reached the door. "No, Priest. Lying is the worst thing you could have done."

"I never—everything I told you was true. *Everything*. You're my mate, but I still lost my niece, and everything I do is still because of her, because I can't stand the idea of someone else taking their life in the same way—"

"Save it," Luna snapped. "Dress it up however you want, you still lied. I trusted you, and you fucking lied."

She shoved the door open—and slammed it shut behind her.

Fuck.

I'd ruined everything. I'd been trying to protect her, but instead I'd ... I'd insulted her.

"Fuck," I grunted, and dragged a hand down my face.



Luna

I did not want to be here.

I tried so hard not to glare at the bright colours and giddy noises in the garden behind the clubhouse, tried not to grind my teeth as the bearded chef flirted with ChaCha and grilled meat and vegetables on the massive brick barbecue.

There were more bikers in the Alpha Knights club than I'd realised—I'd only met the ones who lived in the compound. There were others who lived outside it with their families, or alone, preferring solitude. They'd brought their families today, so kids ran around the long patch of grass, playing a game and screaming like banshees when they lost. I tried not to begrudge them their happiness.

"Here," Jessia said, bustling over to me with a bright smile on her round face and a paper plate filled with waffles, cream, and chocolate held out to me.

"I thought this was a barbecue," I remarked, but accepted the plate.

"Aren't there supposed to be sausages and burgers?"

"Well, yeah," she replied with a laugh, "but those come after the most *important* food groups. Speaking of most important, I brought you this."

She held up a pink plastic wine glass that had something clear and bubbly inside, a few raspberries floating at the top of the liquid.

"I'll put it on this table you're brooding against," she offered, her eyes bright. "Want to tell me what's wrong?"

"Nothing's wrong," I replied, and used the plastic fork balanced on my plate to cut an edge of crispy waffle, filling my mouth. I couldn't be expected to talk if I was eating, could I?

"I thought you might say that," Jessia agreed easily. "But I'm not the only one who's noticed you're a little ... surly today. I'm just the first line of defence; ChaCha and Lynn will press you for answers. They're very forceful in their friendship."

"I've noticed," I replied dryly. "Don't worry about me, though, I'm just feeling edgy. You know, being around so many people."

Jessia's smile didn't slip; she patted my arm. "Whatever you say, love. But don't say I didn't warn you about those two battle axes."

I couldn't help but laugh; it was a good description.

"Whenever you're ready to talk, come find me. I'm an awful listener, but I try."

Her humour coaxed another laugh out of me. "Thanks."

"No problem." Her warm eyes glittered. "And good luck."

"Thanks," I repeated, but drawling this time.

I spotted Lynn, ChaCha, and Vienna across the garden near the buffet table, along with a short, dark-haired woman in a very revealing dress. Lynn and ChaCha gave me ominous waves; Vienna was too busy cuddling up to her mate, Guardian, to notice me; but the new woman gave me a beaming, enthusiastic smile and waved like a madwoman. She was cute; maybe a little crazy, but cute. I waved back.

They let me eat my waffle and drink what turned out to be Prosecco, but the second my paper plate was clear, I *sensed* them, the side of my face burning and tingling.

"Oh, here we go," I muttered, half laughing, half wincing.

I'd never really had girlfriends before; I'd been friends with a few of the artists who shared my studio building, and sometimes we caught the bus into town for drinks on a weekend, but mostly it was me, Dad, and Astrid. Astrid

could be fierce and interrogatory in her own right, but there was only one of her. Four women prowled across the garden towards me.

Well, the little brunette woman skipped and waved at anyone she passed. But the other three prowled for sure.

"Alright, Luna, *spill*," ChaCha ordered the second she reached me, her purple hair straightened to a deadly spill over her shoulders and her bronze skin gleaming in the evening sun.

"There's nothing to spill," I replied, giving her a baffled smile.

"Hi!" the small, brunette woman chirped, and I jumped in surprise when she collided with me in a hug. "I'm Everly. My friends have told me *so much* about you. Wanna be my friend, too?"

"Uh. Yeah," I agreed, smiling despite my sour mood. "Why not?"

"Yes!" Everly let go of me to pump her fist. "Another friend! How many am I up to now?" she asked Vienna.

"Counting all the sanctuary, the knights, and the people you've picked up on trips into town ... fifty maybe?"

"You're number fifty-one," my new friend told me with a wide grin, her green eyes bright with genuine happiness. "I've never had real friends before," she told me, "so I'm collecting as many as possible."

"Oh. Well, I'm glad to make the list," I told her, laughing when she threw herself at me in another hug. She reminded me of an affectionate puppy, and it was cute.

"I'm glad, too. Even Lynn likes you, which is *crazy*. Lynn doesn't like *anyone*. Well," she paused, giving me a mischievous look, "except Devil. He's her best friend."

"My only friend," Lynn drawled, and I flicked my gaze up to see her loitering close by in her regular uniform of dark clothes and a leather jacket. She hadn't dressed up for the get-together either, I was relieved to see. "You fuckers are just inconveniences who sometimes bring me food and offer amusement."

"Liar!" Everly accused, releasing me to spin and point a finger at Lynn. "You like me; I know you do."

"Children!" ChaCha barked, clapping her hands loudly. "Can we get back to the matter at hand?"

"Can we not?" I asked under my breath, but their antics and Everly's genuine enthusiasm for literally everything had lightened my mood a little. Jessia was probably right; I was brooding.

But Priest was the only person I'd let inside all my guards, and he'd lied—about something huge and important.

"Miss Pissy-Face is in a mood, and we need to figure out why," ChaCha declared.

I scowled at the name. I did *not* have a pissy face.

Although I was pissed off...

"Maybe she needs a nest," Everly suggested genuinely, her eyes big and brimming with enthusiasm. She dropped her voice to a whisper and added, "And a nice big cock."

"Oookay," Lynn cut in, settling her arm across the smaller woman's shoulders and drawing her back. "Good idea; we'll try them both. First, how about you tell us what's going on, Luna? This is more than what we talked about before; I can tell."

"You're a little more ... sulky," Vienna agreed, but sympathetically. "And that's fine! We all get sulky every now and then."

"Some more than others," ChaCha drawled, sliding a look at Lynn, who grinned with far too many teeth for it to be anything but a challenge.

"We're your support network, remember?" Vienna went on, giving me an encouraging smile. "So you can talk to us. About anything."

I shook my head. But—I was pissed off. And rightly so. Why shouldn't I tell them?

I crossed my arms over my chest and sighed, "Since I got here, you guys have been amazing, but Priest's looked after me a lot, too. He was the one who got me out of that house."

"Ohhhhh, it's a boy problem," Everly breathed, then whispered to me, "I'm amazing at boy problems."

"Your solution is literally always sex," ChaCha pointed out, a smirk on her purple lips.

"Yeah, so? It works."

I laughed. "That's not gonna work for this. Sorry, Everly. He lied to me—for days. I thought he was a decent person. I even told him I *felt safe* around him," I snarled, angry at myself and a little disgusted. "And he's a fucking *liar*."

"Do you want me to kill him?" Lynn offered genuinely, true interest in her sharp eyes.

I laughed. "Ah. No, it's okay."

"I'm pretty sure I can get away with it," Lynn went on, deadly serious. "I

don't have a problem with the guy, but if he hurt you, I've got a few ideas."

"That's worrying," Vienna murmured, her brow furrowed.

"I'm good on the murder front," I promised Lynn, strangely touched by the offer. I got the sense she didn't extend it to many people. "I'm just pissed off, and I don't want to talk to him ever again."

"What did he lie about?" Vienna asked gently, edging closer so she could set her hand on my arm, her face drawn with concern.

I shook my head, resistant to saying the truth out loud. I wasn't even sure *why* I was so angry. But the emotion had drowned me, and it refused to ebb away again.

"He said he was helping me because he didn't want me to struggle with what I—what I saw in that house," I corrected quickly, keeping the truth buried. Lynn raised an eyebrow; ChaCha noticed. Shit. "But it's *bullshit*."

"Ohhhhhh," Everly breathed, wriggling away from Lynn and rushing over to me. "He's doing that overprotective, *I'll keep you safe* thing, right?"

I blinked. "Uh, maybe?"

Everly nodded sagely. "*Did* he keep you safe by lying to you?"

"He only made me angry by lying but ... maybe that's what he thought he was doing. I don't know."

Everly made a face. "Men are idiots. Mates are worse."

"Well, *shit*," Lynn said with a low laugh of realisation.

I was glad I hadn't had to say it out loud. I was still hurt to voice it. I had a mate—and he'd kept that from me.

"What is it with these bikers finding mates?" ChaCha demanded. "They're like goddamn mate magnets."

"Jealous, C?" Lynn purred.

ChaCha elbowed her in the gut.

My eyes fell on Vienna, and some things clicked together. "You're not shocked. That morning you woke me up..."

She winced, running a hand through her blonde hair. "Ah. Yeah. Don't be mad."

"I'm not mad at *you*," I assured her, my skin itchy and hot. I needed to scream at the top of my lungs, or paint something violent. "He probably swore you to secrecy."

Her expression confirmed as much. She squeezed my arm. "He's really worried about you, Luna, and Everly's right. I think he tried to protect you by keeping this secret. Which is stupid, I know. But also..." She lowered her

voice. "You've been through a lot. You might not even *want* a mate."

"Idiot was probably scared of rejection," Lynn remarked.

Which ... I hadn't thought of, honestly. Being rejected by your mate was supposed to be the worst, most unimaginable pain. I hadn't given it much thought; I'd never expected a mate.

"I'm a beta," I muttered, thinking out loud. "I shouldn't even have a mate."

"Well, you do, so buckle up," ChaCha replied. She elbowed Lynn with a smile, but there was something brittle about it. Did she have a mate? Did she *want* one? "We're finally gonna know who wins that bet."

"No, you're not," I replied firmly, shutting down that conversation, shutting down *all of it*. I was overwhelmed by thoughts and feelings, and ... out of my depth. I was so fucking out of my depth it was crazy. "It's never gonna happen, I'm never gonna see his dick, end of story."

Lynn and ChaCha snorted in harmony. I glared.

"Give it time," Vienna urged, watching me with a warm sympathy that made me itchy. "Don't write off the bond yet, okay? It's ... there's nothing else like it. It's special."

I made a face.

"You know your souls fit magically together, right?" ChaCha asked, not teasing anymore. "He's like—the perfect person for you. If you don't give that a shot, you're mad. Even if he lied and deserves a dick punch for it."

"Yes," Lynn agreed eagerly. "I volunteer."

I groaned, palming my face. She just wanted to know if he had a big cock to win her bet. "I'll think about it."

"Does it feel weird when you're together?" Vienna asked. "Or strained? Or do you feel threatened?"

"No. None of that."

"What about comforted? Safe?"

I dropped my hand to give her an unimpressed look.

"I'm just trying to help," she said, matching my scowl with a hint of steel I hadn't realised she possessed. "Sometimes people need things spelled out to them. You're angry he lied; but are you angry he's your mate?"

I opened my mouth, but I didn't know the answer.

And thankfully I didn't have to reply, because a bright shout cut across the garden, as familiar as my own voice, and I snapped my head up to watch my sister weave around bikers, husbands, wives, and kids, until she knocked Vienna aside and hugged me so tight my bruises throbbed.

I'd never been so happy to see her in my life.



Priest

"*H*e's pining," Warning whisper-yelled to Tybalt, but his eyes were on me.

"I'm not pining," I bit out, crossing my arms over my chest. I usually dressed up for these family barbecues, but I didn't have the energy today. I hadn't slept, and I'd gone through the day on automatic pilot, making sure Devil had everything he needed to service our bikes for the Birmingham raid.

"Grade A pining," Tybalt agreed, as if I wasn't here.

In their defence, I hadn't taken my eyes off Luna since I got here and found her surrounded by a cluster of her friends. I was beyond glad she had people to take care of her, but I was bitter that I couldn't be part of that support circle.

"Where the fuck are *you* going?" Tybalt barked at Prodigy when our president stalked past where we'd crowded around the barbecue, like dogs waiting for scraps of meat from Sweetie.

Prodigy halted a few steps ahead, and even I stiffened and averted my gaze when he turned slowly, wholly predator.

"You're fucked," Warning snickered to Tybalt.

Prodigy closed the distance between him and our vice president with a slow, dangerous pace, his expression frozen and unyielding.

Without a flicker of anger in his eyes, he grabbed a fistful of Tybalt's long dark hair and wrenched him closer a step.

"I'm sorry, Tybalt, what was that?" he asked calmly.

"Nothing, president," Tybalt whispered, his eyes blazing.

"Yeah, that's what I thought," Prodigy replied and released him abruptly, making Tybalt sway back a step.

I hid a smile. Tybalt was always mouthing off; it was a rare occurrence to see him reminded of the club hierarchy, but it was a beautiful sight.

"Aw look at that," Sweetie said when Prodigy had left, flipping steaks on the grill. "Priest's cheered right up. You should get knocked down a peg or two more often, Tybalt."

"Shut up," I laughed at the same time Tybalt snarled, "I'll knock *you* down a peg, you chef bastard."

"Pegging's not my thing, man," Sweetie replied, grabbing paper plates. "Oh, look who finally showed up," he called, and I followed his gaze to find Giant, our massive, bald brother, crossing the garden towards us.

I scanned the garden until I found Astrid, his mate and Luna's sister. They hugged so hard the impact looked painful, speaking in a rush, both crying as Astrid gave Luna a phone and—shit, I was definitely pining.

"So, how was the heat?" Sweetie asked, moving steaks and burgers off the grill and onto plates.

"Private," Giant replied pointedly.

I reached across the table behind me for a beer and passed it to him.

"Thanks, man. So, what did I miss?"

Warning grinned, elbowing me. I gave my VP a dark look, which he ignored.

"Nothing much," I replied.

"Luna's his mate," Warning took great pleasure in blurting out. "And he fucked everything up by not telling her."

"I told you that in confidence," I muttered, scowling across the yard, "not so you could taunt me with it."

"What are the chances?" Giant laughed, smiling and even more cheerful

than usual—which was saying a lot. The man was a gentle giant. "Both of us finding our mates, and they're sisters?"

"That's strange shit at work," Warning agreed.

"It's fate," Tybalt argued, grabbing a beer and downing half of it. "Isn't that what all mate bonds are? Fucking fate?"

I blinked at the bitterness in his tone, and was surprised when he muttered something about bullshit under his breath and stalked off.

"What was that about?" I asked, frowning at my brothers.

Giant shrugged. "Not a clue. So," he said, settling the weight of his stare on me, "how are you gonna fix things with Luna?"

That was a damn good question.

How was I going to fix things?



Luna

Everything I'd been scared about—especially Astrid finding out what Anatoly did to me—fizzled into nothing after tonight. She didn't take one look at me and know what he did. She didn't give me that half-guilt, half-sympathetic look I'd been dreading. Maybe ... maybe I could keep it to myself just a little longer. Until I could speak about what happened without it gouging out a part of me.

I said goodbye to the girls and returned to my room—well, *wobbled* to my room thanks to the copious amounts of Prosecco I'd drunk. And that was before Thora brought out bottles of tequila and whiskey and started lining up shots.

I felt strangely okay, and I knew it wouldn't last, but every tear I'd shed with Astrid and every laugh I'd shared with the women of the club had given me a temporary shield against my darkest memories.

I had to squint to read the clock on the bedside table next to the giraffe lamp. Half three in the morning. I should have got into bed, but instead I took

the nightmarish canvas off the easel and placed a fresh one on it. A familiar calm settled over me as I refreshed my water and mixed colours on the palette.

My phone burned in my pocket, reminding me to charge it and read my messages, but for now I drew a slow breath and focused on the piece in front of me. Instead of trying to paint a blue sky, this time I painted the darkness and the storm. But I was clear enough to see it for what it was when I placed a swath of darkness under a lightning-wreathed cloud—not a vivid memory but a shadow that would pass when the storm cleared.

I didn't expect the optimism to last, but the more nights I could have like tonight, I might be able to fight the memories back during the days, too. For the first time I thought *I can do this*, not *I have to do this*.

I squeezed red onto the palette and diluted it with water, letting a drop of blood drip down the canvas from a heavy storm cloud and adding two shorter drips on either side.

That room and that bed would never leave me. I knew that, no matter how much I liked to pretend otherwise. Maybe the alcohol had given me clarity; maybe being with Astrid had. But I knew I'd never fully excise that bit of poison from my mind. I never wanted to go back to my studio, never wanted to go to another park, and I didn't think I'd ever trust an alpha growl.

I sat back and looked at the painting. It wasn't as beautiful as my usual art; the brush strokes were ragged and short instead of broad and fluffy, and my eye went right to the crimson drips before they travelled around the canvas to the rest of the piece: the storm clouds, the flickers of white lightning, and the glowing presence of blue skies trying to cut through the darkness. It took me a moment to realise why that shade of blue was so familiar, and then I groaned at my own subconscious.

"You've gotta be fucking kidding me."

That blue was the colour of Priest's eyes.

"Ugh," I groaned, rubbing my tired face and then laughing at the smear of paint I felt on my cheek. I'd need a shower before I slept, no matter how exhausted and ready for bed I was.

I would figure out what to do about Priest in the morning.

Right now, no matter how annoyed I was that he'd lied, I wanted to spend time with him again. I wanted to hear a good explanation for him keeping that secret. His mate—I was *his mate*. And fuck, he was mine too. I had a mate. A real, genuine soul mate.

ChaCha's words came back to me—that his soul was magically perfect for mine. It had certainly felt that way before I realised he was a damn liar.

Well, maybe not a *liar*—he'd tried to lie and he was atrocious at it. I laughed at the thought as I packed up my brushes and moved the easel back to the window before going into the en-suite. Not a liar, then, just a secret keeper. Which was almost as bad. Almost.

"And now you're making excuses for him," I muttered as I clumsily pulled my clothes off. Now that I wasn't sitting, I became very aware that I was still tipsy.

I snorted when I wobbled into the wall and splayed there.

"He does give good hugs," I sighed, remembering the feel of his arms around me.

When memories had crowded me in the supermarket, he'd been there in an instant—because he *felt* my panic—and his hug had made everything feel okay for a little while—because he was my mate. Because he was safe.

If that was all he was to me—a safe place to land—I could have stayed mad at him. But my memories of laughing over the rusted car, and the way his eyes sparkled when I teased him, and how his smile grew when he made *me* laugh ... they were crystal-clear, and taunting.

"It's been one day," I growled at myself and climbed into the shower, very carefully placing my feet and expecting to slip again. "You can't miss him already."

I stood there—dry.

Huh? Where was the water?

Oh, right, I had to turn it on first.

I reached for the dial—and screamed when cold water poured over me, goosebumps blasting across my body.

"I'm too drunk for this," I cried, shivering when the water began to warm. "And too drunk for Priest-related decisions."

I'd see him tomorrow morning at Sunday service. I'd figure out everything then.

I just had to successfully wash the paint off myself, dress for bed, and then remember to set an early alarm.

No problem. Right?



Priest

I couldn't stop fidgeting. For the third time, I shuffled my notes and adjusted the bible on the lectern, my eyes drifting past the dozen people sitting in the pews to the door, waiting for it to open.

Luna said she'd come, but that was before she found out we were mates and that I'd kept it from her.

I gave her another minute, long enough that people started checking the time on their phones and watches.

She wasn't coming.

I opened my mouth to greet everyone and begin today's sermon, but the door's sharp creak made my voice choke in my throat. Everyone turned to see who'd entered, and my heart skipped—legitimately skipped—when Luna ducked her head, her braids falling around the shoulders of her red coat, and slipped into a pew at the back.

In the front row, Justice waggled his eyebrows at me; I pointedly ignored him and began my service. I shouldn't have felt so optimistic after the

betrayed way Luna had looked at me the last time she entered this chapel. But I couldn't stop the hope spreading through me, adding a light, bubbly optimism to the scripture I recited.

I managed to look everywhere but directly at Luna, though she stood out clearly in the corner of my vision with her long black braids and bright red coat.

Every part of me was aware of her, and even across the span of the chapel I could swear her bitter orange scent coated my tongue with a hint of tart sweetness.

Anticipation and nerves fizzed through me as I reached the end of service, and moved down the aisle to speak to everyone. I ignored Justice's not-so-subtle hints. Word of Luna being my mate had spread fast; my brothers were bigger gossips than fishwives.

I planned to ask Luna to stay behind so we could talk, but I didn't have to. The second my brothers and their families filed out, Luna made a beeline for me, her fingers twisted together in front of her, and asked, "Can we talk?"

"Always," I replied, and then realised that was probably over the top. "Ah, I can ... make us a cup of tea? In my flat upstairs?"

Why was I asking instead of offering? My voice kept going up at the end, and I couldn't stop it. I wanted to drop my face into my hands.

"Okay," she agreed, and I was relieved to see she wasn't glaring. But she looked as nervous and unsure as I felt. "Tea sounds good. I woke up so late, I didn't have time for anything before church."

I stiffened like a bolt of electricity had struck me. "You haven't eaten?" I asked. My instincts demanded I rectify that *immediately*.

"I'm fine, I'm not that hungry," she replied with a shrug.

But all I heard was *that*. She wasn't *that* hungry. So she *was* hungry.

Any clumsy hesitation on my part vanished instantly, replaced by a solid need to provide for her.

"Come on, I'll make breakfast."

I led the way through the door in the back and up the stairs to my flat, becoming very aware of how small and cramped the rooms were. Big enough for two people, but certainly cosy.

"I don't have much in the kitchen here; I usually go over to the clubhouse for meals. But I could do scrambled eggs and toast if you're not opposed. Or allergic," I added, realising how little I knew about Luna. My mate. My mate who was here in my flat.

I jumped a little when she closed the door behind her, sealing us inside my home, together.

She still trusted me. My heart galloped.

"You don't have to make breakfast; I'm fine," she insisted, which I chose to ignore, moving through the open plan living-room-kitchen and grabbing milk, eggs, and bread from the fridge. "*But* you're stubbornly making food anyway," she added with a little laugh.

"I *am* stubborn, especially when it comes to people skipping meals." I put the kettle on and plopped two teabags in mugs. "Sugar? Milk?"

"Milk, no sugar," she replied, and startled the hell out of me by leaning against the counter beside me. "Sorry I got angry and stormed off. I should have stayed to talk; I was just so ... disappointed."

Ouch.

I covered a wince with a nod, flicking on the oven and putting a frying pan on the hob. "I didn't keep it a secret to hurt you. That's the last thing I want to do."

"It was jarring," she murmured, crossing her arms over her chest. "I know I haven't known you long, but I still thought I knew the kind of person you were. And I didn't think you'd lie. But I guess—it wasn't a normal situation, right?"

"No," I murmured, not sure where this was going. Did she want to spend time with me again or was she here to let me down gently?

"Would you have told me if ... all that stuff didn't happen at the Hunters' house?"

"Instantly," I replied, cracking eggs into the pan and whisking them as they cooked, glad for something to keep me occupied. "I knew you were my mate the second I found your scent. The thought of you being with the Hunters, all the things they could have been doing to you—"

I cut the words off, swallowing hard. All the things they *had* done to her.

"My only priority was getting you to safety and *keeping* you safe. Forcing a mate bond on you when you were struggling just to sleep was not keeping you safe."

She sighed heavily. "I really want to be mad at you, but I get it. And for the record, it wouldn't have been *forcing* a bond. I've had a very enlightening conversation with my new friends about mates and bonds and bites and all that stuff."

I glanced at her sideways, and noticed she wouldn't meet my eyes. I didn't

press for why she was embarrassed, or what those friends had told her.

"It's not as if you've ever been forceful," she added, slanting a look my way. "The only thing you've forced on me is this breakfast, and—actually, I am kinda hungry. So you don't need to do much forcing."

A smile kicked up my mouth; I returned to scrambling eggs, made sure they weren't sticking to the pan, and then poured boiled water over the tea.

It felt ... good, taking care of her like this, giving her food and drinks, vital things she needed. I'd never realised how fulfilling being a mate was.

I watched her sip the hot tea and a ripple of pleasure went through me. Yes, my soul purred. *This is what I'm meant to do.*

"And now?" I asked, not daring to look at her. "Are you still angry at me?"

"Not angry. I just..." My shoulders tensed at the pause. "I think you're a dumbass for keeping it a secret. If you'd spoken to any of the omegas in the sanctuary, you'd know a bond can help with—with situations like mine."

A strange flutter went through my belly. She wasn't angry. She was insulting me—that was a good sign, right? Women teased the men they liked. Didn't they?

"So you think ... being my mate is a good thing?" I asked cautiously, fiddling with the tie on the bread bag while I waited for her answer. *Dreaded* her answer, even if hope strangled me at the same time.

"That depends," she replied, watching me with clever brown eyes. "What will you do if I freak out again like I did in the supermarket?"

"The same thing I did that day," I replied, my chest tightening at the reminder of her trauma. "Anything I can to bring you out of it. Hugs usually help."

She raised an eyebrow, her expression wholly unreadable. "So there'll be more hugs?"

"As many as you want," I agreed, my heart pounding.

"And chocolate pots?"

"I'll buy the whole supermarket for you," I vowed, aware the eggs were burning and not giving a shit because there was a tiny smile on the edge of Luna's mouth, and butterflies in my stomach.

"Hmm. Alright."

I startled. "*Alright?*"

She smiled suddenly, like she'd been holding it back.

"I'll give you a chance—on a probationary period," she added as I took

the mug from her hands and pulled her into a tight hug. "And next time you feel me have a nightmare, come wake me up yourself."

"Deal," I agreed, a giddy laugh trying to bubble up my throat. "I'll do whatever it takes to make you feel safe, and to make you happy. You own me—you have since the second your scent hit me."

"Don't be so dramatic," she muttered, but she was laughing and hugging me back, and there was so much relief and joy and bewilderment in my body that I shook with it.

"Spend the day with me," I blurted. "I want to get to know you better, make you food, hug you when your flashbacks get bad—"

"Okay," she cut me off, light in her beautiful eyes and her hands warm on my back. "Remember this is a *probationary* period."

It was a probationary miracle. I hadn't expected her to forgive me, but I was damn glad she had.

"And I can't make any promises. You were right before when I—uh—propositioned you in the toilet. Not my finest move," she added when my lips twitched. "I don't think I'm ready for sex. I don't know how long it'll take—"

"Luna," I cut in gently, slowly reaching up to tuck a braid behind her ear. "I can wait as long as you need. And if you never feel okay with sex, that's fine too."

She scoffed, shaking her head. "I won't be enough without—"

"Yes you will," I argued. "You *are*. That's not going to change."

"But you're a man—and a *biker*. Isn't sex a pretty important thing to you?"

"I'm an alpha; my mate is the most important thing to me."

"You're impossible," she groaned, but she didn't release me. If anything she squeezed me tighter. "And I think you're wrong; this will be a problem."

"It won't," I argued.

"This *getting to know you* is going well," she remarked dryly. "I've learned you're stubborn as hell."

I chuckled. "It's for the best that you learn that early."

She cast the pan of eggs a glance. "Seriously, though. If this, if *anything*, becomes a problem, tell me. I'm not so blind or naïve that I think a mate bond magically fixes all our issues. I know I'm—I'm probably in denial about a lot of things, and maybe one day those things will bite me in the ass."

I stroked her back over her coat, sensing there was more she wanted to say and fucking elated with what she already had said. The eggs were

definitely burning; the smoke alarm would go off soon. I made no attempt to move.

"But I guess—I want to try this, if you do. Being mates."

"I want to," I assured her, probably too fast if her soft laugh was anything to go by. "And whatever issues we have, we'll cross those bridges when we get to them. I'm not going anywhere, no matter how hard things are."

"What if I can't handle you touching me some days?"

"Then I won't touch you," I replied easily. "Or I'll use one of those plastic reacher-grabbers."

She snorted and shoved me. "Be serious."

"I am serious," I insisted, gliding a knuckle along her jaw. "And who says I won't be the one causing issues? Maybe I'll annoy you endlessly rehearsing Sunday services? Maybe—" I swallowed, and got real for a second. "Maybe my instincts will go wild and make me overprotective of you, and you'll find me stifling."

"I'll just poke you with the reacher-grabbers," she fired back, her eyebrows shooting up at my sudden laugh. "What? I'm serious."

I softened, her humour lifting the heavy weight from my chest. "I'm so glad you don't hate me."

"I don't hate anyone," she huffed—but paused. "Maybe—maybe them. The alphas who—"

I squeezed her into a tight hug, sinking through the latent bond with all the comfort and reassurance I possessed. "I hate them too, Luna. I hate every single one of them, every abusive monster in the world, but the ones who hurt you—I hate them the most."

I knew where they were. There was nothing stopping me paying them a visit. Well, except Tybalt who was still interrogating them, but I had a feeling he'd be fine with me killing the trash who hurt my mate. It was just a matter of finding which one—or ones since she'd said *alphas*, plural.

"What's going on?" Luna asked, clear brown eyes squinting up at me. "I think—I can feel you? Or maybe I've been feeling you for a while and just not realising it. You feel ... like a storm."

I winced. "Nothing's going on."

She gave me a dubious look.

Ah, shit. I couldn't deny her anything she wanted.

So I explained, "I'm just imagining what I'd do to those alphas, were I to get my hands on them."

"Which you won't," she said, holding my stare. "Right?"

"Answer me one thing, Luna."

"No promises," she murmured.

"Would you feel safer with those alphas dead?"

She glanced away—and noticed the eggs now blackened and stuck to the pan. "Shit, the eggs!"

She dove away, but I caught her waist and spun her back into me.

"Luna," I said firmly.

"Yes," she muttered, scowling. "I'd be safer with them gone. But you can't just go around *killing* people; you're a vicar."

"I'm an outlaw, darling." I ducked to kiss her temple. "And an alpha. No one hurts my mate and gets to live."

"That's madness," she huffed.

"Regretting agreeing to be my mate already?" I asked, partly teasing, partly dreading her answer.

But Luna rolled her eyes, squeezing my waist. "No chance. Just—don't tell me when you hurt people."

My heart plummeted.

I made her uncomfortable, probably even *repulsed* her—

"That way if the police ask, I can't tell them anything to hurt you even if they growl at me," she finished.

She was ... protecting me?

I was so stunned that she successfully ducked away to take the pan off the heat. The kitchen smelled of burnt food but only sweet citrus filled my senses.

I waited for Luna to turn off the hob before I swept her into my arms and kissed her, swallowing her groan with a thrill of happiness and relief.

My heartbeat kicked up when she locked her arms around my neck and deepened the kiss, her lips and tongue anything but hesitant.

"Fuck, Luna," I groaned when she nipped my bottom lip.

"Maybe later," she replied, a thread of smugness in her voice at her effect on me.

I shuddered.

"For now..." She tightened her arms around me and jumped up, trusting me to catch her or just very determined. I caught the underside of her thighs and swore when her core brushed my hard cock. "Bite me, Priest."

I gasped, squeezing her thighs in reflex. "Luna..."

She dragged her lips down my jaw to my throat, kissing my hammering pulse. "I mean it."

Shit, was I dreaming? She wanted to be bonded to me—*fully* bonded. A bite would lock in the bond; there'd be no ignoring the connection, no going back.

But would the pain of the bite remind her of her assault? The last thing I wanted was to throw her into a flashback with something that was supposed to be a joyous act.

"I'll bite you if you bite me," I proposed.

She tightened her thighs around me, brushing a kiss over my thrumming pulse. "Really?"

"Really."

"Should we ... count down?"

I laughed, a smile creasing my eyes as I kissed her throat to test if she was jumpy—she didn't flinch at all. "Why not? Three ... two ... *one*."

I gasped at the sudden flash of pain piercing my throat, and echoed it by biting gently until Luna's blood trickled over my tongue. The taste of her, my mark on her skin, and the trust she put in me ... it all locked the bond into a full, thriving mate bond. I could taste the stormy water of her soul on my tongue, mixing with her bittersweet orange scent, and I shook with the force of her joined with me.

Luna gasped, drawing her teeth from my skin. "Wow."

"Yeah," I breathed, blinking at her, "Wow."

I could sense her awe; I felt it as clearly as my own, rushing through me like waves.

"You were serious about killing to protect me, huh?" she laughed, holding my gaze. "And you *like* me; I can feel it."

I kissed her again and felt the swell of hope in the bond, followed by a rush of safety.

Fuck. I made her feel *safe*—I could *feel* that safety, and it ruined me in the best way.

"Deadly serious," I replied against her lips, my voice hoarse. "Whatever it takes to keep you safe, I won't hesitate to do it. I'm with you for good, Luna, every step of the way."

She rested her forehead against mine, a smile on her lips. "Every step of the way," she agreed.

EPILOGUE



Sweetie

“Jesus Christ,” I grunted, covering my mouth and nose with the sleeve of my jacket. Leather was shit for filtering smells; it did nothing to mask the scent of piss and cum coming from the room I’d just forced open.

I’d seen—and smelled—a lot of fucked up stuff since joining the Alpha Knights motorcycle club a year ago, but it never got less horrifying.

I was used to finding victims in grimy back rooms behind bars, or basements and attics full of mould and cobwebs, with shitty mattresses shoved into the corners where they were used. There was even a cold, dirty outhouse that had given a girl pneumonia before we got to her; she only just held on. She’d healed and left us for a better life months ago, but you never forgot the twisted shit you saw as a knight. I never had, at least.

This was ... worse. The room wasn’t blackened or moulding; it was bright and gilded, like something out of a damn palace. It still did nothing to cover the scents that lived in the elaborately decorated walls, or sunk into the plush rug in the middle of the room.

The beta we were here to get out—thanks to a tip-off from a maid, because that was how ritzy this place was; it had fucking *staff*—was sat in the middle of the bed, with her knees to her chest.

She wasn't covered in dirt like others we'd rescued; her deep gold skin shone like it had been scrubbed clean, and her black hair hung like a sleek waterfall over her shoulders. Like she was a pretty, pampered pet.

"Hey, you wanna get out of here?" I asked, trying to ignore the scents coming from that bed.

The girl might have been clean but the sheets were *far* from sweet-smelling, and when I crossed the rug, getting a sick joy from grinding dirt into its cream nylon, I realised *why* the bed was filthy. The second I got within two feet from her, she growled so viciously, her voice throaty and rough, that I took a step back.

"I'm not with that pompous prick who keeps you locked up; me and my friends came to get you out."

I reached out to her—and staggered back with a grunt, staring at my hand for a moment in shock at the bright red blood welling from my thumb. She fucking *bit* me.

"Can you hear me?" I asked, taking a step back, my heart drumming fast. "You're getting out of this place. Unless you'd rather stay in your cesspit...?"

She lifted her head for the first time and bared her teeth, my blood dripping from her canines. Fuck, she was practically feral. I'd never seen a beta this vicious before; the ones we rescued were normally quiet and broken. This girl was anything but broken. She couldn't have been more than nineteen, but she looked prepared to tear me limb from limb if I got too close.

A roar came from downstairs, taking me off guard, and the beta flinched, her rich brown eyes snapping to the door.

"That's probably my brothers beating the shit out of the guy who locked you up," I told her, watching her closely in case she bit me again. "You don't ... love him, do you?"

Stockholm Syndrome was very fucking real. Panic and fear tended to ignore logic, and prioritise survival. I'd never judge anyone for that, even if it fucking baffled me.

"Fuck you," she spat, shocking the hell out of me. I pretended I didn't jump in surprise at the sultry rasp of her voice.

"So, you can talk," I murmured, trying to catch her gaze; she avoided eye contact like a pro. "Good, it'll make this easier. You ever heard of the Alpha

Knights MC?"

"No," she muttered, her eyes narrowed near my chest. Maybe at the emblem on my jacket. "Should I have?"

"We beat the shit out of people like that guy squealing downstairs." I could have sworn her lip twitched. No, this girl was definitely *not* broken. But how? I didn't believe for one second she was any less scarred just because her room was pretty and clean. The scents spoke loudly enough; there had been multiple men in here, and recently. They hadn't let her out to use the bathroom while they ... used her. "And we get people like you to a safe space," I added, trying to be soft.

She gave me a flat stare, something like hatred in her eyes. The curl of her lips was vicious, mocking. "I think I'd rather stay here. At least Decker paid good money for me. *You* think you can have me for free."

Shit. She'd been auctioned?

"We won't *have you*," I bit out, my skin crawling at the accusation. This was why I didn't handle getting victims to safety; this was Guardian's job. But Guard was throwing up with the same stomach bug that had wiped out half our numbers this week, so here I was, trying not to be the coarse bastard that came naturally to me.

I was doing a shit job of it, wasn't I?

She scoffed; yep, it was official. I was a bullshit rescuer.

"You'll see," I insisted, flexing my throbbing hand. I still couldn't believe she bit me. "We're gonna put you in a car—in a seat, not the boot—and drive you to our compound where you'll be safe. No one's gonna rape you, no one will growl or purr or *any* of that shit. And there's no gilded fucking doorknobs, either. Who even needs so much gold?"

She snorted. Tilted her head. "You really expect me to believe that. Do I *look* like an idiot to you?"

"You *look* like you're sitting in a piss- and cum-covered bed, and could use a room of your own with none of this—" I flapped a hand at the crusty sheets. "There are other betas at our compound, omegas too."

"Aww," she said in a sweet rasp, "and you want me to join your harem?"

I growled out a sigh, pinching the bridge of my nose. How the fuck did Guardian even do this? Just walk into a room and magically convince them we were safe to leave with?

"Would seeing your abuser beaten bloody help convince you?" I asked, because I was out of options.

"Would seeing violence convince me you're not going to be violent to me? Gee, let me think."

Alright, fuck this.

"Sorry in advance," I grunted. "But you'll thank me later."

I reached across the bed, grabbed her waist, and hauled her kicking and screaming up over my shoulder. She bit me. Four times. Tried to scratch me through my jacket, too.

"I'm going to rip every limb from your body," she snarled as I carried her out of the room. "If you even *think* about taking me with your vile, herpes-infested cock, I'll find a cheese grater and shred the fucker. By the time I'm finished, you won't be able to get hard without being in excruciating pain."

My cock was already in pain at the mere suggestion. I clenched my teeth at the phantom sensation. "Message received, killer."

She growled, deep and throaty, as I strode down the hall. The screams cut out, leaving an eerie silence. "You didn't even give me clothes, you selfish pig. Say what you want about Decker, but he never carried me so everyone could see my bits flapping in the wind."

I winced. "I'll find you clothes."

"Oh, *now* you'll find me clothes. How generous," she spat.

"Sweetie, what the fuck?" Prodigy demanded when I carried the beta across the landing and downstairs where everyone had gathered.

"I told you I wasn't Guard; I gave you fair warning."

Prodigy gave me a searing look and growled, "Put the girl down."

I sighed and set her feet on the fancy ass carpet, watching her. I waited for her face to go pale when she saw the seven men gathered in the foyer. Her expression hardened, growing even fiercer, as if her strength was directly proportionate to how much danger she was in.

"I'm sorry for the rough way you've been handled," Prodigy said with genuine remorse, coming to stand in front of the girl. "Giant, go find some fucking clothes for her." He gentled his voice again, leaning close to her. "You'll be safe now. What's your name?"

The gleam in her eye was the only warning before she reared her head back, slammed it into Prodigy's face, and broke his nose.

Blood spurted instantly. The beta only grew more savage, more feral. She drew blood from all seven of us. I should have realised that day I'd fall in love with her.

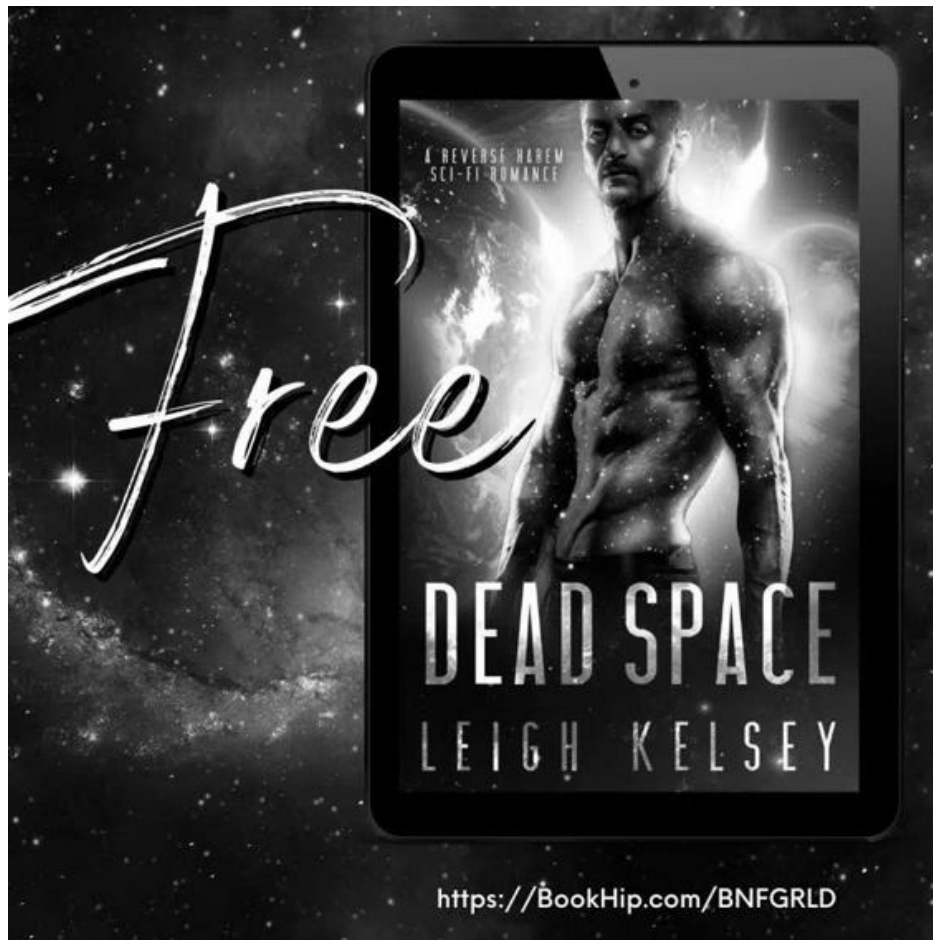


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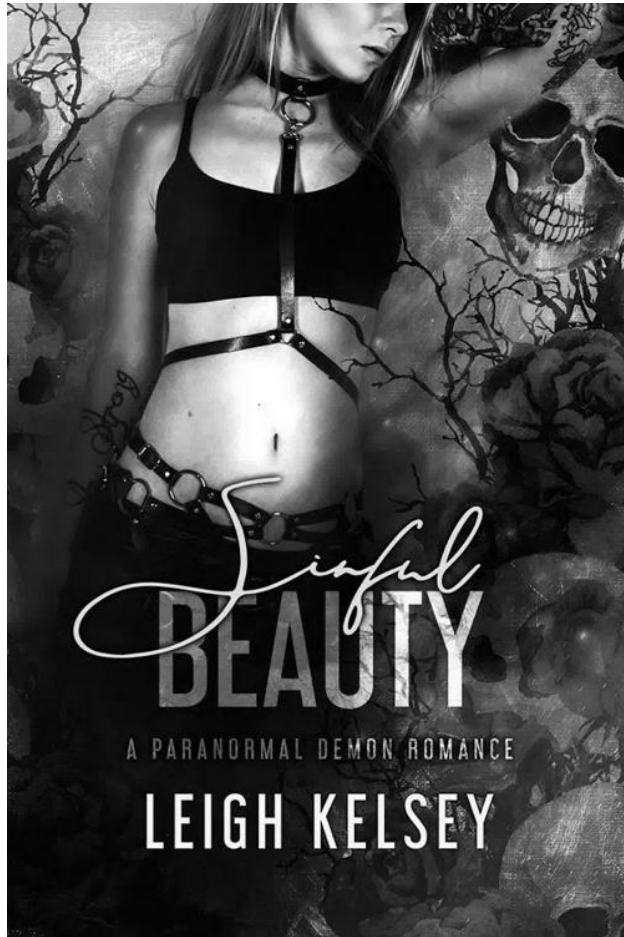
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ABOUT LEIGH KELSEY

Leigh Kelsey writes about psychos with questionable morals and addictions to shiny, stabby objects, but she's perfectly harmless, she swears. She can be found in Yorkshire, England listening to K-Pop, watching serial killer documentaries, and writing as much spicy paranormal romance as she possibly can in a day. (Where's that Time Turner when we need it...?)

Find her MF dark romance books under the name Phoebe Ash.

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Phoebe Ash is a dark romance author from the UK. She writes strong heroines, damaged alpha heroes, and their flawed, messy love stories. Her debut series, the Alpha Knights MC, is out now, and you can pick up a freebie spicy romance story by joining her mailing list!

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