

Chapter 16 Don't Be Scared

Lianne's POV:

The whole room seemed to lock up in that second.

I was exposed against Ethan, my bare skin rubbing against the coarse wool of his suit jacket that scraped at my tender back, while my breasts were pinned hard to his rising and falling chest.

A faint whine slipped out of me. My face flamed red as every thought in my head scattered. My hands thrashed in a panic, trying to duck down and grab that wretched towel, or find anything at all to hide this smothering disgrace.

But Ethan's arm felt forged from steel, locked around my waist, giving me no room to move at all.

He tipped his head down, his stare burning and unchecked as it swept over my body.

That usual icy distance in his eyes had disappeared, overtaken by a desire so fierce it nearly looked ravenous.

"Falling apart now?" he teased in a low voice, mockery curling through every word. "What happened to that fire you had when you were mouthing off to me?"

Shame and fury tore through me at once. I shoved at his chest, trying to force even the slightest space between us. "Ethan, let me go!"

Rather than loosening his grip, he pulled me in tighter, while his free hand caught my chin and tilted my face up toward his.

I knew exactly what came next. As his fated mate, my body had already turned traitor against my mind, aching for his touch in spite of everything.

My lashes quivered as I shut my eyes on instinct, bracing myself for the harsh kiss I was certain was about to fall.

One second. Two seconds...

But that expected heat never touched me.

I felt his rigid body go abruptly still, and then, the crushing force that had trapped me disappeared all at once.

I opened my eyes and saw Ethan standing several steps away.

The desire in his eyes was fading with frightening speed, giving way to an icy sharpness.

"Sorry." The word came out short and rough. He didn't spare me another glance before turning and walking straight out of the master bedroom.

The loud bang of the closing door seemed to shake me to the core.

I remained there, unmoving with the cold towel crumpled by my feet. Tears broke free before I even realized it, slipping down my cheeks.

I was so pitiful.

Only a moment earlier, being that close to Ethan had almost made me forget every hurt between us. But in the end, all I had done was make a fool of myself again.

To him, I was probably nothing more than a toy tied to him by the mate bond, useful now and then for easing his physical urges.

His self-control had nothing to do with respecting me; it was because the sacred place in his heart had long belonged to Ivy alone.

I picked up the towel and wiped at my tears like I was moving on instinct before climbing beneath the covers and curling into myself.

Only one thought was left in my mind—I couldn't remain here any longer.

I wanted to get away—get away from this villa built on deception, get away from the suffocating Thorn Pack.

I missed my father.

If he were still here, he never would have let me suffer through something

like this.

I wanted to go somewhere with mountains and rivers, somewhere no one knew my name, and quietly bring this child into the world.

I would teach them how to run, teach them how to hunt, but I would never let them know their father was such a heartless Alpha.

Without realizing it, I cried myself to sleep.

Boom!

A crack of thunder seemed to burst right beside my ear. I jerked awake from the nightmare and shot upright in bed, my heart pounding so violently it felt ready to tear out of my chest.

In the dark, I dragged in silent breaths, my forehead soaked with icy sweat.

Whenever I shut my eyes, I saw my father's face in the moments before he died.

It had been a stormy night after the company collapsed. Just like this, with thunder shaking the sky, he had ended his own life in despair.

The pain of losing someone you love was the kind of wound that never truly closed.

The dizziness came back, along with fierce palpitations that made it almost impossible to breathe.

Thunder kept rumbling without pause, and now and then, lightning cut through the curtains, flooding the room in a harsh, ghostly white.

I clenched my teeth, trembling so badly I couldn't stop, my nightdress damp all over with sweat.

Making myself leave the bed, I groped blindly through drawers and boxes. My shaking fingers finally closed around a bottle of medicine.

I tipped two pills into my mouth and forced them down dry, without a drop of water.

But medicine didn't take effect that fast.

I curled up on the bed again, clutching the edge of the blanket so hard my knuckles turned pale. I whispered, "Just hold on a bit longer, Lianne. When morning comes, it'll be okay. Nothing will happen."

Then, all at once, the doorknob turned with a soft click.

Every nerve in me drew tight in an instant. Like a frightened cat, I fixed my eyes on the door, barely breathing too scared to move.

The door opened, and a tall figure made his way toward the bed.

It was Ethan.

I quickly squeezed my eyes shut and pretended to be asleep, but the violent shaking running through me exposed every bit of my fear and weakness.

The second the covers were lifted, that familiar sandalwood scent drifted into me.

"Still awake?" His deep voice sliced through the dark.

Without opening my eyes, I answered stubbornly, "I was asleep. The thunder woke me up. I'm fine. You can go."

He didn't reply and seemed ready to get up and leave.

At that moment, panic rushed straight through my chest.

Even though reason told me to drive him away, my instincts were crying out for him to stay.

I didn't dare ask him not to go; I only tightened my hold on the blanket without thinking.

The second I heard the soft click of the door shutting, fresh tears burned at my eyes.

Of course, he had always been half-hearted with me; even one extra question seemed like too much effort for him.

But in the very next instant, the mattress dipped a little as a burning chest pressed against my back.

Ethan hadn't gone anywhere; he had only stepped away to close the door.

He sat down beside me on the bed and reached out with his long arm, gathering me and the blanket into his arms.

"Don't be scared. I'll stay with you until you fall asleep," he murmured it near my ear, his warm breath brushing softly over my temple.

I made a muffled sound in response, and tears spilled out all over again.

Why did he always have to do this?

After disgracing me, he turned around and gave me the comfort I longed for most on nights like this, when storms broke overhead.

This gentleness, no matter how poisonous I knew it was, was something I could never bring myself to reject.

I breathed him in greedily. Wrapped in that familiar scent, my frayed nerves finally eased, and I slipped into a deep sleep. ①