

Through Rising Fog We Walk Paths Unknown Yet Comforting by Arlo Mason Jett 1

chapter 151

DAMIEN'S POV

The moment I stepped into the room, Tiffany nearly collapsed against me. She was holding her injured hand. Her face was streaked with tears. Her entire body was shaking. I grabbed her quickly, steadying her before she fell, and then my eyes drifted against my will to the sofa.

Kane and Bella sat side by side.

They were close. Far too close.

His fingers were intertwined with hers as if he had no intention of ever letting go. His posture was relaxed... but there was a warning beneath it, a silent threat that made my heart pound so loud I felt dizzy.

I had known for a while that they were involved. I mean, they were basically married, but knowing and seeing were two different realities. The woman I abandoned – no, the woman I once loved – sat there like she belonged to a world I could no longer reach. She had risen from the dirt of the city while I had watched from a distance. And 1/8 now... now she was someone even I had to look up to.

16:06

That alone left a bitter, anxious taste in **my** mouth.

"Alpha Stonewood..." I forced my throat to work. "I'll take my sister away now."

Kane looked at me. His expression was calm, dangerously calm.

"Don't you want to say hello to Bella?" he asked. "You should be old acquaintances."

I felt cold sweat move down my spine. The way he said it... too calm, too careful. As if he was poking at a wound he knew would bleed.

I swallowed hard. “We haven’t seen each other in a long time. I hope we can let bygones be bygones.”

My voice trembled. Not enough to be obvious, but enough that I heard *it*.

But Kane’s next words almost made my knees give out.

“Bella, when you went to jail, he immediately broke up with you. *If* you want revenge, you can tell me. I’ll help For.”

16:06

#16 Bonu

Just like that. No hesitation. No emotion. Just power – raw and unquestionable. He didn’t need to raise his voice for the floor to drop out beneath me.

Tiffany froze beside me. Her breath hitched. I knew she was terrified too because if Kane truly moved against our family, the Silverwoods wouldn’t survive a year. We’d be erased.

“Alpha Stonewood, I-” I started, helplessly trying to defend myself.

But Bella’s voice cut me in half.

“There’s no need. He became a stranger the moment he broke up with me years ago.” She didn’t even look at me. “I should be thankful. He showed me who he really was. Because of everything that happened, I got to see the truth of our relationship”

My heart clenched painfully.

She said it so calmly... so firmly... and without a single glance in my direction. As if I never mattered.

She had healed. She had moved on.

16:07

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And I was nothing.

“In that case, good,” Kane said.

(P) -16 Bonus

He stood, walked right up to me then placed a hand on my shoulder. His touch was light . His smile was gentle. But his eyes were cold enough to burn.

“You should thank her for not wanting to take revenge,” he murmured. “Otherwise, by next year, we wouldn’t see the Silverwood Pack in this part of the country.”

My entire body went numb. I bowed my head so low I could barely breathe.

“Thank you,” I whispered to Bella because I knew she didn’t owe me mercy at all. I took Tiffany’s arm and practically dragged her out before things got worse.

Only when the hospital doors shut behind us did I breathe well again.

Tiffany let out an angry sob. “Damien, why do you think Kane has taken an interest in Bella?!”

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Aclosed my eyes for a second. “I’ve already told you, doif?

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(+16 Bonus

“Bella is relying on Kane’s power! Without him, she’s a nobody. A fucking nobody” Tiffan y spat.

“You saw what happened in there,” I snapped. “If she had asked for revenge, our pack would be destroyed. Do you understand that?”

Tiffany trembled and grabbed her injured hand. “She’s nothing without him! Nothing!”

I looked at my sister “Don’t be stupid. For the Silverwood family’s sake, don’t provoke her again. Do you hear me? Or don’t come crying to me when the pack falls because of you.”

She opened her mouth to retort but then she

remembered the hospital room.

In that moment, she probably remembered Kane’s shadow falling over her and Jayden crushing her fingers.

She froze.

And *for* once... stayed silent.

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16:07

BELLA'S POV

Kane stood in front of me, blocking the light. He bent slightly, bringing his face close to mine. His smile was gentle, beautiful, even, and those deep eyes of his glowed.

He was gorgeous. He looked like an angel.

But everything he did... everything he said... reminded me he was anything but gentle.

"Are you happy today, sister?" he asked softly.

Sister.

He still called me that.

Yet this was the same man who kissed me, touched me, held me, punished those who hurt me, and watched me with a hunger that made my skin warm. This man's gentleness was a disguise. Underneath it... was someone terrifying.

I looked into his eyes. "You deliberately asked Damien and Tiffany to come here. You wanted to show me that Something I could never achieve in my life can be *done*."07

He didn't deny it. His eyes softened.

"Not only that," he murmured. "I want to show you that I can give you everything – from dignity to respect. Even your old life. Your wolf powers... maybe we can raise them again."

My breath caught. He brushed aside a strand of hair from my shoulder, letting his fingers trail against my skin.

"In the future, if you want to be a doctor again..." he spoke, "or a star, or a boss... I can help you. I can help you live above everyone who laughed at you. Everyone who looked down on you will bow their heads."

His words were slow. He spoke like he was laying an entire world at my feet.

“Tell me,” he whispered, “is that okay?”

My heart beat hard. His offer was so tempting it almost hurt. He could actually do this.

He could give me everything a person would ever want – Dignity. Dreams. Power. A life I never thought I’d touch again.

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But...

(*) -16 Bonu

My voice trembled as I asked, “Do you really want me to stay with you?”

His eyes locked onto mine and without missing a beat, he answered.

“I do.”

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BELLA’S POV

“I can’t refuse, can I?” I asked quietly.

The moment the words left my mouth, something shifted in Kane. His eyes flashed, turning a bit gold. His wolf pushed through and I felt the air around us tighten.

He straightened slowly, towering over me. His shadow swallowed me whole.

“No,” he said. “You can refuse. I’ll give you that right.” He paused, head tilting slightly as he studied me. “But, Bella... are you sure you want to refuse?”

My breath hitched. The room felt colder and heavier. It felt as if the walls themselves waited for my answer.

If I said yes to him, if I accepted what he wanted, I could have power, dignity, a new life. He could bend fate for me with a single order. Any other man, any other situation, and I might have agreed without thinking. But Kane...

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Kane wasn’t anyone.

16:07

He terrified me in a way that sank into my bones. One sentence from him had ruined my entire life. I had spent three years in prison. No lawyer would touch my case. No doctor, pack elder, or alpha would hear my pleas. I remembered sitting in that courtroom alone, hands cuffed, hearing the words Kane's fiancée... Kane's loss... Kane's anger...

I remembered the way witnesses pointed at me with trembling voices as if Kane himself stood behind them with a knife pressed to their spines.

And that was only what humans saw.

In the wolf world, it had been worse. They had turned their backs on me, one by one. My pack threw me out. My wolf – Anna – went silent from the trauma. Everyone acted as if Kane had already sentenced me to death.

Even now, after discovering his real identity, I couldn't stop my body from reacting whenever he came close. My muscles locked. My breath snagged. My pulse jumped like a scared animal. How could I keep a man like this beside me? How could feelings continue for someone who was not the man I thought I knew?

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This man... this Alpha... was my nightmare.

I forced a breath past my tight throat.

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+16 Bonu

"Yes," I whispered. "I want to refuse."

Kane's expression shifted slowly, dangerously. His face darkened in a way that made the room feel unbearably small. His voice dropped into something cold.

"You don't want to stay with me?" he asked.

I swallowed. "No, Alpha Stonewood. I don't"

He laughed bitterly. "I didn't expect to be rejected by a woman. I need you to do something for me"

“What?”

“Bella, think carefully. Without my protection, what will you do? Even if the Monroe family leaves you alone, do you really plan to sweep roads for the rest of your life?”

His words hit me harder than they should have.
Maybe because they were true. Maybe because he knew exactly where to aim to hurt me.

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+16 Bonus

But I forced myself to look him in the eyes. “That’s **my** business.”

His jaw tightened. His lips pressed into a flat, angry line. For a moment, I felt something powerful inside him. It felt like frustration, disbelief, rejection. It rolled off him like waves against my skin. I had wounded him, and that alone scared me more than everything else.

His arms tensed. I could see his muscles shifting under his sleeves. He growled lowly.

Then he turned around and left without another word. The door slammed behind him.

Only then did my body begin to move again. I let out a breath.

The doctor came later for my routine checkup. He was gentle, professional, smiling politely as he flipped through my reports.

“All indicators look good, Miss Jameson. The sedative has cleared from your system completely.”

Heft relieved. “Can I be discharged?”

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“Yes,” he said. “As long as Alpha Stonewood agrees, you may leave anytime.”

My stomach twisted. “I... need his permission?”

The doctor nodded respectfully. He had no idea how each word stabbed me. "You are under his care. It *is* just a procedural formality."

"Okay," I murmured. "Got it."

When they left, I stepped into the bathroom. The harsh fluorescent light reflected a version of me I almost didn't recognize. I looked at myself in the mirror.

I looked at my brows, my almond eyes and my soft, pink lips. Under the brightness, my skin almost glowed.

I guess I was pretty enough in a normal crowd. Still, I was nothing special beside women like those around Kane – women raised in wealthy packs, women who had never spent a night in prison or been beaten on the streets.

Why did he choose me?

Prouched my lips gently. They tingled as if they

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remembered him.

1. f) -16 Bonus

Tara's voice echoed in my memory. She would always tell me "Bella, do you know your lips are beautiful? Men will want to kiss you just from looking at them."

I had laughed at her. I thought she was teasing.

But Kane... Kane didn't tease.

When he kissed me, he didn't hesitate. He didn't test the waters. He consumed. He claimed. His hunger had been overwhelming. The thought of it all was hot enough to melt my thoughts into liquid. My chest tightened just remembering how close he had pressed me, how breathless I had felt in that moment.

Heat spread in my stomach and rushed through my spine.

"Don't think about it," I whispered urgently to the mirror. "Don't think about it anymore."

He said he'd give me a choice. A man like him wouldn't break his word. I had to believe that.

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16:07

A dream where I met a man named Kane. A **dream where** he held me, kissed me, watched me with eyes full of heat and danger. A dream where we cared for each other.

And when I woke up from that dream... I would be alone again.

Just like before.

I changed back into the simple clothes I wore when I was brought here. My bag, my phone – those were all I owned. Everything else belonged to the hospital or to Kane.

I sat quietly on the sofa with my hands folded on my lap.

I was waiting.

Waiting for the man who terrified me. Waiting for the man who kissed me.

Waiting for the man I had refused. Waiting for the man who never accepted rejection.

The hallway outside was silent.

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BELLA'S POV

I waited for Kane with a kind of calmness that didn't feel natural to me. The hospital room was too quiet, too white, too clean.

I sat properly on the small sofa, the way one was supposed to sit when they didn't want their hands to shake or their mind to go too far. My back was straight.

I had my palms placed neatly on my knees and my ankles together. It was the position I used whenever I needed to remind myself that I had control of my body, even when I didn't have control of anything else.

The door opened and Kane stepped inside.

He stopped the moment he saw me.

"Proper," he murmured under his breath. "Of course."

He walked toward me with that effortless confidence only an Alpha carried – the kind of confidence

that didn't need to be spoken to be understood. His wolf moved with him to the point that I could feel it.

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"Do you want to leave the hospital?" he asked.

"Yeah." I whispered.

(*) +16 **Bonus**

As I looked at him, my eyes fell to the scarf around his neck.

My scarf.

He was wearing it. It was the simple brown one I had knitted for him, thinking I was doing something nice for it. He didn't need it. He had expensive things, powerful connections, a life far beyond me. Yet he wore it.

Even now.

He stepped closer. "I can give you another chance to make your choice. Think carefully before you answer. Do you really not want to stay with me?"

I took in a deep breath.

One thing I knew was that Alpha Stonewood never gave second chances. Never. I had heard the stories even

before prison. I had lived through the fear of his name while locked behind bars. And yet here he was... offering

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Why me?

He tilted his head slightly. "Yes or no, Bella?"

+16 Bonus

His voice wasn't loud, but it was the kind that made the world pause. My heart hammered painfully. I knew that staying with him would change everything. I also knew that once he was done with me, my life could become far worse than anything I had already survived.

He was Alpha Kane Stonewood. A man who had lived in my nightmares. A man I once trembled at the mere mention of.

I forced myself to swallow. "... I want to be alone. I don't want to stay with anyone."

His eyes got darker but not with anger. It was something colder, something that sent a shiver crawling over my skin.

"You're sure?" he asked "You don't think you're going to regret it?"

My heart squeezed painfully. I desired him; I was terrified of him; I wanted to run but at the same time, I wanted:08

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\$16 Bonus

him to pull me close. It was ridiculous and confusing.

"No," I whispered.

His jaw flexed slightly. Then, before I could process it, his hand wrapped around my wrist then he drew me up from the sofa. I gasped in shock then I stumbled and fell onto the hospital bed behind me.

He pinned me down to the bed softly. He caged me in with his presence. He had one knee on the mattress. He had his hands braced on either side of me so I couldn't ignore him, couldn't pretend the space between us wasn't suffocating.

I could have moved away but my body didn't move.

"Kane... what are you doing?" My voice trembled as I spoke.

"I regret giving you a choice." He growled "I never should have"

He leaned into my neck then inhaled. Then slowly, he pressed a soft kiss at the corner of my jaw.

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I hated myself for it. I wanted it too much.

“No,” I whispered.

+16 Bonus

“If I intended to take you right here, Bella... you wouldn’t have to tell me no.”

My breath hitched. He was right.

Even if I wanted to scream, who would dare fight against Alpha Stonewood?

Before I could gather myself, his lips finally met mine.

The kiss wasn’t forced. It wasn’t rushed. It wasn’t even fully claimed. It was slow, deep, testing.

And gods help me, I kissed him back.

My fingers curled into the sheets. My mind kept spinning as he drew me deeper into the moment. My

heart throbbed painfully. My body warmed due to his closeness.

Then panic punched through me.

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16:08

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~ +16 **Bonus**

It was too much. It felt too real and too intense.

Without thinking, I bit him.

He jerked slightly, but he didn’t pull away. The taste of blood spread between us, startling me back into myself. I froze.

His eyes opened. They got darker as he looked at me. Slowly, he smiled.

“Did it taste good?” he asked softly.

I stared, speechless. My body was still trembling.

He lifted his thumb to my lips and wiped away a bit of the blood. "This is the first time a woman has drunk my blood. You truly do like breaking my rules, sister."

That word again. "Sister". How ironic.

"Kane... let me go. Please." My voice cracked even though I hated sounding weak.

His fingers moved through my hair with slow, soothing strokes "is that how much you'd hate to stay by my side?"

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(**) +16 Bonus

"I just want to live peacefully." I spoke. "I just want to breathe."

Every time I swallowed, I could still feel the taste of him. It made my body react in ways I didn't understand. It gave me heat, nerves, shivers, adrenaline that rolled under my skin like something was rising inside me.

Oh gods... what had I done? What had we done?

He leaned closer. "So being with me would destroy your peace?"

His hand brushed my shoulder. It was meant to be a simple touch, but the fabric of my hospital gown slid slightly, exposing the curve of my shoulder. His breath hitched softly, and before I could react, he lowered his lips to my skin. He kissed the spot softly.

Every part of me lit up.

"Kane..." I whispered.

I trembled harder. The world tilted. My stomach turned.

Suddenly I slapped my hand over my mouth. "U" 16:08

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\$16 Bonus

I pushed past him and stumbled off the bed. My legs nearly buckled, but I forced them to move, rushing into the small bathroom. I leaned over the sink. My hands gripped the edges so tightly my knuckles whitened.

Then I threw up. I basically retched.

Again.

Again.

Something was wrong. Something inside me was shifting, snapping awake, clawing upward.

I gasped for breath between waves of nausea. I could feel cold sweat rolling down my spine.

Something in me was awakening... and I didn't know if it was mine.

Or his.

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BELLA'S POV

My body shook uncontrollably as another wave of nausea rolled through me. I held on to the edge of the sink while I vomited again, though nothing came out anymore.

At a point, it was just painful, dry heaves that shook through my chest and left my throat burning. It didn't matter. It was already too late. His blood, his taste, lingered on my tongue. No matter how violently I retched, I couldn't get it out of me.

I lifted my head slowly. I felt my vision swimming. In the mirror, my face looked ghostly pale, and strands of my hair stuck to my cheeks. I took a shaky breath and wiped my mouth with the back of my hand, but my fingers froze when I saw him. Kane stood right outside the bathroom, tall and still.

His expression was unreadable at first until those dark eyes locked onto mine with a coldness that made my heart clench. He stared at me as though my reaction was an insult to him.

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+16 Bonus

I opened my mouth but nothing came out. My throat tightened. I wasn't disgusted by him. I was disgusted by myself, by how weak he made me feel, by how much I

wanted him even when I was terrified... by how painfully confusing everything between us had become.

But I couldn't tell him that. I barely understood it myself.

I curled into myself. The more pale I looked, the darker his expression became. His eyes flashed with something like anger... or disappointment. Maybe both.

He took a breath. "All right, Bella. Since you're so disgusted, I'll let you leave."

A chill ran through me. This time... he wasn't teasing. He wasn't threatening. He wasn't playing.

This time, he meant it.

"However," he continued,, "if you regret it in the future, I won't ever want you again. I, Alpha Kane Stonewood, never give anyone a second chance."

He looked at me from head to toe one last time – my

Making legs, my torn clothes, my pale face. Then he 16:08

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+16 Bonus

turned around and started walking out of the ward

The room fell silent after he left. I felt the floor sway slightly under my feet. I braced myself on the sink again, breathing slowly, forcing myself not to collapse. My body felt drained, like every drop of strength had been forced out of me.

"So... does this mean I can leave?" I whispered to myself, unable to believe it.

I straightened up weakly and looked at my reflection. My clothes were torn where he had grabbed me. I swallowed hard, trying not to think about the heat of his mouth on my skin, the weight of his body, the sound of his voice when he said I disgusted him. I adjusted my top, pulled my hair back, wiped my face, and forced myself to breathe normally.

I didn't feel normal.

But I still walked out of the hospital, step by slow step.

When the sliding doors opened and the cold air hit my face, I thought I would finally get a moment of peace... But instead, chaos exploded around me.

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"There she is!" a voice cried out.

"It's her! The Bella who killed someone!"

"Three years for a life? Trash! Human trash!"

(0) +16 Bonus

Before I could process their voices, I felt something wet and foul—smelling thrown against my arm. It was a rotten vegetable. Then another. Then a stinky egg burst against my shoulder.

My breath hitched. My instinct was to cover my head, but I forced myself to stay upright. People were surrounding me from every angle, forming a tight circle. Phones were shoved toward me, lights flashing. Reporters barked questions while fans – if they could be called that – screamed accusations.

"She caused Gina to lose her sister!"

"That murderer has no shame showing her face!"

"She should've rotted in prison!"

They threw more vegetables, more eggs. They gave me more insults. The stench clung to my clothes, soaking

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many people, too many hands, too many voices.

(**) +16 **Bonus**

For a moment, I couldn't breathe. Not because of the crowd, but because of the crushing realization that Kane was gone. He really left. This time, he wasn't going to step in.

And maybe... maybe he shouldn't. Maybe I needed to endure this.

But it still hurt. Every shout. Every flash. Every hateful word.

It hurt in a way deeper than physical.

Still, I straightened my back. I covered my head with one hand, pushed forward with the other, trying to slip through the gaps in the crowd.

I didn't fight. I didn't yell. I didn't cry. I simply moved, one step at a time, the way someone moved through a storm they had been waiting for their whole life.

But inside, something small inside me cracked.

And I wondered for the first time...if I had made a 16:08

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JAYDEN'S POV

+16 Bonus

From the seat of the black Bentley, I could see everything through the tinted glass – the crowd, the flashes, the thrown objects, the way Bella's small frame disappeared in that sea of yelling strangers. I glanced at the rearview mirror to check on Kane.

He hadn't moved an inch.

"Alpha Stonewood," I said carefully, "should I go help Miss Jameson?"

Kane didn't look at me. He just stared straight ahead. His expression was unreadable.

"No need," he said coldly. "Since she's not willing to stay by my side, then she should understand that she needs to endure this."

Endure this?

I bit the inside of my cheek. He said it so easily. But I had been with him long enough to know when he was lying, not to me, but to himself.

"These people must be Miss Gina's fans," I explained,

trying to convince him to reconsider. "They probably a8

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+16 Bonus **+16**

the news online about Miss Jameson being hospitalized. That's why they're waiting outside to confront her."

"This is an insignificant matter," Kane said.

But his voice was colder, too cold. That was a warning

sign.

I wanted to argue. To remind him that just hours ago he had nearly killed a reporter for sneaking around her hospital floor. That he had torn down men for speaking her name the wrong way. That he had watched her sleep as if she might vanish.

But before I could say anything, his posture shifted.

His eyes flashed to a shade of dangerous gold.

“Let’s go,” he said.

That was the only warning.

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I swallowed and nodded, quickly shifting the Bentley into traffic. But I kept glancing back at him through the mirror. Because something was wrong. Something was Very wrong.

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(S)+16 **Bonus**

His fingers had changed. His nails elongated. His half shifted claws rested on his knees. Every few seconds, a

low growl rumbled in his chest. It wasn’t anger.

It was rage.

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He wasn’t just mad. He wasn’t even furious.

He was close to losing control.

And for the first time, I realized this wasn’t about pride. This wasn’t about her rejecting him.

This was something deeper. Something dangerous.

Because even though he said she didn’t want him...He still couldn’t stand the sight of her being hurt.

But he forced himself to leave anyway.

I tightened my grip on the wheel. If Bella ended up seriously harmed, I didn't know what Kane would do. I wasn't even sure he knew what he would do.

16:08

And from the way the growl rumbled louder inside the ear? I had a feeling...

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BELLA'S POV

I returned to the cabin in a state of embarrassment. The feeling was so intense that it felt like a fever under my skin.

It had only been a few days since I'd left, yet it felt as if I had lived an entire lifetime in that short time – one filled with confusion, danger, truths I wasn't ready for, and a man I still didn't know how to forget.

The moment I opened the cabin door, I stood still for a moment, staring at the cramped little space.

Now, it felt foreign, like I had walked into someone else's life. I shut the door and leaned back against it, looking at

the room.

I took in everything – The small table, the worn sofa, the narrow hallway leading to the bedroom. They were all exactly the same, but everything inside me had changed.

I rubbed my arms as a shiver ran through me. Then I laughed softly, bitterly.

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+16 Bonus

"Well, Bella," I murmured under my breath, "from now on, this is home again. Assuming Kane doesn't appear out of nowhere to drag me out of it."

The thought made my chest tighten. I had gotten used to hearing his footsteps, feeling his presence even in silence. I had gotten used to someone being there. I had gotten used to someone calling me “Sister” with a teasing grin that made my heart betray me every single time.

Now the cabin felt too loud with silence.

I let out a slow breath and walked toward the bedroom. I grabbed a set of fresh clothes and forced myself into the bathroom. I washed away the sweat, the humiliation I felt, and the scent of him that I could still feel in my skin no matter how hard I scrubbed.

When I stepped out, I looked at my reflection in the mirror. The mirror showed a woman who looked calm but hollowed out from the inside. I dried my hair roughly and began tidying the house simply because I needed something to do, something that wasn’t thinking about him. But tidying only made it worse.

Rane

was everywhere. His cutlery still sat by the sinks P

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the hook, his toothbrush leaned in the cup beside mine. His clothes, his shoes, the extra socks he shoved under the bed, the things he used... they were all there.

My throat got tighter as I picked up each item and placed them neatly into a cardboard box I dragged from the closet. I folded everything slowly inside it. I should have thrown them away. A normal person would have. But I couldn’t. I treasured the days I spent with him, even if he had been nothing but a disguise. Even if the man I thought I knew was a lie.

My hands paused on the edge of the blanket he always pulled over me when I fell asleep on the sofa. I pressed it to my face for one foolish second before forcing myself to drop it in the box. “He was an illusion,” I whispered. “But my feelings were real.”

That was the part that hurt me the most. I sat on the edge of the bed and reached for the half-knitted gloves I’d left by my headboard. I had knitted them slowly, patiently, picturing his large hands and how ridiculous he would look pretending not to like them.

But now... these would never be finished. I placed the

6ves, needles, and yarn gently into the box. When the:09

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shut.

+16 Bonus

I carried the box to a corner of the house then set it down

slowly.

"I'll still be living alone in the future," I murmured. "Kane is nothing but a man from my dreams."

I didn't believe my own words. Not entirely. Maybe not at all. Still, I turned away and prepared for bed.

That night, I didn't turn off the lights. The brightness made the room feel smaller and safer, the way it had when I first left prison and moved into this cabin. The darkness had reminded me too much of locked doors and metal bars. It reminded me of how trapped I was in prison.

But then Kane lived with me, and his presence helped me to chase away the shadows in my mind. I could sleep without fear. I could breathe. Now all of that was gone. I wasn't sure if safety was something I would ever feel again.

I sighed. I picked up my phone and dialed Tara. She answered on the second ring, breathless. "Bella You'1:09

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"I came in about an hour ago," I said softly. "I just... needed to settle down first."

"Are you okay?"

"I'm here," I replied. "That's all I can say."

She exhaled slowly. "Will you be at the cabin tomorrow? I'll come find you."

"Yes. I'll be here. I'm not going anywhere. It seems that other than here, I have nowhere else I can go."

"You're not alone," Tara said firmly. Her voice cracked a little. "Don't ever think you are."

I almost cried at that but I held it in. We talked for a few more minutes, and when I hung up, the silence returned louder than before. I lay in bed with the lights still on. Sleep didn't come.

Every time I shut my eyes, I saw Kane's face in my mind.

My body felt strange. It didn't feel wounded, not sick... I felt restless. I felt as if something inside me was pacing, Watching, waiting. And then... the howls began. The 16:09

Chapter Too

sounds weren't coming from outside but from inside me.

My chest tightened. My fingers gripped the sheets.

"Anna?" I whispered.

Could it be her?

It had been so long. So long since I last felt my wolf's presence. I thought she was gone forever. But tonight, I felt something. Not her voice. Not her true spirit. Just a whisper of something/

"Wherever you are," I breathed into the quiet. "Anna... please come back to me. I don't want to be alone."

But nothing answered. I didn't feel any warmth at all. I lay awake until morning.

The next day, Tara arrived. She knocked loudly before I could even finish brushing my hair. When I opened the door, her eyes widened.

"Oh my God, Bella," she gasped. "You look exhausted. What happened? I saw the news this morning. Were you Surrounded at the hospital entrance? Did they hurt you?"

I shook my head, trying to smile. "No. Embarrassed, yes. But not hurt."

"Embarrassed?" Tara repeated. "Bella, they attacked you with their words. They cornered you. They had no idea what happened and still treated you like a criminal."

I looked away. "It's fine. I'm used to-"

"Don't say that." Her voice broke. "Don't say you're used to being treated like that. You didn't poison anyone. You didn't do anything wrong. And I hate-" She stopped and covered her face with her hands. "I hate that you think you have to accept their judgment."

I swallowed hard. My throat felt tight again. Tara stepped forward and wrapped her arms around me so tightly I could barely breathe, but I needed that pressure.. I hugged her back and closed my eyes.

For a moment, the ache in my chest faded a bit.

"I'm distraught," she whispered fiercely into my shoulder. "Because you're innocent. And because nobody sees it. Nobody knows the real you."

Chapter 156

BELLA'S POV

+7 Bonus

When Tara closed the door behind us, she let out a deep breath, shaking her head. She marched straight to the tiny kitchen and started preparing coffee like she needed the warmth to calm down.

I sat at the small table, my palms wrapped around themselves. I felt tired.

It had always been that way after humiliation. My body would tremble, but my mind would fall quiet, as if it had learned how to survive long before I asked it to.

Tara set a steaming mug in front of me. Then she sat down and glared at the wall as if it personally offended her.

"How dare those people treat you that way! They only criticize from some moral high place without knowing anything at all," she said angrily. She paused, then added under her breath, "Stupid humans." She looked at me. "No offense."

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20:52

< Chapter 156

+7 Bonus

thinking – she remembered every bruise, every scar she had seen on my body when I was in prison. I didn't talk about it, but she'd pieced together enough. Sometimes I felt like she cared about me too much.

She cleared her throat then shifted the topic abruptly.

"Is Kane really Alpha Stonewood?" she asked quietly.

"Yes," I said.

Tara blinked in shock. She looked absolutely stunned. I didn't blame her. Who wouldn't be? I lived with him. Hell, we were practically married. We lived together. I thought I knew him quite well yet I didn't know anything at all. I always knew he was hiding something. I just didn't know it was something so big.

"That's..." Tara started. She didn't finish her sentence, like she didn't know what to say.

I took a sip of the tea she made "Yeah...I'm more shocked than you are"

"But... why would someone like him pretend to be an exiled Alpha and live in this tiny cabin with you. That0:52

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< Chapter 156

revenge? I'm confused, truly"

+7 Bonus

"It was nothing but a game to him," I answered bitterly.

I tried to keep my face neutral but my chest got tight. I thought of his hands warming mine on cold mornings. I thought of the silence he shared with me at night, the kind that didn't require words. I thought of how he waited by the door whenever I was late returning from

work... how he listened to me even when I wasn't sure I was making sense. None of it had been real, not really. All of it had been something he created. Something he played

with.

"A game?" Tara repeated. She looked utterly lost.

I nodded. "Yes. Rich wolves like him... they get bored. They do strange things to feel something again. Pretending to be someone else probably felt new and exciting for him." I stared down at the mug again "But novelty fades fast."

Tara looked at me helplessly. I could sense her frustration, her desire to defend me, to fix the wound Kane left behind. But nothing she said could change the Prifth. Nothing could take away the sting of knowing that2

< Chapter 156

+7 Bonus

"I know you hate deception more than anything," she whispered. "And Kane... he didn't just lie, Bella. He hit you where it hurts most."

I lifted my head and gave her a small smile. "I'm fine... really. The game is over. I don't have any connection to him anymore. I'm just back to living by myself. I didn't lose anything important."

But my smile made her eyes sparkle with sadness. It must have looked too calm, too controlled—like something polished until all the cracks were hidden.

"Then I'll move in with you," she said suddenly.

"You don't have to do that," I replied quickly. "I don't want you fighting with your family or your pack again because of me. You've done enough. I don't want to feel guilty every time we sit down for a meal or laugh together."

"You don't owe me anything," she snapped. "We're best friends! When someone lost money back in school, everyone accused me, remember? And you were the only one who stood up for me. You believed in me when everyone else walked away. You helped me catch the real2

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< Chapter 156

+7 Bonus

My throat tightened with emotion. I blinked back tears.

"Thank you," I said quietly.

“That’s right.” She leaned forward. “Now what are you going to do? What’s your plan?”

“What else can I do? I’ll go back to work at the hospital,” I said.

“Bella, think for a second.” Tara sighed. “The video of you being surrounded at the hospital entrance is already online. People are commenting. Judging. By now the people at the hospital know everything. What if your colleagues treat you-”

“Don’t worry,” I interrupted gently. “It’s fine.”

“How can it be fine?” she demanded.

I let out a slow breath. “Because everyone at the hospital already knows about what happened three years ago. They know about Sophia Monroe. They know I spent three years in prison. None of this is new to them.”

Tara stared at me, speechless, and in that heavy silence:

< Chapter 156

+7 Bonus

coming from my mug and wondered how long it would take before my life stopped feeling like a cage.

I wondered how long it would take before my heart stopped reacting to Kane’s name, his voice, the memory of his cold eyes when I rejected him.

But I kept my face calm. I always did.

Because that was the only thing I had left.

Tara reached across the table and held my hand gently.

And for a moment, just a moment, I let myself breathe.

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Chapter 157-1

JONAS’ POV

+7 Bonus

Kane Stonewood sat reclined on the leather sofa like he owned the room, like nothing in the world could ever reach him. One elbow rested lazily on the armrest, his hand supporting his cheek. His other hand lifted a glass of deep red wine to his lips every now and then, and each movement was slow.

The warm light above him caught the lines of his face and made him look almost unreal.

He looked beautiful yet dangerous at the same time. He was the kind of man who didn't have to try to be alluring. It simply radiated from him. It was no wonder the wealthy women in Emerald City whispered about him with hunger they couldn't hide.

I leaned back, studying him, and sighed. Kane looked relaxed, but the way his eyes stayed half-lidded told me he was thinking about something else entirely. He always was.

Something was bothering him. Something important?

20:52

< Chapter 157-1

+7 Bonus

been dying to meet her. What kind of woman makes you abandon your Old Alpha on a holiday?"

His fingers paused on the glass. Not enough for anyone else to notice, but I had known him long enough to catch it. He looked at me.

"Oh?" he murmured. "Do you really want to meet her?"

The hair on the back of my neck stood up immediately. That tone... absolutely meant trouble.

"I feel," I said slowly, "like if I nod now, I'll meet a very swift and painful end."

He arched an eyebrow. So I raised my hands and surrendered.

"Nope. Don't want to meet her. I take it all back. You're happy now?"

He smirked. That was answer enough.

Before I could press him further, I saw two figures walk through the entrance of the bar. I recognized one instantly – dark hair, easy swagger, too-expensive jacket

< Chapter 157-1

his new girlfriend again."

+7 Bonus

Kane didn't even turn his head. But I did, and I shook mine.

"I swear this kid has a new girlfriend every season," I continued. "He picks a starlet, pours money on her, helps her get famous... then gets bored and replaces her with the next rising actress. I don't know how he finds the time. Or the motivation. Or the damn energy."

Kane's lips twitched. That was the closest he ever came to laughing.

"He's young," Kane said mildly.

"Young? He's a menace," I shot back. "He spoils them rotten, then tosses them aside like worn shoes. Ruthless brat."

"And yet," Kane said, swirling his wine calmly, "they keep coming to him."

I grunted. "Only because he has money and that stupid face."

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< Chapter 157-1

few cheap drama posters. She was pretty enough but nothing remarkable.

+7 Bonus

Still, Eric liked them young. He liked them wide-eyed, desperate, and easily replaceable.

I was about to say something else when Kane's posture shifted. Something had caught his attention.

His eyes were on the girl. I sensed it instantly.

"What?" I muttered. "You know her?"

Kane didn't answer. But his jaw tightened. The action was the smallest sign that something was about to happen.

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20:53

< My Convicted Wife is My Mate

Chapter 157-2

KATHY'S POV

+7 Bonus

Eric's hand rested lightly on my lower back as we walked into the private lounge. My heart fluttered at the gesture, and I straightened my posture just a little, making sure the silk dress he bought me hugged my body perfectly. I loved how it felt. It was expensive, elegant, nothing like the clothes I wore before he came into my life.

Eric had given me everything I dreamed of – designer bags, jewelry, reservations at restaurants I never could afford. He gave me a lifestyle that felt unreal. And I wanted to keep it. I needed to. I couldn't go back to being nobody, to being unknown.

I deserved more.

And Eric... Eric was beautiful in a way that made my stomach twist. He had a strong jaw, almond eyes, relaxed confidence. When he glanced at me, even briefly, I felt like melting.

So why wouldn't he kiss me? Why did he pull back 1/6 whenever I leaned forward?

20:53

< Chapter 157-2

optional?

+7 Bonus

I feared he'd lose interest in me like he had with all his other girlfriends. Everyone knew he changed women every few months. If I didn't tie him down quickly, I'd be out the door just like the rest.

I looked at his face from the side, taking in his perfect features. He was worth wanting, worth fighting for. I wanted him. I wanted to be more than a temporary toy.

"My friend is here today," Eric murmured into my ear, snapping me out of my thoughts. "I'll introduce you."

I smiled sweetly. "Of course."

If he was a friend of Eric's, he would be wealthy, powerful. It could be another doorway into the life I deserved.

But when we approached the lounge area and I saw the man sitting on the sofa-

My breath caught.

It couldn't be. It couldn't be him.

20:53

< Chapter 157-2

47 Bonus

The exiled nobody Alpha we pushed onto her like a curse.

He looked nothing like that day. That man had messy bangs covering his forehead. He looked handsome that day but he kind of had cheap clothes, and the air of a nobody. This man...

This man looked like a king. His suit molded perfectly to his broad shoulders. His hair was pushed back to reveal gorgeous features, and his aura....Goddess....his aura filled the entire room.

Maybe I was mistaken. They couldn't be the same person. Bella's arranged husband was a joke, a failure, a man worth less than dirt. He was an exiled Alpha. Maybe they just looked a lot alike.

But before I could convince myself—

Eric leaned toward me and whispered, "Kathy, this is Alpha Kane. You can offend anyone in Emerald City... except him. Even I wouldn't be able to protect you."

My blood turned to ice.

Alpha... Alpha Kane Stonewood?

20:53

< Chapter 157-2

+7 Bonus

My mind

spun. My father used to talk about him like he was a myth. Everyone did. He was a man no one had truly seen. Why? Because he hid his identity. He was the supreme Alpha of the region. The man every pack – mine, included – swore allegiance to.

My heart started pounding painfully.

Who was he? What was he? And why did he look like—

"I see," he said, finally lifting his head to look at me. "It's you, Kathy. I hadn't expected to meet you again."

That voice.

That voice was the same as the man I insulted to his face.

The man I dismissed. The man I called useless.

My knees almost buckled.

Eric frowned at his tone. "Kane... you know her?"

Kane took a lazy sip of his wine. "Yes. We've met."

I felt faint. Could it really be him?

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< Chapter 157-2

"I – I – I didn't know," I stammered, swallowing hard. "Back then... I didn't know who he really was. I didn't realize he was Alpha Stonewood."

Kane didn't even bother acknowledging me. I felt the shame burn hot under my skin.

I gathered the courage to bow my head "Alpha Stonewood... I'm sorry if I offended you previously. I didn't know. It was a misunderstanding."

+7 Bonus

His expression didn't change at all. His indifference made me even more scared.

He turned to Eric. "In the future, don't bring this woman near me. I don't want to see her."

The world collapsed around me.

My face drained of color. The room became painfully silent. Eric froze beside me, clearly shocked.

I knew the stories. No one angered Alpha Stonewood. No one survived it.

Ana I... I had insulted him. That day, I had mocked him5P

< Chapter 157-2

+7 Bonus

I realized, with a cold sinking feeling, that I might have ruined everything.

Because Alpha Kane Stonewood... was not a man who forgave.

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Chapter 158

KANE'S POV

Jonas approached me the moment Eric and Kathy

+7 Bonus

disappeared out of the hall. He leaned in, almost tripping over his own shoes in his rush.

“Alpha... has Eric’s new girlfriend offended you?” he whispered like a nervous pup.

I didn’t answer him right away. Instead, I lifted the half–full glass of wine in my hand and swallowed the entire thing

Kathy Jameson.

The moment I saw her beside Eric, smiling proudly, I thought of Bella. I couldn’t stop the comparison. I didn’t

even try.

If Bella had stayed with me...

She wouldn’t be wearing torn gloves and walking around in the cold at four in the morning, picking up trash. She 1/6 wouldn’t be hiding her bruised hands in the sleeves of a

20:53

< Chapter 158

+7 Bonus

would have had a life where no one dared look down on her.

But she didn’t want that. She didn’t want me.

She had flinched when I touched her earlier. Not

dramatically. Bella never dramatized anything but it was enough. Enough to show me that at whatever I was offering, she didn’t want it. Her actions were enough to make something in my chest twist tightly.

Jonas cleared his throat. “Alpha?”

“She didn’t offend me,” I said finally. My voice came out flat. “And it doesn’t matter if she did.”

Jonas blinked. “You’re sure? I mean... she looked terrified of you.”

“She should be,” I replied, setting the empty glass down. “But that’s not your concern.”

He swallowed and nodded quickly, stepping back. People were still clapping inside the hall but I'd had enough of the celebration. The laughter. The hypocrisy. The masks

everyone wore even without the masquerade theme. 20:53

< Chapter 158

KATHY'S POV

+7 Bonus

Eric walked stiffly beside me as we left the hall. The night felt cold, but his expression felt even colder. My heart beat too fast as I tried to match his steps.

Finally, when we reached the car, I gathered the courage to speak.

"Eric... did I offend Alpha Stonewood somehow?" I whispered. "He looked like he wanted to kill me."

Eric didn't look at me right away. His jaw shifted once. "In the future, stay away from him. Don't speak to him. Don't even look at him unless I tell you to."

A shiver ran through me. "Did I... do something wrong?"

"How did you meet Kane?" he asked, turning to face me fully now.

I swallowed hard. What do I say? How do I tell him this?

"I met him at my sister's arranged marriage," I began. "Back then he looked... different. Not like tonight. My family got into an argument with him and... well... things 3

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< Chapter 158

+7 Bonus

I tried to keep my voice light, casual, harmless. The last thing I wanted was for Eric to think I had been disrespectful to a man like Kane Stonewood. If Eric thought I was trouble, if he thought I was embarrassing him, he could leave me. Just like that.

So I spilled everything. I gave him every detail, every encounter. I told him about the moment I saw Kane at

the small cabin where Bella lived.

Eric's brows lifted. "A cabin? A sister? Jonas mentioned Kane abandoned the Stonewood Group to save a woman... could it be the same one?"

Panic gripped

me. "Eric... I swear I didn't know who he was. If this hurts you, I'll apologize. I'll beg if I need to. Please, don't be angry with me. I'll behave. I'll be good."

My voice cracked, and my eyes stung. I hated showing weakness, but with Eric... I never knew where I stood. I didn't want him to leave me. I cherished this relationship more than anything.

His expression softened only slightly as he lifted his hand and brushed his fingers across my lips the way he always did? His touch was gentle. He was so affectionate with me

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< Chapter 158

Even now, after tracing my mouth with his fingertips, he reached into his pocket, pulled out his immaculate handkerchief, and wiped his fingers. He acted as if touching me had dirtied him.

+7 Bonus

Honestly? The whole thing hurt my feelings but I didn't say anything. I couldn't risk Eric getting mad at him. I'd do anything to keep him interested.

I tried not to show the sting in my chest. I tried even harder not to question him.

I needed him more than he needed me.

"You don't need to apologize," he said calmly. "You're my girlfriend. Your only job is to care about me. My world. My image. Nothing else matters."

His voice was gentle, but cold.

"I... understand," I whispered.

Do I, though? Not really.

He pulled his hand back and continued wiping until there was no trace of me left on his skin.

20:53

< Chapter 158

+7 Bonus

I bit my lip, holding the vow in my heart. I wanted to ask him why he did that but I kept silent.

One day... I would make him love me completely. I would make sure I had him to myself exclusively. He would choose me, and only me. I would become the woman he couldn't replace.

His final girlfriend. His future wife.

That was the promise I made to myself.

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Chapter 159

BELLA'S POV

+7 Bonus

I returned to the hospital early the next morning. The shift hadn't even begun, yet half the staff had already gathered in groups, whispering. I could tell from the moment their eyes flicked toward me that the videos online had reached them.

Bella Jameson: former healer, ex-convict, now sanitation worker and the woman someone had publicly thrown eggs and rotten vegetables at outside the hospital doors.

The moment I walked in, the murmurs sharpened into actual sentences.

"Bella, don't drag us into trouble," one woman snapped loudly enough for everyone to hear. "What if someone comes to our hospital and starts throwing things at us because of you?"

Another added immediately, as if she had been

rehearsing. "My parents are terrified now. They asked why I'm working with an ex-convict who makes enemies so easily."

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of someone else's drama."

+7 Bonus

Their voices cut through the room like knives. Some of them barely knew me, yet they spoke with the confidence of people eager to assign blame.

I adjusted my gloves calmly and kept my head down. The more attention I drew, the harsher they became. Experience had taught me that. And I needed the job too badly to get into an argument. If I was dismissed, if word spread that I "caused trouble" anywhere else, every door would close on me. No hospital would hire a former inmate again. Not even for cleaning.

So instead of reacting, I simply replied, "Let's get to work. We're already behind schedule."

That only made them roll their eyes. But at least they stopped talking.

Jasmine walked over and handed me a new pair of gloves. She was one of the few who treated me like a human being.

"Ignore them," she muttered quietly. "They've been waiting for a chance to push you out. Even if you leave."

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< Chapter 159

"Let's just finish before morning rush hour."

+7 Bonus

We started sweeping the sidewalk outside the hospital. The sun hadn't risen yet. It was still way too early.

I tried to focus on the rhythm of the broom, on the cold breeze brushing my face, anything to keep my thoughts steady.

But trouble had a way of finding me these days.

A man came speeding down the sidewalk, looking over his shoulder as if someone chased him. Before I could move aside, he bumped into me hard. My broom fell on the pavement as I stumbled backward, nearly falling.

"Hey!" Jasmine yelled. "Watch where you're going!"

The man didn't even look at us. He just mumbled something and rushed off like we were invisible.

Jasmine hurried to my side. "Bella, are you hurt?"

I shook my head, rubbing my shoulder. "No. I'm fine. Thank you"

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< Chapter 159

+7 Bonus

I simply picked up the broom again. I had been treated worse in my life. A rude man on a sidewalk barely registered. "Let it go, Jasmine. We have a schedule."

She sighed but followed my lead.

We continued working until the streets were finally clear. When our shift ended in the late evening, I went to the locker room and changed out of my orange uniform. As I reached for my phone in my pocket, I felt something against my fingers.

I pulled it out to see a small silver bracelet.

I froze in shock. This wasn't mine.

"When did this get in here?" I murmured.

It was simple. It was just a thin silver chain with a tiny charm shaped like an acorn. Barely noticeable. The kind of bracelet a child might wear. I turned it over in my palm, frowning. Maybe someone dropped it when they bumped into me? Maybe it fell off during the collision earlier...

4that yours?" Jasmine asked, glancing over.

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< Chapter 159

+7 Bonus

"You should turn it in tomorrow," she said. "Someone might come looking.

"I will."

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After saying goodbye to her, I stepped outside and began the long walk back to the cabin. The air was colder tonight. By the time I reached the familiar road, the lights in the cabin were completely off.

I stood there for a moment, staring at the dark windows.

In the past... whenever I returned from my night shift, the porch light had been on. The living room lamp too. Sometimes a warm plate of food waited on the table. Kane always pretended he wasn't waiting for me. He'd be reading, cleaning, fixing something but the lights never lied.

Now everything was dark.

I smiled bitterly.

What am I expecting? He has his own life.

Púnlocked the door and stepped inside. The place was30:53

< Chapter 159

Sleep didn't come.

+7 Bonus

Instead, I reached into my pocket and pulled out the bracelet again. Under the lamp, the silver looked dull and worn. I ran my finger across the charm. It was childish, really. It looked out of place in a world like mine.

Why would something like this be in my pocket?

My mind drifted back to the man who had knocked into me earlier. He hadn't looked like the type to wear a bracelet, but I couldn't be sure. Maybe he dropped it. Maybe he would come back searching for it tomorrow.

Or maybe it belonged to someone else entirely.

I let out a long breath then placed it on my bedside table.

“I’ll take it to the Lost and Found tomorrow,” I

murmured to myself.

There was no point overthinking it.

Just one more strange thing in a long list of strange things life kept throwing at me.

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< Chapter 159

my eyes.

Sleep felt far away.

But morning would still come.

*7 Bonus

Chapter 160

THIRD PERSON’S POV

+7 Bonus

The man who had knocked into Bella earlier that day had no idea how fast his luck would turn. Inside one of

the private hotel suites, one that looked more expensive than most people’s entire lives, he knelt on the polished marble floor, shivering so violently that even the men holding him felt it.

Blood covered his face. His lip had split open. He had one eye already swelling shut. His palms were pressed flat against the ground as if the floor could somehow save him from the danger sitting a few feet away.

Eric sat on the single black sofa, legs crossed. His posture was calm, relaxed even, but the atmosphere around him was cold.

The thief swallowed hard. "Sir... I swear I have no idea where the bracelet is. I – I saw it and put it in my pocket, yes, but I swear, I don't know why it isn't there anymore." His voice cracked. "Please, I'm telling you the truth..."

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Eric leaned back, but his eyes didn't soften. If anything,

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"I am not asking a complicated question," Eric said "Where. Is. My. Bracelet?"

"I don't know-"

+7 Bonus

"Then you will lose a hand." Eric's tone didn't rise. He didn't need to shout. His calmness was its own weapon. "You can ask for anything else, but you will return that bracelet to me."

At those words, something changed behind Eric's eyes. It looked like a hint of grief. His expression didn't break, but inside he something tightening in his chest. That bracelet was the only physical connection he still had. He had spent years guarding it with all his life. It wasn't something he could replace, not something money could regain. Losing it... was not an option.

The thief sobbed, trembling harder. "Sir... sir, please..."

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Eric tilted his head slightly. "You want your fingers? Then give me my bracelet."

Behind him, the men he had brought stiffened. They'd worked for him long enough to understand exactly what that tone meant. If the bracelet wasn't found soon, 20:54

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< Chapter 160

+7 Bonus

moment of the day, every corner he had turned, every person he had bumped into.

Then something clicked.

"I remember!" he blurted. His voice rose with sudden panic, fear, and hope. "I knocked into someone earlier – a sanitation worker! A woman sweeping the floors. The bracelet must have fallen out of my pocket then, sir. She must have picked it up!"

Eric's jaw tightened. His men looked toward him, waiting.

"Mr. Hart," one of them said carefully, "should we go after her?"

Eric stood slowly. "Find her. Now."

"Yes, sir!"

The men rushed out. Eric remained where he was, staring down at the thief. His pulse raced in his temples. Not out of panic. He never panicked but out of the anger inside him.

Ble Chad already spent years searching for someone. Losing

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< Chapter 160

Willingly... or not.

+7 Bonus

Bella reached for her phone, blinking sleep from her eyes. The digital screen told her it was 3:02 a.m. She grunted softly. She could still sleep for a couple of hours before she had to get ready for work. Her body ached from the long shift.

Her back was sore. Her hands were raw from cleaning

chemicals. She was exhausted.

She lowered the phone and closed her eyes. But the next second, her entire body shot upright.

Someone was in her apartment.

Her breath froze. Her eyes widened so quickly that they stung. A man sat at the dining table, legs crossed. His posture was composed. His shoulders relaxed as if he were sitting in his own home. He was holding the small silver bracelet she had found earlier.

For a second Bella blinked, thinking maybe exhaustion had pushed her into a dream. But when his eyes lifted 0:54

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< Chapter 160

This was no dream.

“Are you awake?” he asked.

+7 Bonus

Bella’s throat tightened. She sat up straighter, pulling the blanket over her chest. “Y— you—who are you? Why are you in my home?”

She looked at her phone on the nightstand. If she could grab it fast enough, maybe she could call the police. Maybe-

“Don’t bother.” The man’s voice cut through her thoughts “If you plan on calling the police, you should save yourself the trouble. If I meant to harm you, I would have done it while you were sleeping.”

A cold shiver crawled down her spine. He had read her mind effortlessly. He had been watching her, maybe for minutes, maybe longer. She hated how vulnerable she felt.

Without her wolf, her senses were dull. Anyone could sneak up on her now. Anyone could break into her home.

She swallowed and tried to keep her voice steady. “Why: 54

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< Chapter 160

the bracelet.

“This,” he said, “is mine. It was stolen today.”

+7 Bonus

Bella’s breath caught. “I didn’t steal it. When I found it, it was already in my uniform pocket.”

“I know you didn’t steal it.” he said. “If you had, you wouldn’t be breathing so calmly.”

Her stomach tightened. She pulled the blanket closer, watching him carefully. He was dangerous. She didn't need heightened senses to feel it. Everything about him screamed wealth, power, and a level of ruthlessness she recognized too well.

Still, something about him didn't align with a petty thief or an entitled rich man. She was confused.

Why would someone like him break into a stranger's apartment over a simple silver bracelet?

He stepped closer again. Bella leaned back. Pride made her glare at him despite her fear. She had survived prison. She had survived years of being broken down emotionally and mentally. She wasn't the type to cower easily, not0:54

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< Chapter 160

"How did you... know I had it?" she asked quietly.

His jaw flexed. "I make it my business to know."

That didn't reassure her....at all.

+7 Bonus

"You picked up this bracelet," he said. "What reward do you want? Money? A job? A new place to live? Name it. As long as you aren't unreasonable, I'll give it to you."

Bella blinked. The arrogance in his tone was shocking. She didn't want anything "I don't need a reward."

His brows lifted slightly. He almost looked amused. "You don't want anything? Not even a favor that could change your life?"

She thought of Kane. Of how easily people with power believed they could rearrange someone's future like moving pieces on a board. Of how many times she had vowed never to let another person hold anything over her, not again.

"My life is mine," she said quietly "I'm not interested in being indebted to anyone."

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20:54

< Chapter 160

hers.

+7 Bonus

“Are you saying that because you want something more?” he asked “Or are you trying to make me push harder? Playing hard to get?”

Bella blinked in disbelief. “Why would I play anything with you? I don’t even know who you are. You already got your bracelet. All I want is for you to leave so I can sleep.”

He looked at her. His hand turned, and the bracelet shimmered between his fingers.

Then he straightened.

“I’m Eric,” he said.

The name meant nothing to her, but the way he said it – with absolute certainty that she should understand – made her feel uneasy.

Bella had only one thought in her mind – Who the hell was this man?