

Alpha's Regret: Begging For My Luna Back – Chapter 41

Faith's Pov

I agreed to give this man a chance at proving himself, but not to torture me. That's why I couldn't understand why he woke me up yet again. This time, though, it was to take me to town. The sun was barely peeking over the horizon, painting the sky in soft shades of pink and orange. My eyes felt heavy, and the early morning chill seeped through my thin nightgown.

"And we couldn't do this after eight?" I asked him, my voice thick with sleep and annoyance. He was having the time of his life, laughing at my discomfort.

"Stop throwing a tantrum because it's a surprise," he said, his tone light and teasing. Clearly, we had two different ideas of what a surprise should look like. My idea of a surprise involved a warm bed and maybe breakfast in bed, not being dragged out into the cold.

He led me to his car, a sleek black vehicle that always seemed to hum with a hidden power. I climbed in, still grumbling under my breath. The drive was quiet, the only sound the soft purr of the engine and the occasional rustle of the trees outside. I couldn't shake the feeling of exhaustion, but a sliver of curiosity began to prick at my annoyance. What could possibly be so important that it required a pre-dawn raid on my slumber?

As the sky brightened, we pulled up to a place I hadn't been to in what felt like forever: the mall. But this wasn't just any morning at the mall. As we drove through the immense parking lot, noticed that it was completely empty. The gates to the mall were shut, and there wasn't a soul in sight. My eyebrows shot up in surprise.

Astor parked the car and turned to me, a genuine smile gracing his lips. Welcome to your personal shopping spree, Faith."

No he didn't.

My jaw dropped. "You... you closed down the whole mall?"

He nodded, his eyes twinkling. "Just for you. I figured we could have the whole place to ourselves. No crowds, no stares. Just you and whatever you desire."

I stared at him, trying to process this. Astor, the Alpha who had always been so focused on pack duties and his own power, was doing this? For me? The gratitude that flooded me was overwhelming, pushing aside the last remnants of my annoyance.

"Astor," I began, my voice catching slightly, "I... I don't know what to say."

He reached out and gently brushed a stray strand of hair from my face. “You don’t have to say anything. Just... enjoy. I know that for the last three years, you’ve been dressing the way you thought was expected of you. The ‘luna’ way. But I see how happy you are when you’re comfortable. When you change into your soft leggings and oversized sweaters at home, there’s a spark in your eyes that I haven’t seen enough of.”

His words hit me like a gentle wave. He noticed? He’d actually paid attention? I thought back to the clothes wore, the stiff dresses and tailored suits. They made me feel like I was playing a part, not like myself. I’d always wanted to experiment, to express myself, but the fear of what others might think, the whispers about what a luna should look like, had held me back. I’d never had the confidence to develop my own personal style.

“I... I’ve always wanted to try different outfits,” I confessed, my voice soft. But I was too afraid.”

A warmth spread through my chest. This wasn’t just about clothes; it was about him seeing me, the real me, and wanting me to be happy. Without thinking, I leaned forward and hugged him tightly. “Thank you, Astor. This means more than you know.”

”He held me for a moment, his embrace strong and comforting. Then, he pulled back slightly, a playful glint in his eyes. “I didn’t do this for free, you know”

My heart sank a little. “What do you mean?”

He grinned. “You have to be my personal model. You have to try on different outfits for me, and I get to tell you what looks good.”

I rolled my eyes, but a smile played on my lips. “Reluctantly,” I agreed. This was a small price to pay for what he was doing.

And so, the day began. We spent hours inside the silent, echoing mall. Astor was surprisingly good at his modeling job, offering genuine compliments and even suggesting pairings I wouldn’t have thought of. I tried on everything from flowing dresses to edgy jeans, from cozy jumpers to stylish coats. For the first time in a long time, I felt like I could breathe, like I could be myself. We laughed, we posed, and for a while, the weight of our past seemed to lift. After our shopping spree, we decided to explore the nearby human town. The air was crisp, and the unfamiliar sights and sounds of the human world were a welcome change of pace. We found a small, cozy cafe with outdoor seating and ordered some coffee and pastries.

We talked easily, the conversation flowing between us like an old, comfortable river. Astor told me more stories about his childhood.

I don’t know why I’m reluctant about sharing that part of my life with him but I hope someday I’ll be comfortable enough to tell him that my childhood wasn’t like how I’m sure he thinks it was.

As the afternoon sun began to dip lower in the sky, casting long shadows across the street, Astor's phone buzzed. He pulled it out, his brow furrowing as he read the message. His expression shifted from relaxed to concerned.

"What is it?" I asked, a knot of unease forming in my stomach.

He looked up at me, his eyes serious. "It's Alice. She's... she's sick."

Of course.

Alpha's Regret: Begging For My Luna Back – Chapter 42

The urgent call had ripped me from my sleep, a frantic message from Alice about a sickness that couldn't wait. My heart had hammered against my ribs as we rushed to the packhouse,

Astor clearly has been hiding how he really feels about the baby because I could tell how worried he was the whole way.

Yes I'm angry but I'm not angry at the innocent baby that's not even born yet because he didn't choose to be born this way.

I don't want to say that a part of me doesn't resent the baby because it will forever be used against me. It's a constant taunt that I will never be able to get rid of

I don't want anything to happen to the baby and I think I may be one of the reasons why she might be secret now and I feel guilty for stressing her out only to find out that there was no sickness.

Alice was perfectly fine, glowing even. I wanted to strangle her in front of everybody for playing such a dirty game with us but unfortunately, we had some pretty important people...

Alpha Sanders and Wendy.

Astor's parents. They were here, their faces beaming, their voices loud with joy.

I guess they've already received the good news and if I'm correct I think that's the reason why they are here in the first place.

“Oh, Faith, darling!” Wendy cooed, her eyes sparkling. “Isn’t it wonderful? A grandchild! We’ve waited so long for this!”

I’ve always found it hard for this woman to show emotions such as happiness and love and I’ve seen her with her son and I have no doubt that she loves him but I have never seen this amount of happiness in her face.

Alpha Sanders, usually a man of few words, was equally effusive. A little one! Imagine, Faith. Astor will be a father, Our family will grow.

I was surprised because I thought he would find it outrageous and fume as much as I am but he looked like nothing could ruin his day after this.

Their happiness was a tsunami, crashing over me, drowning me in their excitement. They spoke of nurseries, names, and the future. And with every word, every joyful exclamation, a sliver of ice pierced my heart. They knew. They knew how I was feeling about the fact that my mate was carrying another woman’s child. And they didn’t care. Or perhaps, they did, but their delight in this new life overshadowed any consideration for my pain.

I sure have known that I couldn’t get happiness because today was very sweet and special only for it to end in a disaster.

Every fond look, every excited whisper about names or nursery colours, felt like a deliberate twist of the knife. It was as if they were completely oblivious to my presence, to the fact that I was standing right there, my mate’s mate, watching them celebrate the very thing that had shattered my world.

Alice deliberately cruel, leaned into her parents’ praise, her hand resting possessively on her belly. Each smile she directed at them felt like a direct jab at me. It was too much. The air in the room grew thick, suffocating. My breath hitched. I couldn’t stand it. I couldn’t bear to witness their unadulterated joy when mine had been so brutally shattered.

“Excuse me,” I managed to choke out, my voice barely a whisper. I turned, stumbling away from the scene, my legs carrying me on autopilot. I needed to escape, to find a place where their happiness couldn’t reach me.

Maybe I’m being selfish right now but I don’t think it’s fair for everybody to celebrate this like it’s some kind of achievement and I didn’t expect it from Alpha Sander but I guess blood will always choose blood.

I practically fled from the room, my heart pounding against my ribs like a trapped bird. The corridor felt long and empty, a welcome relief from the suffocating warmth I’d just endured. I don’t even think that anyone will notice because they’re too happy right now.

And then, I bumped right into someone

A solid, strong presence. I stumbled back, bracing myself for a collision, and looked up to see Alpha Kyle. His brow was furrowed with concern, his blue eyes scanning my face.

“Faith? Are you alright?” he asked, his voice a deep rumble, unexpectedly gentle.

I wanted to scream my heart out but the words caught in my throat. What was there to say? That my mate was having a baby with another woman, and his parents were celebrating it right in front of me? That I felt like a discarded toy, a part of Astor’s life that was now deemed unimportant?

How do I compete with the woman who is about to give him his firstborn born and it will be even worse if she gives birth to a son.

“I... I’m fine,” I lied, my voice too high, too strained. I couldn’t talk to him. Not now. Not about this. I pulled away, leaving him standing there, a question lingering in his eyes. He looked like he wanted to say more, but I didn’t give him the chance. I just kept walking, the image of Alice’s smug smile and the sound of his parents’ happy chatter echoing in my ears.

The house felt like a sanctuary, a place where I could finally let the mask slip. I fumbled with the lock, desperate to be inside, behind closed doors. But before I could even push the door open, strong arms wrapped around me from behind. My body tensed, ready to fight, but the familiar scent, the gentle pressure, told me who it was. Astor.

He nuzzled against my neck, a low, mournful sound rumbling in his chest. “Faith,” he whimpered, his voice thick with emotion. “I’m here. I love you.”

Those words were exactly what I needed but could I tolerate this daily for a month is a question that remains unanswered.

Alpha’s Regret: Begging For My Luna Back – Chapter 43

Having him close, his hand a constant, warm weight on my back, and his soft words a steady hum against my ear, was a breath of fresh air. It was a comfort I hadn’t realized I was craving, a calm in the storm of my own thoughts. But the calm was short-lived. It didn’t change the fact that today was Friday, and Friday meant dinner at the Pack House. And with his parents back, there was no way we could skip it. We had no choice. I had to soldier on, just like I always did. I was used to it

“Thank you,” I said, pulling away from him gently. He didn’t get a free pass just because he’d offered me a moment of peace. All of this, the chaos, the pressure, was happening because of him.

“I’ll go and freshen up and then I’ll head to the Pack House,” I told him, looking him in the eye. He nodded.

“I’ll do the same, and we can go together,” he said, taking me by surprise. Together? This meant we’d walk in there like a normal couple, side by side. My heart fluttered and it was a good feeling, a foreign warmth spreading through me. I was experiencing a lot of good things lately, things I hadn’t expected.

As I walked towards my room, I noticed my door was slightly ajar. Inside, my room was a complete mess. No, not a mess, but full of shopping bags everywhere piled on my bed, spilling onto the floor, even hanging from the back of a chair. I had completely forgotten about them. I guess he’d had someone bring them in.

After a quick shower and picking out one of the new, soft dresses that felt like a hug, I met him by the door. He looked handsome, as always, his usual dark clothes making him seem even more powerful. We walked side by side, out of our house inside the Pack grounds and towards the main Pack House.

As we reached the Pack House, my stomach did a little flip. This was always

the hardest part, walking in, facing all the judging eyes. But then, just as we were about to step inside, his hand reached for mine. His fingers laced through mine, firm and warm. He held my hand.

My breath caught in my throat. My eyes flickered to his, wide with surprise. He just offered me a small, almost imperceptible squeeze, his expression unreadable. My heart swelled, a sudden burst of overwhelming joy.

It was such a simple gesture, but it meant so much.

We walked into the large dining hall, his hand still firmly clasped around mine. I tried to act normal, to ignore the hushed whispers and curious glances that followed us. He led me to our table, pulling out my chair for me before taking his own.

After a few minutes of polite greetings, excused myself. “I’ll just go check on the kitchen,” I said, needing to get away from the staring. It was my duty as the Luna to make sure everything was running smoothly, even if I felt like I was still learning the ropes.

The kitchen was full of activity, fragrant with the smell of roasting meat and fresh herbs. The new women who had been started recently, were moving with purpose, their movements quiet and efficient. I watched them for a moment, impressed. These new people were pleasant and professional, their uniforms crisp, their expressions focused.

“Everything looks wonderful,” I said, stepping further into the room. “The aromas are incredible.”

A woman with kind eyes and a neat bun smiled at me. “Thank you, Luna. We’re just putting the finishing touches on the roasted vegetables.”

Their smiles didn’t quite reach their eyes, and their politeness felt a little too stiff, a little too perfect. But at least they were cordial and respectful.

“Faith, darling! There you are!” a voice cooed from behind me.

I stiffened, my shoulders tensing. I didn’t even need to turn around to know who it was. Ovelia. My mother-in-law,

I turned, forcing a smile that felt like it was tearing my face. Ovelia in a deep purple dress, floated towards me, her arms outstretched. She embraced me, a short, air-kissing sort of hug that didn’t quite touch. “It’s so lovely to see you, dear! You look absolutely radiant tonight.”

Radiant? I felt, ready to snap. Her words were sweet, but her eyes held a calculating glint. I hadn’t forgotten our last conversation, not for a second. The way she had gently, firmly, gaslit me into believing that I had no choice but to accept everything to simply be a good Luna and endure.

She pulled back, her smile wide and seemingly genuine. “Everything looks delicious, doesn’t it? Such a relief to have fresh, professional faces in the kitchen. Though I must say,” she lowered her voice slightly, though it still seemed to carry, “I am a little disappointed that Alice will be the one giving us our first grandchild. I had always hoped it would be you, after all.”

My forced smile wavered. There it was. The taunt. The subtle jab wrapped in a seemingly caring remark. She wasn’t trying to comfort me; she was reminding me of what I hadn’t given them, what Alice supposedly had.

“Oh, well, Faith, you shouldn’t worry your pretty head,” she continued, patting my arm. “You will have children in the future, I’m sure of it. There’s plenty of time.”

“I just hope that you’ll treat Alice’s baby with kindness. Just as you’ll treat your own children, when you eventually have them, of course.” Her voice grew a little firmer, a little more pointed.

That was it. My patience snapped like a dry twig. “Treat the baby with kindness?” I repeated, my voice dangerously low. “It’s a baby, Not a pet project. And frankly, it’s a little early to be even thinking about that child, isn’t it? It isn’t even born yet.” My eyes narrowed. “And as for my children, in the future, if I even have them who knows what life holds, right? I can assure you, they will be kept very far away from Alice. That girl is toxic. A walking disaster, frankly. I wouldn’t want her influence anywhere near my future pups.”

She gasped, her hand flying to her chest. Her eyes, usually so composed, widened with shock and anger. “Faith! How dare you speak like that. How dare you speak about the woman who is going to be the mother of my son’s first child, our first grandchild! And how dare you speak to me, your Luna, in such a disrespectful manner!” Her voice rose, echoing slightly in the busy kitchen, making a few of the staff members pause their work, their eyes darting towards us.

I want it to apologize and take a step back because the conversation was taking another direction But I didn’t. Not this time. My chin lifted. “I demand the right to my opinion, Ovalia. And my children, if I ever have them, will be my children. And I will raise them as I see fit. And that includes keeping them away from anyone I deem harmful.” The air in the kitchen crackled with the sudden tension, the unspoken battle between us.

I’m just tired of if you believe having a say in my life and she has started already decided on the Fate of my children which is not going to happen.

Nobody is going to run my life from now on.

Alpha’s Regret: Begging For My Luna Back – Chapter 44

Alice’s Pov

I sat next to Astor’s mother, Luna Ovelia because seat being warmed up by somebody else. My hand rested protectively over my slightly swollen belly, a silent testament to the little life growing inside me Astor’s life. His heir. I had imagined this night so many times and my dream was slowly coming true.

But then, my eyes landed on him, and a cold dread began to spread through me, chilling me even through the warmth of the roaring fireplace. Astor was seated a few seats away from me but he wasn’t looking at me. He was looking at her. Faith. His supposed Luna

For three long years, Astor had treated Faith like a ghost. He barely spoke to her, rarely touched her, and often left her to navigate pack life on her own. It had been perfect. It had given me hope, fueled my belief that he would eventually realize she was nothing but a mistake. That I was his true match. Our baby, I thought, would seal that fate.

Tonight, however, was different. Terribly, sickeningly different.

Astor’s hand was on Faith’s back, a light, almost possessive touch that sent a jolt of pure venom through my veins. It wasn’t just resting there; his thumb was gently circling, a soft, intimate gesture that made my stomach churn.

Faith who was usually so quiet in crowded place was actually laughing. Not a fake, polite titter, but a genuine, bright sound that made her eyes sparkle. And Astor, Astor was laughing with her. A deep, rich sound that I hadn't heard from him in... well, ever, when he was with her.

My fingers curled into tight fists under the table, my nails digging into my palms. It was a small pain, but it anchored me, kept me from screaming. Every shared glance, every whispered joke, every time his eyes met hers, it felt like a dagger twisting in my gut. He leaned closer to her as she spoke, his head tilted, his expression soft—soft! as if she was telling him the most fascinating story in the world. He even brushed a stray strand of hair from her face, his fingers lingering for just a moment longer than necessary.

It was all happening in front of everyone and they were all watching it. I could feel their eyes, subtle glances sliding from Astor and Faith to me, then back again. It was a silent conversation, a collective gasp of surprise and, worst of all, a knowing pity directed at me. They were all thinking, Look what's happening in front of her. Look at how he's finally acting with his mate. Look at poor Alice, pregnant with his child, being pushed aside.

The humiliation burned through me, hotter than any fire. I had carried his baby, carried the future of this pack, endured the whispers and the scandals, all because I believed it would bring him to me.

It was supposed to be my victory and my guarantee. Instead, he seemed even more detached from me, more distant. Every touch he gave Faith, every laugh he shared with her, solidified his rejection of me.

And with that rejection came more hatred for Faith. I hated her for her for simply existing and for stealing what I believed was mine.

she just had to come back and she was given everything that was supposed to be mine and I want it back.

"My dear Alice," Luna Ovelia said, her voice a gentle murmur, pulling my attention away from the sickening display. She reached across the table and patted my hand, her eyes full of genuine warmth, but also a hint of worry. "You look a little pale. Is it the baby, perhaps? Is everything alright?"

I forced a smile, a fake one that probably didn't reach my eyes. "Just a little tired, Luna. These little ones demand so much, don't they?"

"Oh, they certainly do!" she chuckled, her gaze flicking towards Astor and Faith, a slight crease forming between her brows. "But it's such a blessing. A future Alpha, a true heir to the Eternal Pack. What a wonderful thing for us all." She paused, then raised her glass, trying to catch Astor's eye. "To the future of our pack, and to the little one who will lead us!"

Several high-ranking members at the table echoed her sentiment, raising their own glasses, their smiles directed at me. They, like Luna Ovelia, had always preferred me.

I grew up in front of dear eyes and I was refined, educated, and outwardly perfect for the role of Luna. Faith, on the other hand, was just... Faith. They all believed, just as I did, that I was the right choice.

But Astor didn't even hear them. He was still locked in his own world with still Faith. He hadn't even looked up. Faith, too, seemed oblivious, her fixed on Astor, a soft, dreamy look on her face. They were completely ignoring everyone, including his mother's toast, including the very visible efforts to bring me into the spotlight. It was as if they were the only two people in the entire, crowded room.

As the chatter resumed, a new face caught my attention. Alpha Kyle, he sat a few seats down from Faith. He was handsome, with sharp, intelligent eyes and a body built for power. I'd noticed him earlier, but his presence hadn't registered beyond a polite nod. Now, however, I saw something in his gaze that made my own blood quicken, but not with anger this time. It was a different kind of sensation, a flicker of... an idea.

Alpha Kyle was watching Faith. Intently. His head was turned slightly towards her, his eyes following her every move, every smile she gave Astor. There was a hunger in his gaze, a raw interest that was unmistakable. He wasn't just observing. He was seeing her.. And he wasn't just looking at her as Astor's mate; he was looking at her as if she was the only woman around. A slow, wicked smile began to spread across my face, hidden behind my hand as I pretended to sip my water. The jealousy was still there, a hot ember in my chest, but it was now overshadowed by a newfound, exhilarating coldness. An opportunity. Apath.

Astor might be foolishly distracted by his mate's newfound charm. But Faith is another story entirely. Alpha Kyle's eyes held the key. He wanted her. And knew, with absolute certainty, how I could use that desire to my advantage. To tear them apart, once and for all.

My smile widened. This was just the beginning.

Alpha's Regret: Begging For My Luna Back – Chapter 45

The cool night air bit at my cheeks, but the warmth of Astor's hand in mine kept the chill away. We walked in comfortable silence, the path from the pack house back home.

"Tonight was great" Astor said, his voice soft, a genuine smile in his tone. He squeezed my hand gently.

I squeezed back. "It really was," I agreed, meaning it more than he could ever know. Great was an understatement. It was probably the only Friday pack house dinner I'd truly enjoyed in the three years I'd been living here. For three long years, I'd sat at those tables, invisible.

I was a ghost, a shadow. All I ever got were quick glances, filled with pity or a silent understanding that I didn't belong, that I wasn't wanted. Every dinner was a reminder of my place: outside the circle, an outsider even among my own. But tonight felt like breathing again after holding my breath for so long.

Astor turned to me when we got home and he pulled me into a hug, a gentle, had agreed to give him a chance, comforting embrace that I leaned into. and if a hug was part of that, then there was no harm in it.

But then, as he pulled back slightly, his gaze dropped to my lips. My heart fluttered, but a warning bell went off in my head. He started to lean in, slowly, expectantly.

My hand came up, a soft barrier between us. He stopped, confused. "Not yet, Astor," I said, my voice barely a whisper, but firm.

He retreated fully, a flicker of hurt in his eyes. "Not yet?" he repeated, then looked around the hallway. "Are we ever going to get to a stage where we'll share a room, Faith?"

His question stung, not because it was wrong, but he was rushing things" Astor," I began, trying to keep my voice even. "I agreed to give you a chance a few days ago. Remember? You asked for a month.

And as far as I'm concerned," I continued, my voice gaining a little more strength, "you've done the bare minimum. A few conversations, holding hands, a pack dinner where you finally acknowledged me. That doesn't mean everything is okay between us. That doesn't magically erase three years of feeling like nothing."

The words hung in the air, heavy and unspoken. He remained silent, his gaze fixed on the floor. I waited for a moment, but he didn't respond. With a weary sigh, I turned and walked away, leaving him standing there in the quiet hallway. My heart ached, a mix of disappointment and a strange sense of victory. I was holding my ground, protecting myself, even if it meant refusing the very thing I'd longed for for so long.

I went to my room, changed into my pjs and laid in bed, the silence of the night wrapping around me. Sleep eventually came.

The next morning I got up, showered, and then headed to the kitchen. Astor was still asleep, but I quietly started making breakfast – eggs, toast, and coffee. It was part of my routine, and despite everything, I still wanted to do it. It was a gesture, a small step in this new "chance" we were tiptoeing around.

After eating a quick bite myself, I left a plate for Astor with a note, then headed out the door. My next stop was the pack house. After a big dinner, especially one that went late, I liked to make sure everything was cleaned perfectly. It was a habit, a way to contribute, even if it felt like my contributions often went unnoticed.

The pack house was usually bustling by now, but this morning it was quiet, the air still thick with the lingering scent of last night's feast. Most of the pack was probably sleeping in. I walked through the main hall, checking the tables, then went to the kitchen. The cleaning crew had done a decent job, but I spotted a few missed spots, dried gravy on a counter, a sticky patch on the floor. My hands instinctively reached for a cloth and detergent.

As I scrubbed at a particularly stubborn stain on the main kitchen island, a soft, melodic laugh echoed from the doorway. My heart sank. Alice.

She stood there, her hands cradling her gently swelling belly – Astor's unborn child. Her blonde hair fell in perfect waves, her eyes sparkled, and her smile ,was radiant.

"Look what the cat dragged in," Alice purred, not unkindly, but with a sweetness that always felt laced with poison. She wasn't alone. Two other she-wolves, Lily and Clara, stood behind her, their expressions mirroring Alice's subtle smirk. These two were always with Alice, always ready to back her up.

I kept scrubbing, pretending I didn't hear her, pretending the familiar ache in my chest wasn't growing.

"Still doing the dirty work, Faith?" Alice sneered, stepping forward a little. "Some things never change, I guess."

"You know," she continued, her voice dropping, "it's really quite sad. Astor's just being kind, you know. He always had a soft spot for strays. But we both know where his heart truly lies. Especially now." She gestured to her belly, a triumphant glint in her eyes. "He's going to be a father. you know."

My hands trembled, the cloth still in my grip. I usually have something to say to her but she is pregnant right now and I don't want to stress her out or do something that might cause her to lose her baby.

"But don't worry, Faith," Clara chimed in, stepping closer, her voice sharp. "We'll always have a place for you. Someone has to clean up after us, right?"

I generally thought that everybody heard Astor when he said that people should start respecting me but for some reason Alice convinced them that it doesn't apply to them.

Alice picked up a half-empty bottle of maple syrup from the counter, leftovers from breakfast. She held it loosely, then, with a casual flick of her wrist, she let it tip. The sticky, amber liquid cascaded over my head, down my hair, my face, my clothes and it dripped into my eyes, stinging.

I gasped, my hands flying up to my face, trying to wipe it away, but only smearing it further. The syrupy sweetness turned into humiliation.

“Oops!” Alice exclaimed, a feigned shock on her face, but her eyes glittered with malicious glee. “How clumsy of me! Oh, Faith, you’re just covered in it, aren’t you? You always were a mess.”

Lily and Clara erupted in laughter, a cruel, mocking sound that echoed in the vast kitchen.

Then, Alice’s hand, surprisingly strong, shoved me hard from behind. My feet, already slippery from the syrup that had dripped onto the floor, lost their grip. I stumbled, my arms flailing, and crashed to the ground, landing hard on my side. My head hit the tiled floor with a sickening thud, sending stars dancing before my eyes. Pain shot through my skull, and a warm trickle started from my temple. My hands instinctively went to my head.

“Why don’t you just stay down there, Faith?” Clara sneered. “It suits you. You’re good at being on the bottom.”

Then, a new voice, deep and commanding, ripped through the mocking laughter, silencing it instantly. “What in the Moon Goddess’s name is going on here?!”

The kitchen fell silent. The laughter died in their throats. I heard gasps. I didn’t dare look up, convinced it was just another pack member who would join in the shaming or simply turn away.

But then, a shadow fell over me, not a menacing one, but one that offered cover. A strong hand, careful and gentle, touched my shoulder.

“Are you alright?” the voice asked, concern facing every word, it was Alpha Kyle.

I gathered my pride and I stood up.

I’m sorry you had to witness that but my sister and I have a thing for games and this was just one of them.” said with my eyes burning straight to her and all of this took me back to when I first arrived at the eclipse pack.

she tormented me every single day and endured it but when I came here I promised myself that I would be strong and I wouldn’t let her do what she did to me back there.

I could have said something and I could have done something if I wanted but I am back to that scared little girl again because of this baby on the way and I’m not sure I can handle it.

Alpha’s Regret: Begging For My Luna Back – Chapter 46

Today brought back old sadness. It was the same heavy, choking feeling I used to get from my adoptive mother.

I was sitting on the edge of the bed, feeling the sudden, cold grip of something I hadn't thought about in years. It was the feeling of being small and useless. Today, dealing with Alice's sharp words and constant disrespect, it had cracked open a door I kept locked tight.

Flashback: Eight Years Old

The kitchen floor was cold under my knees, even through my thin pajamas. I was eight years old, skinny and tired, scrubbing the old linoleum with a worn brush. The smell of Pine-Sol was sharp and burned my nose, but I liked it because it meant I was cleaning, doing my job.

I watched the dirty water swirl down the drain. I had been working for two hours. My arms ached, and sweat was beading on my forehead, but I concentrated hard on the corner near the big wooden table, where the grime always seemed to stick.

I finished, stood back, and looked at my work. It wasn't perfect, but it shone under the weak yellow kitchen light. For an eight-year-old, it was magnificent. I was about to call for my mother, ready for approval and when the back door slammed open.

"What is this mess?"

My mother's voice was never soft. It was always a knife, sharp and ready to cut.

I turned quickly, my heart thumping against my ribs. "Momma, I just finished. I scrubbed every spot—"

She didn't even look at the floor. She looked only at me. Her eyes were dark and full of a cold anger I couldn't understand. She was holding the bucket I had just emptied. There was still a sludge of grey, muddy water and some sticky dirt at the bottom.

Before I could move, she tilted the bucket.

The cold, filthy liquid splashed over the newly cleaned floor, soaking my bare feet and splashing up onto my pajamas. A thick splash hit my face, dripping down my cheek and into my eye. The smell was awful—old grease, spoiled milk, and dirt.

I froze, shocked by the sudden cold shock.

"You call this clean?" she hissed, dropping the bucket with a loud clatter that made me jump. "Look at this, Faith! Look at the dirt. You didn't even try."

I looked at the mess she had made, then back at her. My carefully cleaned floor was ruined. My effort was gone.

“I—I worked really hard, Momma,” my voice wobbled, sounding small and pitiful.

“Hard?” she laughed, a dry, ugly sound. “You are useless. You are a waste of space. You couldn’t clean a simple floor right. You can never be good at anything, Faith. You will never be good enough.”

The words struck me harder than the cold dirt had. They hammered against the fragile hope that lived inside my small chest.

“Nobody loves a child who can’t even do simple chores,” she continued, stepping closer. “Nobody loves a child who is useless.”

That was the breaking point. The knowledge that my own mother thought I was unlovable, that I was a complete failure, tore through my innocent heart. I didn’t just cry; I felt a frantic, desperate surge of pain rise up my throat. I threw my arms over my face and started to sob hysterically. Big, broken sounds tore out of me, the sound of an eight-year-old realizing she was truly alone.

But the noise lasted only a second.

A sharp, burning pain exploded across my cheek. The sound of the slap echoed in the small kitchen, stopping my breath.

My head snapped back, and my tears stopped instantly, replaced only by a terrified whimper. My vision blurred.

“There will be no crying in my house,” she whispered, her face inches from mine, her breath smelling stale and sour “Get up. Clean it again. And if I hear one more tear, you’ll stay on that floor all night.”

Present

The slap still burned.

I gasped, snapping back to the present. was dizzy, clutching my knees to my chest. The sheets under my hands felt rough, and the room was spinning. I wasn’t eight; I was a grown woman, but the fear was still the same, raw and overwhelming. Hot tears were running down my face, not the loud, childish sobs, but the quiet, shaking kind that betray true trauma.

I hated that Alice’s small slight earlier—another reminder that I wasn’t good enough in this pack. My chest felt tight, locked up. I tried to swallow, but I couldn’t.

Just then, the door opened swiftly.

Astor walked in, stopping dead when he saw me. His face, usually carved into strong, decisive lines, softened slightly, then hardened again with confusion.

“Faith? What’s going on?” he asked, moving toward me quickly. His presence gave me the warmth I was seeking and I decided to tell him about my childhood and what happened today.

“Alice,” I managed to choke out, just the hame.

His jaw tightened, and his eyes narrowed. He didn’t wait for me to finish the sentence.

“Look, Faith, I need you to stay away from her,” Astor stated, his voice flat and stern. “And I need you to stay away from my mother.”

I’m honestly glad that I don’t have to explain anything because he must have known what happened and the fact that he’s here for me means a lot.

“Your mother?.” I understand why he wants me to stay away from Alice because she’s toxic but his mother.

“Don’t play dumb. I’m talking about the things you said to my mother,” he accused, the low growl returning to his voice. His gaze was cold, completely devoid of the sympathy I needed. “I know exactly what happened, and I know what you told her to her face.”

My heart plummeted.

“I… I didn’t say anything to your mother,” stammered, shaking my head vehemently. “I wouldn’t disrespect her. I would never-“

Alpha’s Regret: Begging For My Luna Back – Chapter 47

“Then did you talk to her at all last night?” He leaned in closer, his voice low and dangerous.

I was still shaking my head no, this conversation was going the exact opposite way I thought it was going to go so I was confused.

“I… I didn’t say anything to your mother,” stammered, shaking my head vehemently. “I wouldn’t disrespect her. I would never-”

“Faith. Stop.” His hand came up, stopping me mid-sentence. His eyes were dark, burning a hole right through me. “Did you speak to her at dinner yesterday?”

The question was so but the way it was asked threw me off.

“Of course I did,” I said, confusion creeping in. “We were sitting at the same table. I said ‘hello’ and ‘thank you’ for the food. Was I supposed to pretend she wasn’t there?”

As soon as I said it, the confusion vanished, replaced by a cold, stomach-dropping certainty. He wasn’t asking about manners. He was asking about the incident. The little scene where she had pushed me until I pushed back.

“Oh,” I whispered, the realization hitting me like a physical blow. “You mean when she kept mentioning Alice and the baby or do you mean our conversation in the kitchen?”

His jaw tightened. “I mean when you chose to pick a fight with my mother at the dinner.”

“I didn’t choose a fight!” The heat instantly rushed back to my face, my denial turning into righteous anger. “Your mother started it! She was talking about that baby the entire night, making sure I heard every tiny detail about Alice’s check-up, about the nursery, about the due date. She was doing it on purpose. To make me feel small. To make me feel like I don’t matter,

I’m not even going to start talking about what she said to me in the kitchen”

I reached out, trying to grab his arm, trying to make him understand that I wasn’t a villain here.

But he didn’t even flinch. He just stood firm, stone-faced.

“I know I have things to fix,” he said, cutting me off before I could finish my explanation. His voice was hard, lacking any of the warmth I was begging for. “I know I have some major groveling to do, and I am ready to do every single bit of that. I will fix every mistake I have made regarding you and this relationship, Faith. But you do not bring my mother into this war.”

“My war?” My voice cracked. “This is our relationship! And I wasn’t trying to include her! She came to the kitchen and she started to talking about the baby and she basically told me that I should love the baby as much as I love my children and I thought it was crazy talk because the baby isn’t born yet. It was starting to aggravate me because she was doing it intentionally!”

He stepped back, crossing his arms over his chest, his stance purely defensive. “My mother would never do something like that. She is always telling me that I need to fix our relationship. She has always supported us.”

His words sliced me open. He wasn’t just defending her. He was painting me as the aggressor, the liar.

“So you’re defending them?” I asked, my voice barely a tremor. My heart was slamming against my ribs, waiting for the answer that would either save us or end us. “You are taking their side over mine?”

That was when he snapped.

“Stop it, Faith! Just stop the fighting!” He threw his hands up in frustration. The anger in his eyes was blinding. “I am begging you to calm down. The tension, the stress, the constant arguing... it could affect the baby!”

The words echoed in the small space between us.

The baby.

He didn't mention my feelings. He didn't mention my hurt or my pain.

He only focused on the potential consequence for the child, The child that was born behind my back not to mention the child that he has been constantly asking me for forgiveness for

The anger drained out of me instantly, replaced by a hollow, sickening despair. The air left my lungs. It was the deepest cut yet.

“You're worried about the baby,” I repeated, my voice flat and emotionless, like I was tasting ash. “Not how I feel.”

“I'm worried about everything! I'm worried about you both!” he argued, but the power had gone out of his voice, replaced by a tired frustration. He wasn't arguing with me anymore; he was arguing with the situation he couldn't control.

“No, you're not,” I said softly. I recognized this feeling. It was the feeling you get when you realize you are completely alone, even when the person you love is standing right in front of you. “You're worried about them from me because you also think I would do something to hurt your baby.”

I expected him to shut the thought immediately out of my head but he kept quiet and that was all the confirmation that I needed.

I had nothing left to say. I didn't have the energy to explain the agony of hearing about his other baby while fighting for recognition on this one. I turned around, intending to leave the house and go anywhere quiet. I needed space to breathe, to mend the new cracks he had just put in my heart.

I was good at that because I've been doing it for 3 years.

I took three steps toward the door.

“Go then,” he spat out, his voice sharp and laced with pure contempt. “You should run, Faith. Because that's what you always do when things get tough.”

Alpha's Regret: Begging For My Luna Back – Chapter 48

The truth didn't just hurt, it was a physical sickness.

I was curled up by the cold edge of the lake, my face hidden in my knees. The sound of the rushing water was supposed to be calming, but everything felt loud.

Astor is never going to change.

That simple thought finally sank into my heart, sharp and heavy like a stone. I've spent the last couple of days making excuses, covering for him, believing that my love was enough to fix the broken parts of our relationship. But my love had only helped him break me instead.

I was shaking, not from the cold, but from the realization that I had wasted my whole life. I wanted to scream until my throat tore, but I just kept making these harsh, broken noises. I felt myself losing control, flying out of my own body.

Just as I thought I was going completely mad, I felt it. That heavy, familiar weight nearby. I stopped breathing and slowly looked up.

There he was. Alpha Kyle.

He was standing maybe ten feet away, watching me with that calm, intense look he always had. I knew he had seen me crying. I knew he had heard me breaking. Rage, pure and hot, replaced the grief.

"It can't be a coincidence anymore," I choked out, my voice thick with snot and tears. I wiped my face fiercely with the back of my hand. "Every time I try to be alone, you are here. Are you following me?"

He didn't get angry or defensive. He just gave a small, easy laugh—the type of sound that seemed out of place in this serious conversation.

He walked closer, completely ignoring the mud on the bank, and sat down right next to the water, looking out over the dark lake. He looked truly peaceful, almost transfixed by the moonlight hitting the water.

"Funnily enough, Luna Faith," he said, his eyes still on the horizon, "this is the only place I seem to find peace at, too."

I didn't believe him for a second. It just sounded like a polite way to deny he was stalking me. But I was so tired. It had been such a long day of pretending everything was fine. I just wanted to breathe without thinking about the massive mess that was my life.

He turned his head toward me. “Is it okay if I ask you a question?”

I pulled my knees tighter to my chest. “If it’s about what happened today, then no. I don’t want to talk about that mess.”

“It’s not about that,” he promised.

I hesitated, then nodded. “Fine.”

He looked at me for a long time, his eyes searching. “Have you ever genuinely smiled, Faith?”

The question was so simple and so stupid that I almost laughed. “Of course, I have! Who hasn’t laughed?”

“I mean genuinely,” he corrected me gently. “Ever since I came to this pack, I have never seen you truly smile or laugh. You always have a kind of sadness hanging around you. There’s always something behind your eyes.”

My heart hammered against my ribs. It was true. He was seeing past the mask I wore for everyone—for Astor, for the pack, for me. He was too intuitive. He knew too much.

I stood up instantly, putting distance between us. The ground felt cold beneath my feet.

“I don’t appreciate how much you seem to know or want to know about me, Alpha Kyle,” I said, putting ice into my voice. I leaned on my title, trying to push him back. “This is where our conversation ends.”

He didn’t move. He just tilted his head, disappointment shadowing his face.

“I can see that you’re withering away in front of everybody, Faith. You are breaking on a daily basis,” he said, his voice low and serious. “If you keep holding onto a relationship that is failing you, it will kill you.”

That was too much. That was crossing every single boundary I had left.

“You need to stop trying to read me and insert yourself into my business,” I snapped, my hands shaking with controlled fury. “You are a visiting Alpha. We appreciate having an ally, but I will not tolerate this kind of talk. I will tell

Astor immediately.”

He finally stood up, his height making him seem even more dangerous under the weak light.

“I can see how much you love your mate,” he countered, stepping closer. “But I don’t believe those feelings are being returned in the way you need them to be.”

“STOP!” I yelled, finally losing control. “You don’t know anything about our relationship! You have no right to comment on it!”

He looked away, shaking his head slightly, and let out a sigh that sounded heavy with fatigue.

“I must have been very wrong about you” he said sadly. “I thought you were a very strong woman, Faith. But now, I’m not so sure.”

The insult, the doubt, hit me harder than any physical slap. He had hit the one thing I was desperately trying to hold onto: the idea that I was strong enough to fix this.

I turned quickly, not wanting him to see the fresh tears that were already

blurring my vision. My feet started moving fast, desperate to escape him, desperate to escape myself.

“Faith!” he called out behind me.

I stopped, but I didn’t turn around. My shoulders were tight and stiff.

He spoke clearly, the words echoing slightly across the dark water.

“If you ever want to escape this hell that you seem to be living in, then you should come to me for help.”

The lifeline was too strange, too tempting, too unbelievable. I couldn’t stop the question that spilled out of my mouth. I spoke without thinking.

“What would you want in return?” I asked him, the bitterness clear in my voice. “Nobody does anything for somebody else for free.”

A moment of silence passed between us. I heard the soft crunch of his shoes in the dirt as he took a step closer.

“Nothing,” he finally answered. His voice was soft, almost a whisper. “I just don’t want to watch another young woman lose herself while trying to uplift a man in her life.”

Alpha’s Regret: Begging For My Luna Back – Chapter 49

The heavy front door clicked shut behind me, the sound echoing in the silent, dark hallway. It was well past three in the morning, and every bone in my body ached with a tiredness that went deeper than just physical exhaustion. I just wanted to crawl into bed and disappear.

I can't believe I entertained alpha Kyle's offer and even though I didn't answer him but the fact that I seemed interested must have painted a bad picture about me.

I left him by the lake but I didn't go home until now.

"Faith? Is that you?"

Astor's voice, low and rough, sliced through the quiet. I froze, my hand still on the doorknob. Of course, he was awake, he probably wants to shout at me even more.

I didn't answer, just started walking, my footsteps soft on the wooden floor, heading towards the stairs. Maybe if I just kept moving, he'd let it go.

"Faith! I asked you a question. Where were you?" His voice was louder now, sharp, like a whip cracking.

My shoulders tensed. I kept walking. The steps felt heavy, each one a struggle.

"Faith, stop! I need an answer!" he snapped, his voice a cold blade.

That was it. My last thread of patience snapped. I spun around, my own anger flaring up, hot and fast. "I'm tired, Astor! I'm so tired of you always telling me how to feel, how to act, or where I can and can't go!" My voice was a furious whisper, careful not to wake anyone else, but full of venom.

He stood by the living room doorway, a dark shape in the dim light. His eyes felt like they were burning holes into me. "I know where you were, Faith. But I want to hear you say it."

My stomach clenched. He knew. Of course, he knew. Why did he always play these games then? "Good," I retorted, my voice dripping with sarcasm. Then why are you bothering to ask me?"

I turned to walk away again, completely done with this. I just wanted to be free of his constant questions and accusations. But before I could take another step, his hand shot out, grabbing my arm. His grip was tight, crushing.

I gasped, startled, a jolt of fear shooting through me. "Let go, Astor!"

He didn't. His face was a mask of furious suspicion. "Are you having an affair, Faith?" he demanded, his voice low and dangerous.

The words slammed into me, knocking the air out of my lungs. My mouth fell open. “What are you talking about?” I whispered, utterly shocked. My mind spun, trying to make sense of his crazy accusation.

“Alpha Kyle,” he spat out, his grip tightening until my arm throbbed. “For some weird reason, every time I go looking for you, I find you with him! So, I’m asking you, Faith, what the hell is going on between you two?”

My shock quickly turned to a different kind of anger. A cold, burning rage. Alpha Kyle? That was his ‘evidence’? My mind flashed back to a different time, a different betrayal. He had no right.

I pulled my arm free with a furious yank, ignoring the pain. “Oh, really? Every time you go looking for me?” I scoffed, a bitter laugh escaping my lips. “Why didn’t you demand yourself to stop when you were cheating on me with my sister, Astor? Why didn’t you ask yourself what the hell was going on then?”

He flinched, his face going pale in the dim light. He opened his mouth, probably to start with another one of his endless excuses, another round of “let me explain.” But I wasn’t going to let him. Not this time.

“No,” I cut him off, shaking my head slowly, tears stinging my eyes but refusing to fall. “Don’t bother. Don’t even try. You’ve done enough talking, Astor. Believe me, you’ve done more than enough.” My voice broke, but my resolve didn’t. “I’m so tired. So tired of the constant explanations, the constant promises that things will change. So tired of constantly trying to give you another chance, only for you to always, always show me your true colors.”

I looked at him, really looked at him, and saw not the man I loved, but the man who had broken me, over and over again. My chest ached with a dull, heavy pain. “I just want to be left alone, Astor. Just leave me alone.”

I turned my back on him then, not bothering to wait for his reaction. I heard him call my name, a desperate plea, but I kept walking, my pace quickening. I wouldn’t stop. I couldn’t. Each step was a step away from him, away from the pain. I reached my room, slammed the door shut, and fumbled with the lock, clicking it into place with a shaky hand. The sound was deafening, final.

I leaned against the door, my chest heaving, trying to catch my breath, trying to calm the storm inside me. Everything felt too much. I stumbled into the bathroom, flicked on the light, and turned the shower on, letting the water run hot, steaming up the room. I stripped off my clothes, each movement feeling heavy and slow.

Stepping under the shower, the hot water rained down on me, scalding my skin but somehow soothing my soul. I closed my eyes, letting the water wash over my face, down my hair, over my body. It felt like it was washing away the dirt, the accusations, the pain. As the steam filled the small space, mind started to clear.

I thought about everything, all the compromises, all the tears, all the times I convinced myself to stay, to try again. I thought about how I always waited for him to give me permission to be happy, permission to feel something different, permission to even just leave an argument.

And then, a stark, painful truth hit me, clear as the water pounding against my skin. I shouldn't be asking for permission. For anything. Not from him. Not from anyone. I couldn't keep doing this. If I stayed here, if I kept trying, kept giving him chances, I was going to die. Not a physical death, but a slow, agonizing death of my heart, my spirit. The heartache would consume me, hollow me out until there was nothing left.

The water poured down, a cleansing torrent, as a new resolve solidified within me. I was leaving. And this time, it wasn't just a threat. This time, I swear, Astor will never find me.

Alpha's Regret: Begging For My Luna Back – Chapter 50

My eyes fluttered open to the soft light filtering through the curtains. it was a new day but I'm not looking forward to it.

I swung my legs out of bed and stretched, feeling a surprising sense of calm settle over me. Downstairs, the aroma of coffee and something warm and delicious filled the air. I padded into the kitchen, my bare feet silent on the cool tile.

And there he was. Astor. Sitting at the table, a plate piled high with pancakes in front of him. He looked up as I entered, a small, almost expectant smile on his face.

"Good morning," he said, his voice a little softer than usual. So I guess he is going back to his original plan which is dangling a sweet in front of me hoping I'll take it and forget everything.

I blinked. "Morning. Don't you have a meeting this morning?" I asked, my tone deliberately casual. I hadn't expected him to be here, let alone have breakfast waiting for me. It was a complete surprise.

He frowned, a strange look crossing his face. It was like he'd expected something else, a different question, a different reaction from me. But I just kept my gaze steady, pretending not to notice his confusion.

"I canceled them," he said, his voice even smoother now. "All of them. For the rest of the day. I want to spend the day with you."

A small smile touched my lips. Part of me a very small, very ignored part – found that sweet which is exactly what he wanted because that’s what he’s been doing for the last couple of days but I know better now. “That sounds like a good idea,” I said, reaching for a mug. “But unfortunately, I have things to do.”

I sat down and started to eat. The pancakes were perfect, fluffy and golden.

Astor, however, didn’t touch his. He just watched me, his eyes intense, his fork hovering over his plate. It was unnerving.

Finally, I couldn’t stand it anymore. I put my fork down. “What?” I asked, trying to keep my frustration in check.

He took a deep breath. “I know I messed up,” he began, his voice low and earnest. “And I would like to apologize...”

Before he could even finish, I raised my hand, a sharp gesture to stop him.” Astor, please,” I said, my voice tight. “Just... stop.”

He started to talk again, to explain, to grovel. But the words felt like sandpaper on my already raw nerves.

“Astor, stop!” I snapped, the words louder than I intended. My voice cracked with a frustration I hadn’t realized was simmering beneath the surface. “Are you not tired of constantly having to say sorry? Because I’m tired of hearing it. I’d just like to eat my breakfast in peace.”

He finally fell silent, his shoulders slumping slightly. He looked, for the first time, truly defeated. I picked up my fork again, the quiet in the kitchen almost deafening.

After I finished, I took my plate and the remnants of his to the sink. As I started to wash the dishes, I felt his presence behind me. He still couldn’t let it go, could he?

“You know,” he started, his voice laced with that familiar, pleading tone. “You promised to give me a chance. To give me a mon...”

I turned the water off, wiping my hands on a dishtowel. “I haven’t forgotten,” I said, my voice cold and clear. “That’s why I’m still here. But that doesn’t mean I have to tolerate your overbearing presence while I’m just trying to start my day.”

I left him standing there in the kitchen, the scent of soap and his unspoken words hanging in the air. I walked back to my room, the silence a welcome relief. I needed to get ready, to get out, to breathe.

When I finally emerged from my room, dressed and ready, Astor was waiting by the door. His eyes were full of a desperate hope that I tried my best to ignore.

“So, what are you going to be busy with today?” he asked, his gaze searching mine.

“The usual,” I replied, my voice flat. “And don’t worry. I won’t be going anywhere near your mother. Or Alice.” The last part slipped out, a little sharper than I intended.

He tried to say something, to plead, to argue, but I just walked past him, my mind made up. As I walked towards the pack house, a wave of doubt washed over me. Was I doing the right thing? Leaving him, walking away from... whatever this was?

But I couldn’t help but remember how lonely I am here and how much I’m drowning in pain. I cry every second of everyday and that can’t be normal. So I knew. I had to choose myself. My happiness. My peace of mind.

I know the person that I’m reaching for help to is up to no good either because I’m not stupid to believe that it’s a coincidence but the man finds me everywhere I am but for now that’s not important.

I reached the pack house, my steps firm, I walked directly to Alpha Kyle’s door and knocked. The sound echoed in the quiet hallway.

The door opened, and there he was. Alpha Kyle. He looked surprised, but his expression softened when he saw my face.

“Faith,” he said, a welcoming smile gracing his lips he had a knowing looking his eyes and he looked like he was already celebrating his Victory but the only person who will win is me. “Come in.”

I shook my head, a small but decisive movement. “Thank you, Alpha Kyle,” I said, my voice steady. “But I don’t want people to get the wrong idea. I’m here because I accept your help.”