

Let Them Kneel

Chapter

Chapter 1 Chapter One

Kaelani's hands knew the rhythm of kneading dough better than they knew the warmth of touch. The wooden counter beneath her palms was dusted in flour, the yeasty scent of rising bread clinging to the air. Behind her, the ovens hummed, filling the small bakery with the comforting perfume of sugar and spice. For five years, this place had been her sanctuary. A life she had built with her own hands – quiet, steady, safe. “Another batch of cinnamon honey cakes?” Tessa's voice chimed from the front, playful as always. “You're going to ruin my figure if you keep making those.” Kaelani smiled faintly, brushing a strand of dark hair from her face. “They sell out first. You know that.” “They sell out because half the men in town come here hoping you'll smile at them while you hand them a bag,” Tessa teased, loud enough that a customer chuckled on his way out. Kaelani rolled her eyes, her cheeks warming as she pressed her fists into the dough. This was how mornings usually went: Tessa bantering, Kaelani pretending not to notice. It was simple. Predictable. Human. Kaelani dusted her palms on her apron and moved toward the front counter, her gaze drifting absently through the wide bakery windows. Across the street, sleek black cars rolled to a stop in front of the new hotel. Men in pressed suits stepped out, polished and important, their voices carrying on the autumn wind. A year ago, that corner had been nothing but an empty lot overgrown with weeds. Now the glass-and-steel hotel stood gleaming like it had been there all along, casting a long shadow over the old brick storefronts. Progress, people called it. Kaelani called it trouble. The hotel had dragged change into town like an uninvited guest – outsiders with too much money, talks of expansion, even rumors of a highway cutting right through the countryside. It wasn't her business, not really. But the bakery had always been a place for neighbors, for locals, for familiar faces. Now, she saw more strangers passing through her door than ever before. Her eyes lingered on the line of men crossing the pavement. They looked out of place here, their presence too sharp, too heavy for a town this small. Expensive suits, expensive cars – men who belonged in high-rise boardrooms, not in front of a corner bakery on Main Street. Tessa appeared at her side, pressing close to the glass with a grin. “Well, well. Looks like the hotel's paying off. Do you see them? Straight out of some Wall Street magazine spread. God, they're gorgeous.” Kaelani shook her head faintly, brushing flour from her hands. “Not my type,” she murmured, turning back toward the counter. She had no interest in strangers who didn't belong here. Tessa

rolled her eyes dramatically before flitting back to help a waiting customer. Across town, a black sedan wound its way down Main Street, drawing more than a few stares as it slowed before the new hotel. Inside, Julian leaned back against the leather seat, gaze cool as he took in the town's mix of old brick buildings and new construction. "Remind me what's first on the agenda," he said, voice clipped but steady. Jace, hands relaxed on the wheel, didn't miss a beat. "Border negotiations. Some of the Alphas are pushing for tighter control of the northern stretch. Claims human development is creeping too close to pack lands." Julian's mouth flattened. "And the others?" "Two want to sell parcels off – play nice with the humans and line their pockets. The rest are split. If expansion goes forward, the highway alone will cut right through neutral ground. Everyone wants a piece." Julian gave a low hum, neither agreement nor disapproval. Typical. Alphas squabbling for territory while humans built over it like ants. That was why the council called this summit, and why he couldn't afford distraction. The car slowed into the hotel's valet lane. The gleaming glass structure loomed above them, polished and new, a symbol of everything humans were building here. Jace flicked a glance at him as he pulled to a stop. "I'll handle check-in. We're early enough to get a read on who's arrived." Julian nodded once, pushing open his door. The moment his boots hit pavement, a sharp gust of wind cut down the street. Exhaust. Asphalt. Crisp leaves. And beneath it—something warm. Sweet. Spiced. It clung to him like an invisible hand, tugging at his senses. He stilled, nostrils flaring. Across the street, a small bakery sat nestled between an antique shop and a bookstore, sunlight glinting off its painted windows. "Julian." Jace's voice snapped his attention back, already at his side, handing off the keys to valet. "We should head in." Julian's gaze lingered on the bakery. He couldn't place why, but his wolf stirred restlessly under his skin, pacing. "Meet me inside," he said finally, his tone leaving no room for question. Jace arched a brow but didn't push. He knew better. With a shrug, he turned toward the hotel doors, leaving Julian to cross the street alone. The bell above the door jingled, sharp against the steady hum of the bakery. Kaelani glanced up from the tray she was icing, her hand stilling as her gaze locked on the man who had just stepped inside. Tall. Broad-shouldered. A presence that seemed to fill the small shop without effort. His dark suit cut sharp lines across a frame built for power, not for boardrooms. The way he carried himself – steady, unyielding, commanding – set him apart from every polished stranger she had ever seen step off the hotel curb. Her chest tightened. She'd grown up around their kind to know exactly what he was. Alpha. Kaelani's eyes darted instinctively toward the counter, searching for Tessa. But her friend was juggling a large takeout order – boxing pastries and pouring several coffees while a customer waited impatiently – far too preoccupied to notice the way the air seemed to shift. Her stomach knotted. She despised their kind – entitled, dangerous, always hungering for control. And now one stood in her bakery. The moment Julian stepped inside, the warmth of the bakery wrapped around him, thick with sugar and spice. That scent—the one that had dragged him across the street—swirled stronger here, burrowing under his

skin. His gaze swept briefly over the glass displays until it landed on the source he decided it had to be: golden, glazed cinnamon honey cakes, their rich sweetness perfuming the air. His wolf quieted, almost satisfied, and Julian's mouth curved faintly at his own foolishness. Drawn across the street for a pastry. "Can I help you, sir?" A woman's voice asked, clear and firm. He didn't bother looking up. Insignificant. Whoever she was, she was human — and therefore beneath his attention. "One of the cakes and a large coffee," he said, his voice deep and curt, more command than request. He reached into his jacket, pulled out a bill far larger than the order required, and set it on the counter without sparing her a glance. "Keep the change." His eyes were already drawn back toward the window, scanning the hotel across the street as if this stop was nothing more than a distraction. Kaelani bit back a scoff, rolling her eyes as she moved to prepare the order. Typical. Wealthy, arrogant, dismissive — exactly the sort she had no patience for. She slid the boxed pastry and steaming cup across the counter with practiced efficiency. "You're all set," she said, her tone sharp to match his. He took the items without looking at her, turned on his heel, and walked out as easily as he'd come in. The bell above the door jingled, and just like that, the air seemed to settle again.