

Through Rising Fog We Walk Paths Unknown Yet Comforting

Chapter 161

BELLA'S POV

Now, I recognized him.

He was Eric Simpson.

The name alone made me pause. For a heartbeat, everything froze. I stared at him in shock. "Eric?" I repeated, slower this time. "Eric Simpson."

+7 Bonus

I had heard that name many times – on television, in magazines, whispered by starstruck girls in the break room. In the entertainment world, he was practically royalty. People said he could turn someone into a star overnight, or bury a career with a single word. When I used to date Damien, even he had spoken with a hint of envy about the Simpson pack's power. They were powerful. They had prestige as well. They had old money with deep political roots. Their influence stretched far beyond what people saw on screens.

But I pushed those thoughts away. Old money, new money, packs, titles – it all led back to one place, one person I was trying so hard not to think about. Kane.

Kane 20:54

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+7 Bonus

Eric's reputation wasn't all glitter, though. People said he was indifferent. They said he was controlled to the point of being unreadable. He was the kind of man who would lift a woman to fame and walk away from her just as quickly. He never dated the same woman twice.

But none of this explained why he had been the one to barge into my home in the middle of the night over a simple silver bracelet.

I looked down at my right palm. The scar there was faint now. It was a thin pale line. That night with Kane, when everything had felt like it was shattering again, I had crushed broken mirror in my hand just to stay conscious. Just to remind myself to keep moving. I had been lucky the tendons weren't severed. I was even luckier that he still had arrived in time.

The scar would fade soon. Just like the memory of him would fade. Or so I kept telling myself.

I stepped out of the hospital doors and barely made it to the walkway when a silver-grey Porsche slid in front of me, blocking my path. The door opened, and Eric stepped out. He looked tall and commanding. He was well dressed in a suit.

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He approached me. "Bella Jameson"

I straightened my shoulders. "Is something wrong?"

"I want to treat you to a meal," he said simply.

+7 Bonus

There was no smile on his face. There was no warmth either. It was just a statement, as if it had already been decided. He opened the passenger seat door without waiting for my answer.

"To thank you." He said.

I

blinked. "I didn't actually help you with your bracelet. You found it yourself. You don't owe me anything."

I stepped aside to walk past him, but he raised a hand with a quiet authority that made the air tighten. His arm blocked my path, and his eyes locked onto mine.

"I'm not used to owing favors," he said. "So, I must treat you. Today."

His tone wasn't aggressive. It was worse. It was calm. He sounded like I couldn't refuse him even if I wanted to, like a closed door you couldn't talk your way through20:54

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+7 Bonus

not because they were spoiled, but because the world had taught them they never needed to. And in my experience, the more you pulled away, the harder they pushed.

Besides, if Eric had wanted to harm me, he would've done it last night. He hadn't. He'd just wanted that bracelet.

And I was too tired to argue.

So I nodded once and got into the passenger seat. Eric quietly shut the door, walked around to the driver's side, and started the engine. The car moved smoothly, gliding through traffic.

I looked out the window at the city passing by. I felt a humorless smile tug at my lips. I used to believe everything could be reasoned out – logic, fairness, justice. That was before prison, before betrayal, before the world showed me that sometimes, reason didn't matter at all. Decisions were made based on power. On whims. On the mood of the person in front of you.

"What are you thinking about?" Eric's voice cut into the silence.

I didn't look away from the window.

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"Mm. It is."

+7 Bonus

"And the person who stole it?" I asked quietly. "Will the consequences be... severe?"

He glanced at me. "Quite."

His voice was soft, almost gentle, but the cold truth beneath it chilled me. That softness was just a surface. Beneath it was steel. The dangerous kind.

Just like Kane.

My stomach tightened, and I looked away.

The car slowed and stopped in front of an elite restaurant I recognized immediately. I had walked past it before, back when I used to imagine a normal future – dinners, dates, celebrations. This place was nearly impossible to book, even for wealthy families. A single meal could cost an average person a year's salary.

But to someone like Eric Simpson, it might as well have been a casual café.

He/stepped out first, then opened my door for me. 20:54

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beside him.

+7 Bonus

Eric led me to a private room, the kind likely reserved for high-profile clients and political elite.

“What would you like to eat?” he asked, taking the seat across from me.

“Anything is fine,” I answered truthfully.

I had no idea how to navigate menus like this anymore. Besides, pretending would be pointless.

He nodded once then ordered several dishes. He did it effortlessly, like someone who had been coming here his whole life. I wasn’t surprised anyway.

The table slowly filled with beautifully arranged plates. They were all expensive.

I sat quietly as the last dish was placed before us.

I thought about what was happening right now – me in this elegant room dressed in my work clothes with a man who lived in the spotlight, a man who had walked into

life out of nowhere, retrieving a bracelet that clearR:54

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BELLA’S POV

+7 Bonus

“You used to be Alpha Damien’s girlfriend, didn’t you?” he asked quietly.

As soon as he asked that question, my hands froze completely. I felt the small piece of fish slip back onto the plate as I lowered my hand.

I felt an ache in my chest. I lowered my eyes to the table.

“Yes.”

Of course, he already knew. Men like Eric never stepped into a situation blind. He would have had people investigating me the moment he decided to look my way. He probably knew what detergent I used on my scrubs.

He continued, unfazed. "And the reason you broke up with him was because of the poison incident that year?"

"So, what if it was?" I lifted my head slowly, looking at him. "Mr. Simpson, the person I killed back then... was Alpha Kane Stonewood's fiancée. Tell me, who would I dare associate with me after that?"

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the last thing I expected.

"I dare."

+7 Bonus

For a second, I genuinely wondered if I had misheard him. My mind went blank. My breath hitched somewhere between my ribs and my throat. I stared at him in shock.

What the hell did he mean by that?

He tilted his head a little. "What do you think? Do you want to try being with me?"

I felt nothing soft or romantic about the question. My skin got heated...but not in the good kind of way. My scalp tingled. The man in front of me might as well have been discussing which wine to order. His tone was flat. He sounded detached, like I was a possibility he was entertaining on a bored evening.

What do I even say to that?

"As far as I know," I replied slowly, "you already have a girlfriend."

Phad heard it earlier at the hospital. The nurses 20:54

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crush.

+7 Bonus

Eric shrugged lightly. "There's a woman, yes. But if you go out with me, I'll end it with her."

Just like that? I almost laughed. It came out as a startled exhale instead.

This man was treating relationships like seasonal shoes – wear, discard, replace. He spoke so casually like this was perfectly reasonable.

"Why?" I asked, genuinely surprised "Why me?"

I wasn't fishing for flattery. It was the confusion of someone who had lived through too much to believe in casual compliments.

He stared directly into my eyes. Not at my clothes, not at my body – my eyes.

"Your face looks good," he said simply. "I like it."

I blinked. "My face?"

Bénodded. "Especially your eyes. They're beautiful... Bin

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+7 Bonus

His eyes didn't even drift for even a second. It pinned me to my seat.

I felt my heartbeat trip.

He leaned forward slightly. "So? Do you want to date me?"

My breath locked. The intensity in his eyes was too strong, too focused. It didn't feel flattering. It felt like I was being dissected.

I stood abruptly, pushing my chair back. "I'm going to the ladies' room."

I didn't wait for his reaction. I just turned and walked quickly out of the private room.

I heard nothing behind me – no footsteps, no voice calling after me – but somehow, that silence felt heavier than anything else.

In the washroom, I gripped the edges of the sink and stared at my reflection.

My thin face. My pale skin. No makeup. No glamour.No4

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47 Bonus

My eyes weren't beautiful. At least, not in the way Eric described. They were tired. They were worn. They told stories of prison nights, years of guilt, months of rebuilding a life that had been shattered.

Could Eric truly have taken a fancy to me?

No. It didn't make sense.

He must be bored or curious. Or playing one of those rich Alpha games.

Kane used to look at me like that too, like I was something he wanted to understand, something new, something he could take apart and rebuild.

My heart ached deeply at the thought of him.

Kane would be nothing but a scar soon, I reminded myself. Just like the one on my palm.

I took a deep breath and stepped out of the washroom.

I took two steps. Suddenly, I saw a blur of movement. Before I could process anything, I saw a hand flying towards me.

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The slap landed before I even realized what was happening.

+7 Bonus

Fire burned across my cheek. The shock was so sudden that for a moment, I froze. I blinked and looked up.

"You must be that fucking whore!" a woman spat.

I recognized the voice before I fully recognized her face.

Sarah.

She was a famous actress who'd been clinging to Eric's arm for nearly a year. The one the nurses at the hospital gossip about all the time. She looked nothing like her public persona. Right now, she was red-eyed, furious, trembling with jealousy and humiliation.

"I didn't expect you to crawl into Eric's life," she snarled. "Do you think a pathetic, washed-up thing like you deserves to eat here with him? You're a third-rate nothing!"

I inhaled slowly and kept my voice level. "You've mistaken me for someone else."

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+7 Bonus

Some people had stopped near the washroom entrance to watch. They didn't record. They didn't step in. They simply observed, looking entertained.

Of course, they did. This was a high-end restaurant. Drama was dessert.

I straightened my posture. "Whether he wants you or not is none of my business. But what you did just now?"

I lifted my hand to my swelling cheek. "You need to apologize."

Sarah's jaw dropped. Then she laughed. "Apologize? To you? A shameless tramp who steals someone else's boyfriend? You think Eric will actually touch you? You're nothing. You're replaceable."

Her voice rose. Her eyes were filled with anger. Her hair was a bit wild. She looked unhinged.

I felt something inside me snap.

I had endured Kane. I had endured prison. I had endured being dragged through the mud by society. But I would

no endure this. Not tonight. Not from a spiteful,

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"You're not going to apologize?" I asked quietly.

"Do you need me to say it again? I'm not apolog-"

SLAM!

+7 Bonus

My hand struck her face before she finished the sentence.

The slap echoed even louder than hers had.

Her head snapped to the side, her hair flying.

I didn't flinch. I didn't step back.

I simply lowered my hand, breathing evenly, staring straight at her as her shocked eyes slowly turned toward

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BELLA'S POV

+7 Bonus

The air in the corridor still vibrated from the sound of my slap. For a moment, everything felt unnaturally still, like even the lights were holding their breath. Sarah slowly lifted her hand to her cheek. Her eyes widened with complete shock, like she couldn't believe that a nobody like me would actually stand up for myself and slap her.

She covered her face with both palms as if she couldn't believe what had happened.

"You... you hit me?" she whispered, her voice trembling.

I held her stare without flinching. My cheek still burned from her hit, but my voice came out calm "Since you can hit me, why can't I hit you back?"

Her fingers shook as she pointed at me. "Who do you think you are? You're just....just some third-rate C list nobody pretending to be important! What right do you have to lay a hand on me?!"

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I almost laughed. Not because it was funny, but because

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+7 Bonus

"What about you?" I asked quietly. "You're just a small-time celebrity. And if it weren't for Eric, nobody would even know your name. Everything you have – your roles, your money, your spotlight – was built on his support. The only reason you ran over here today is because he dumped you and you're terrified you'll lose everything. I'm sure you don't even truly care about him."

Her face went from red to purple. The watching crowd shifted uncomfortably. People started looking at each other while whispering.

"You think you're more noble than me?" I continued. "You and I both know you're not."

I could practically see the words slicing into her. She was falling apart in real time. I could feel her pride fading.

"You-" She choked on her own fury, then suddenly raised her hand again. "I'll kill you!"

Her slap came at me so fast I barely had time to react. But before her palm could reach my face, her wrist was caught mid-air by a hand behind her.

Sarah froze. A visible tremor ran through her entire arm5.5

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Eric stood there.

+7 Bonus

He was the one holding her hand. He stood, looking cold and composed. His aura was strong enough to cut through bone. His intense eyes landed on her with the kind of impatience that could make anyone's blood run cold.

"What are you doing, Sarah?" he asked. His voice was indifferent, almost bored.

Her whole body went stiff instantly. She swallowed hard. "E— Eric, I... I heard you were here. I just wanted to see you, I—"

"You were looking for me?" he repeated.

He looked at my cheek – still stinging, still red. And what stunned me was that he completely ignored Sarah's bruised face.

"Was she the one who hit you?" he asked me.

His tone wasn't angry or concerned. He sounded ...just calm.

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That startled both of us.

+7 Bonus

I stared at him. I wasn't sure if he was serious. Sarah stared too, but her expression twisted into horror as soon as she processed his words.

Eric shifted his grip, letting her wrist go.

"Is one slap enough for you?" he asked me, as casually as if he were asking how I liked my meal. "Why not hit her a few more times? You should get it out of your system. She provoked you. She should pay for it."

My breath caught in my throat. Whatwhat the hell was he saying?

Sarah's face drained of color. She backed up like a frightened animal. She started shaking uncontrollably. "Eric... no—please. I won't do it again, I swear. I swear I

won't!"

He didn't even look at her. His expression stayed blank and unreadable.

Begging meant nothing to him.

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with diamonds one week and walk away without a backward glance the next.

+7 Bonus

This was the same man who bought Sarah entire movie roles. Who replaced directors for her convenience. Who booked full hotels for her birthday.

Surrounded by so much affection, everyone assumed she would become Mrs. Simpson one day.

But now she shook in front of him like a child facing punishment.

And he... felt nothing.

His eyes were empty even when he looked at me. Even though he spoke in my defense, there wasn't warmth in his voice. There was no care, no affection.

What could have made him this way?

Sarah must have realized her pleadings weren't moving him, so she suddenly turned toward me with desperate

eyes.

"Hey, please... I'm sorry. I shouldn't have slapped you?" 0:55

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"He doesn't," I replied quietly.

+7 Bonus

Sarah blinked fast. Her expression was filled with panic. "He does! He must! You're the woman he's with now,

right?"

"I'm not," I said plainly.

Her face twisted with confusion. "But you came with him-

"I'm not his girlfriend. That's what I was trying to tell you. You've mistaken me for someone else. I can't ask him for anything."

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Her desperation turned into raw fear. Not of me but of him.

I inhaled deeply and looked at Eric. His eyes landed on me. They were dark and impossible to read.

"She slapped me," I said. "So, I slapped her back. It's settled now. I don't need to hit her again."

Eric tilted his head slightly. "Is that so?" 6/7

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I stepped back, suddenly exhausted.

“Mr. Simpson,” I said quietly, “thank you for the meal today. But I’d like to go home now.”

+7 Bonus

For the first time, I saw something small change in his eyes. Still, I couldn’t tell what he was feeling. He didn’t say anything.

I didn’t wait for permission.

I walked past him.

I didn’t look back. I just kept walking.

And the moment I pushed the door open and stepped out of that corridor, I finally let out a deep breath.

special offer: **800** bonus free to you

Chapter 164

ERIC’S POV

Bella walked away without looking back, and for a moment I just watched the sway of her hair as she disappeared around the corner.

+7 Bonus

Something tightened in my chest. The feeling was quick. It felt inconvenient, and unwelcome. Usually, I don’t feel anything.

I pushed it aside the second she vanished from sight. She said she wasn’t my girlfriend. She wasn’t. And yet the look in her eyes when she walked past me stayed stubbornly in my mind.

I exhaled once and turned.

Sarah stood where Bella had left her. Her whole face was drained of colour. She was pale, trembling, and trying desperately to hold herself together. Her eyes were glossy with tears. Her breathing came out in shallow, uneven puffs. Without the cameras and filters, without her

20:55

practiced smiles and delicate poses, she looked small. She 1/6 looked frantic, almost pathetic.

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+7 Bonus

I stepped closer. As soon as I did, her shoulders jerked as if she were bracing for impact. I lifted a hand and brushed her eyelashes lightly with my thumb.

"You're going to cry?" I asked. My tone was flat.

She flinched at my touch, then immediately leaned toward it, like she was hoping affection might return if she clung hard enough. "Eric, I – I just love you too much," she stammered. "I panicked today. I didn't mean to behave like that. I won't do it again, I promise."

"You love me too much?" I repeated.

"Yes!" she cried. "Yes, I love you. I've only ever loved you. Eric, please... let's not break up. Please don't leave me."

Her voice cracked as she stepped closer. Her eyes were filled with tears. A few onlookers who hadn't left yet were watching her unravel. They were clearly moved by the sight of a beautiful woman crying for love. It was dramatic, emotional, even cinematic.

But to me, it was noise.

Nothing.

20:55

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doesn't mean anything when it's selfish."

+7 Bonus

She went silent. Her tears froze on her cheeks as she stared at me with disbelief. I could still see the hope in

her eyes.

And then I ended it.

"But I've never loved you." I said.

The words came out final. Her whole body froze as if I had slapped her harder than Bella ever could. I watched her process it. Her pupils dilated. Her lips trembled. Her hands slowly dropped to her sides.

"And," I added, "I don't like women who cause scenes."

That sentence landed like a knife. She knew exactly what

I meant.

Realization hit her

hard. I saw her memory flip back to a conversation I once let slip, about an ex who had shown up uninvited and made trouble. I had mentioned it casually, not caring how she interpreted it.

Bu6l remembered what happened after.

20:55

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+7 Bonus

another. She disappeared from the industry like she had never existed. Last I heard, she fled abroad under a pile of debt.

I hadn't done it out of anger. I had simply erased a nuisance from my path.

Now Sarah stood in front of me, realizing she had just

become another nuisance.

Her knees shook violently. "Eric... please," she whispered. "Don't do that to me. I won't cause trouble again. I

won't."

I turned away, uninterested in hearing the rest.

Sarah panicked the moment my back faced her. "Wait, please, Eric! You – you're being like this because of her, aren't you?"

I stopped.

Not because of what she said, but because of the tone. Her tone was accusing, hysterical, desperate enough to be

stupid.

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+7 Bonus

The irony almost made me laugh. Love? With Bella? She didn't even want to be near me. She made that very clear. But Sarah wouldn't understand that. She couldn't understand anything beyond her own panic.

She stepped forward and screamed, "You love her, don't you?"

I turned my head just slightly. "You don't get to speak about things you don't understand."

But Sarah pressed on. She was obviously blinded by fear. "You'll never get her! She won't stay with someone who doesn't care about anyone's feelings! One day, she'll leave you too!"

That was the moment I faced her fully.

My wolf stirred beneath my skin. I could feel him clawing at the edges of my control. A cold, violent instinct flickered in my eyes for just one second. Her breath caught. She stepped back so fast she nearly tripped.

I didn't need to say anything. The look was enough.

Her legs gave out. She dropped to the floor with a chokee

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harder this time. It was pure fear, not love

*7 Bonus

I watched her for a moment. Not out of pity but of confirmation. Sarah understood. Fully. She was finished.

I wanted to make sure that she knew what this meant for her.

With that, I turned without another word and walked away, letting my silence seal her fate. Behind me, she sobbed. She was broken, terrified, and aware that she had crossed a line she could never come back from.

I didn't look back once.

Chapter 165

BELLA'S POV

I walked out of the restaurant without looking back. I felt....exhausted.

+7 Bonus

Tonight had been chaos from start to finish. Every time I told myself I just wanted peace , I ended up drowning in another mess. Sometimes I wondered if trouble was

stitched into my shadow.

—

I wrapped my arms around myself as I walked. I wished I could go home – my real home. The one where Grandpa ruled his pack, where his voice was warm and loving towards me, where I felt protected. But those days were gone. My birth family... well, calling them family felt like a joke now.

I was just breathing in the cold air when my phone buzzed in my pocket. I flinched. For a second, I debated ignoring it, but when I saw the caller ID, I became tensed. It was a relative from my mother's hometown.

The irony stung. I had just been thinking about family, 1/9 and now one of them was calling.

20:55

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sounded frantic and loud. "Your grandma has been hospitalized!"

+7 Bonus

My breath froze in my lungs. "What? What happened?"

Before I could even process the shock, she kept talking "Bella, listen. The police are still detaining your uncles, your aunt, and your cousins. The officers said they'll all be sentenced for many years once the case goes to court. If that happens, your grandmother will have nobody to care for her!"

I closed my eyes. There it was – the true purpose of the call.

They wanted me to drop the charges. They wanted me to free them. Even after everything.

“So you’re calling to tell me to go to the police station,” I said quietly, already knowing the answer.

“Even if it’s just for your grandmother’s sake, you should let them out!” she insisted. “Besides, we are relatives. This is your pack. We shouldn’t push things too far”

Rélatives? Pack?

20:55

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+7 Bonus

“My uncle and aunts tried to hand me over to a man who deals with women the way hunters deal with prey,” I said “They tried to make me disappear. Are we going to pretend that didn’t happen?”

She sputtered. “Bella – you – you’re being dramatic.

– Think of your grandmother – ”

“I am thinking of her,” I replied, and hung up.

I rushed to the hospital in their town. The moment I stepped into the room, Aunt Elena lunged forward, yelling my name like a curse. She looked like she wanted to claw my skin off. Uncle Ben grabbed her arm, restraining her before she made a scene.

“Bella,” he tried to reason, smiling weakly as if we were having a family gathering and not discussing attempted human trafficking. “Why didn’t you tell us you were getting close to a big shot? If we knew, we would have done things differently.”

“Done what, exactly?” I asked. My voice felt surprisingly steady for how much anger I had inside me. “Not sell

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+7 Bonus

He winced. “We were only arranging a marriage for you. You need someone powerful to rely on. The Gomez family-”

“A family that buys brides like cattle?” I snapped.

Aunt Elena cut in bitterly. "You're exaggerating. We thought of your future! You owe us your gratitude!"

I didn't answer her. Her voice meant nothing. Their excuses meant nothing.

Because the only thing I cared about was lying on the hospital bed.

My grandmother.

Her skin was pale. Her breathing was shallow. Tubes ran across her frail body, and the sight of her chest rising and falling with effort made my throat tighten. I stepped closer, ignoring the voices behind me. I only saw her.

"Grandma..." I whispered, brushing her hair from her forehead.

Her eyelids fluttered slowly. Her lips parted like she 20:55

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+7 Bonus

She murmured the names of my uncles and my aunt, the ones in jail.

I pulled back slowly, feeling my heart twist. She loved them. Even after everything. Even after knowing what they tried to do. She still loved them.

I stood silently, absorbing that truth. Then I turned and walked out of the room.

Uncle Ben and Uncle Frank rushed after me in the hallway.

"Bella, wait! Tell the police you want to drop the case," Ben pleaded. "Just say we misunderstood. Say it was a family dispute."

I turned around. "Why would I drop the case? You didn't think of me as family when you tried to get rid of me. So why should I treat you as mine now?"

Aunt Elena stormed after us. "You ungrateful brat! How dare you let your grandmother suffer like this? She's in the hospital because of you!"

Fénuckled bitterly. "Because of me? I didn't do anything55

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She opened her mouth, but nothing came out

For once, she had no excuse to hide behind,

I didn't wait for more. I left the hospital, letting their voices fade behind me.

Elena tried to chase after me, but I heard one of the other aunties hiss, "Don't you dare! That big shot is protecting her now. If she gets angry, she can make their sentences even longer!"

"How dare she!" Elena shrieked.

"Before you ask if she dares, ask if you want to spend tonight in a cell," the other woman snapped.

Silence followed.

They were cowards. All of them.

I took a taxi back to the city, staring out the window the entire ride. When I reached home, the sky was turning gray at the edges.

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I didn't sleep.

+7 Banus

At five in the morning, like always, I went out to sweep the streets again. Routine kept me sane. Work gave me something to anchor myself to.

Jasmine arrived shortly after and took one look at me. "Bella... you look exhausted. Did you not sleep?"

"Mm," I murmured, keeping my eyes down. "I had to take care of some family matters."

She hesitated. "Is everything alright?"

"No," I said honestly.

My thoughts kept circling back to Grandma. She had whispered the names of the people who hurt me. Not because she didn't love me, but because she was afraid for them. Because she was old and sick and didn't want the family to fall apart.

If I wanted to release my uncles, dropping the charges at the police station wouldn't be enough. The only person who could truly free them... was Kane.

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47 Bonus

Just thinking his name made my chest tighten painfully.

I had rejected him before. I told him no. I walked away from his offer, his protection, his warning.

He had been angry. I saw it in his eyes. I remembered how disappointed he looked, even though he tried to hide it..

And now I had to go to him? To beg him?

Would he even listen? Would he refuse?

If he did... Grandma might never reconcile with her own sons again. She might die with regret in her heart. And I couldn't allow that.

Grandma mattered more than justice. More than pride. More than wounds that would never heal.

At noon, after hours of overthinking, I finally sat down on my bed, holding my phone tightly. I stared at the number glowing on the screen.

The number I had bought for him when he didn't have a Skone.

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But it was all I had.

My thumb hovered over the call button, my heart pounding.

And I pressed "call".

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Chapter 165

BELLA'S POV

3 min left

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43 min left

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"Even if it's just for your grandmother's sake, you should let them out!" she insisted. "Besides, we are relatives. This is your pack. We shouldn't push things too far"

RéPatives? Pack?

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< Chapter 165

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"I am thinking of her," I replied, and hung up.

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"Done what, exactly?" I asked. My voice felt surprisingly steady for how much anger I had inside me. "Not sell

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< Chapter 165

3 min left

He winced. "We were only arranging a marriage for you. You need someone powerful to rely on. The Gomez family-

"A family that buys brides like cattle?" I snapped.

Aunt Elena cut in bitterly. "You're exaggerating. We thought of your future! You owe us your gratitude!"

I didn't answer her. Her voice meant nothing. Their excuses meant nothing.

Because the only thing I cared about was lying on the hospital bed.

My grandmother.

Her skin was pale. Her breathing was shallow. Tubes ran across her frail body, and the sight of her chest rising and falling with effort made my throat tighten. I stepped closer, ignoring the voices behind me. I only saw her.

"Grandma..." I whispered, brushing her hair from her forehead.

Her eyelids fluttered slowly. Her lips parted like she

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3 min left

She murmured the names of my uncles and my aunt, the ones in jail.

I pulled back slowly, feeling my heart twist. She loved them. Even after everything. Even after knowing what they tried to do. She still loved them.

I stood silently, absorbing that truth. Then I turned and walked out of the room.

Uncle Ben and Uncle Frank rushed after me in the hallway.

"Bella, wait! Tell the police you want to drop the case," Ben pleaded. "Just say we misunderstood. Say it was a family dispute."

I turned around. "Why would I drop the case? You didn't think of me as family when you tried to get rid of me. So why should I treat you as mine now?"

Aunt Elena stormed after us. "You ungrateful brat! How dare you let your grandmother suffer like this? She's in the hospital because of you!"

I clenched my teeth bitterly. "Because of me? I didn't do anything"

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< Chapter 165

She opened her mouth, but nothing came out.

For once, she had no excuse to hide behind.

I didn't wait for more. I left the hospital, letting their voices fade behind me.

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Elena tried to chase after me, but I heard one of the other aunties hiss, "Don't you dare! That big shot is protecting her now. If she gets angry, she can make their sentences even longer!"

"How dare she!" Elena shrieked.

"Before you ask if she dares, ask if you want to spend tonight in a cell," the other woman snapped.

Silence followed.

They were cowards. All of them.

I took a taxi back to the city, staring out the window the entire ride. When I reached home, the sky was turning gray at the edges.

| 21:09

< Chapter 165

I didn't sleep.

3 min left

At five

in the morning, like always, I went out to sweep the streets again. Routine kept me sane. Work gave me something to anchor myself to.

Jasmine arrived

shortly after and took one look at me. "Bella... you look exhausted. Did you not sleep?"

"Mm," I murmured, keeping my eyes down. "I had to take care of some family matters."

She hesitated. "Is everything alright?"

"No," I said honestly.

My thoughts

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< Chapter 165

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Just thinking his name made my chest tighten painfully.

I had rejected him before. I told him no. I walked away from his offer, his protection, his warning.

He had been angry. I saw it in his eyes. I remembered how disappointed he looked, even though he tried to hide it..

And now I had to go to him? To beg him?

Would he even listen? Would he refuse?

If he did... Grandma might never reconcile with her own sons again. She might die with regret in her heart. And I'

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At noon, after hours of overthinking, I finally sat down on my bed, holding my phone tightly. I stared at the number glowing on the screen.

The number I had bought for him when he didn't have a

Kone.

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< Chapter 165

But it was all I had.

My thumb hovered over the call button, my heart pounding.

And I pressed "call".

Coin Package: get more free bonus

Chapter 165

BELLA'S POV

3 min left

I walked out of the restaurant without looking back. I felt....exhausted.

Tonight had been chaos from start to finish. Every time I told myself I just wanted peace, I ended up drowning in another mess. Sometimes I wondered if trouble was stitched into my shadow.

I wrapped my arms around myself as I walked. I wished I could go home – my real home. The one where Grandpa ruled his pack, where his voice was warm and loving towards me, where I felt protected. But those days were gone. My birth family... well, calling them family felt like a joke now.

I was just breathing in the cold air when my phone buzzed in my pocket. I flinched. For a second, I debated ignoring it, but when I saw the caller ID, I became tensed. It was a relative from my mother's hometown.

The irony stung. I had just been thinking about family, 1/9 and now one of them was calling.

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< Chapter 165

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sounded frantic and loud. "Your grandma has been hospitalized!"

My breath froze in my lungs. "What? What happened?"

Before I could even process the shock, she kept talking "Bella, listen. The police are still detaining your uncles, your aunt, and your cousins. The officers said they'll all be sentenced for many years once the case goes to court. If that happens, your grandmother will have nobody to care for her!"

I closed my eyes. There it was – the true purpose of the call.

They wanted me to drop the charges. They wanted me to free them. Even after everything.

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< Chapter 165

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Coin Package: get more free bonus

Chapter 166

JAYDEN'S POV

3 min left

The senior executives sat stiffly in Alpha Stonewood's office, and the room felt colder than usual. No one dared to breathe too loudly. Their eyes were all fixed on the old, cheap cell phone sitting on the edge of Kane's desk. It buzzed and rang over and over again.

The sound was an ugly, outdated ringtone that didn't match the luxurious office or the Alpha who ruled half the city.

All of them knew Kane had two phones now. One was customized and very expensive – his official business line. The other... this old thing. Only Kane and I knew where it came from. When any executive asked out of curiosity, I always smiled then brushed them off. It wasn't my place to share Bella's existence with anyone. And Kane made it clear, without words, that this phone mattered.

Normally, Kane answered it instantly. But today, he didn't move. He just stared at it with a face so cold the air around him felt frozen. His jaw clenched as he looked 1./9

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at it. His wolf was restless.. I could sense it even without

< Chapter 166

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The phone continued ringing. Twenty seconds. Forty. A minute. The executives exchanged nervous looks. Wolves were nosy by nature. The tension in the room was thick enough to choke on.

One of them shot me a questioning look..

I looked down at the phone, my stomach twisting. Only Bella ever called this number. The moment I saw her name flashing repeatedly, I understood what was happening.

Bella was calling Kane after rejecting him. That alone. was enough to make even a calm man spiral – let alone Kane Stonewood, who had never in his life experienced rejection from anyone.

He pretended not to care. But if he didn't care, he could have thrown the phone away. Instead, he kept it on his desk, plugged in, and charged at all times.

That meant everything.

The phone rang for the ninth time. Kane didn't touch it. His expression didn't change, but the cold rolling off him was enough to freeze the room. Finally, after an 21:09

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< Chapter 166

Silence.

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Kane leaned back lazily in his chair, looking almost bored.

"Alright," he said in a flat tone "Continue your report."

The executives jumped up like scared pups. Papers were shuffled. Voices trembled.

I stood beside him, trying to keep calm.

I couldn't help but feel a bit guilty. Bella must have been desperate to call this many times.

And Kane was punishing himself just as much as he was punishing her.

But he wouldn't admit that.

Not even to himself.

BELLA'S POV

I stared at my phone until my eyes burned. Nine calls. Not one answered. My throat tightened, and I forced myself to breathe slowly. Maybe Kane had canceled the number. Maybe he didn't want anything from me

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"Bella, what's wrong with you?" Jasmine asked. "You've been staring at the phone all morning. And you didn't touch your food. Look, it's cold already."

I managed a weak smile. "Sorry. I just... have something to take care of. I want to leave at three. I'll clean the road before I go, but you might have to handle extra work. Is that alright?"

She snorted. "Why wouldn't it be? Last time I took time off, you covered every shift for me. You're the only one who helps without complaining."

"Thank you," I murmured.

But my mind wasn't here. It was miles away...with my grandmother... with my mess of a family... with Kane.

My family's call still echoed in my head. My grandmother had been hospitalized, and the moment I went home, they ambushed me. Not with concern. Not with guilt. But with demands.

"Even if it's for your grandmother's sake, drop the case!" my cousin had begged.

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< Chapter 166

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Aunt Elena had spat, "Why didn't you tell us you knew a big shot? We only tried to marry you off for your own good!"

My uncle added, "If you drop the charges, everything will be fine. You owe us that much."

I owed them nothing. They had tried to sell me to a wolf who would have kept me captive. I would have been broken, used, and silenced. Still, they stood there pretending they were the victims.

All I cared about was my grandmother lying unconscious on the hospital bed. When she whispered names – my uncles', my aunts' – I understood. She still loved them. She didn't want them to rot in prison. She just didn't want to beg me. She was protecting me the only way she

could.

And because of her... I needed Kane.

I needed the one man I had pushed away.

By noon, I stood in front of the Stonewood Group

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< Chapter 166

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"Hey, hey, stop." A guard stepped in front of me. "Employees only. No visitors without an appointment."

"I'm here to see Kane. Alpha Stonewood."

The guard looked me up and down, taking in my worn jacket and cheap clothes. A smirk curled on his lips.

"Right. And I'm the Luna Queen." He said.

The others laughed.

"If Alpha Stonewood met every person who showed up claiming they knew him, he'd never get any work done." Another guard said "These desperate girls never learn, do they?"

"With those clothes, no one's believing you anyway."

Their words hit my skin like cold needles. I wasn't offended. I'd heard much worse. But I was frustrated. I didn't have time to waste. My grandmother's face kept flashing in my mind.

So I waited. I stood outside the gate, hugging my jacket tight as winter wind sliced through it. Every few minutes

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< Chapter 166

He has to come out eventually, I told myself.

He had to.

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Just when my legs were going numb from the cold, I saw a familiar tall figure walking toward the entrance.

Jayden.

My heart jumped. "Jayden!"

He turned. His eyes widened in shock when he saw me. In an instant, he crossed the distance between us.

"Miss Jameson, what are you doing here?" he asked.

I bit my lip, feeling embarrassed. "I need to see Kane... Alpha Stonewood. They won't let me in. Can you – can you take me to him?"

Jayden hesitated only a moment before nodding. "Yes.

Please follow me."

I felt so relieved that my knees nearly buckled. Behind us, the guards stared with pale faces.

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< Chapter 166

"Beta Jayden respects her. Did you see that?"

"Oh my god, were we rude to the wrong person?"

Jayden led me into the building. Even the lobby felt intimidating. The place had polished marble floors, glittering chandeliers, employees in expensive suits moving like they belonged in another world entirely.

3 min left

We stepped into the elevator, riding all the way up to the executive floor. My palms grew sweaty as we walked toward a massive pair of double doors.

"This is the president's office," Jayden said quietly.

"Please wait here. I'll inform him."

I nodded. I felt my stomach twist as he slipped inside. Voices murmured on the other side of the door. Seconds dragged into minutes until Jayden stepped back out.

"You may enter now," he said gently.

My breath caught.

I stepped toward the doorway.

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< My Convicted Wife is My Mate

Chapter 167

BELLA'S POV

2 min left

The moment I stepped into Kane's office, a tight knot formed in my stomach. I stood near the door, unsure if I should move closer or stay rooted where I was.

The room was too quiet, almost painfully so. The place was filled only with the small rustling of papers as he read through the documents on his desk. I had told myself I would never come back to him, that I would cut ties cleanly and move forward with my life. Yet here I was, barely days later, standing in front of the very man I said I would walk away from.

And he looked nothing like the man I had once mistaken for a poor, exiled Alpha who needed help. The man in front of me was a stranger. He looked powerful, composed and terrifyingly confident.

He wore an iron-gray suit that fit him perfectly. His hair was swept back, revealing the strong lines of his face. His dark eyes scanned the documents with cold focus. He commanded the entire office without even lifting his 167a.

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< Chapter 167

through it.

"Sis, are you here just to stare at me like that?"

2 min left

I froze. That word "sis" hit me harder than I expected.

It wasn't said with affection. It was said like he was somehow mocking me. It was a reminder of how foolishly I had tried to make him my family. A reminder of how naïve I'd been.

My throat went dry. "Hi. I... I have something to tell you."

"Go ahead." He didn't even bother looking at me. His eyes stayed glued to the documents, as if I were nothing more than background noise.

I wiped my palms against my jeans before speaking. "I was wondering if you could let my uncle and the others go. They... they've been locked up for a while. They've learned their lesson. I plan to drop the case with the police, but your lawyer is handling everything, so..." I swallowed. "Please tell him to withdraw."

He finally lifted his head.

And even though he said nothing at first, that single fobR9

< Chapter 167

2 min left

you told me you didn't want to release them. So why are you changing your mind now?"

His eyes held something like amusement, like he was laughing at me inside.

I forced myself to look at me even though my chest tightened. "I... want to let them go."

He chuckled, but there was no warmth in it. "What kind of person do you think I am, Bell a? Someone you can order around? I gave you a choice, and you made it. You can't take it back just because you feel like it."

"I'm not trying to order you," I said quickly. "I'm only asking you to tell the police to release them. You know you can do this. Please, it's nothing for you."

"I can," he replied calmly. "But so what?"

I took a slow breath and met his eyes again.

"What do you want in exchange?" I asked.

He put down the pen he was holding and stood up. He walked toward me....slowly. Every step he took toward ind

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< Chapter 167

When he stopped directly in front of me, he lifted my hands before I could react.

"Sis," he murmured "Your hands are freezing."

2 min left

My body tensed. His palms were warm, too warm against my skin. He held my hands between his own, rubbing them slowly. His thumb brushed over my knuckles in a soft way that made my breath catch. He did it so naturally, like he had done it a thousand times before.

His eyes softened too, but only for a moment.

My mind spun.

Why did he look at me like that? Why did it feel like he had done this before?

I shook the thought away instantly. I am imagining it. I

have to be.

He lowered his voice. "Are they warmer now?"

"Y-yes," I breathed. "They are."

He tried to pull my hands away, but he tightened his grip:10

< Chapter 167

2 min left

His gentleness confused me more than his coldness ever had. The same man who mocked me moments ago was now holding my hands as if they were something fragile. I didn't understand him. I couldn't.

My hands grew warm, but the rest of my body felt colder.

"What do you want before you let them go?" I asked again.

Instead of answering, he tilted his head slightly.

"Why did you suddenly change your mind, Bella? You were so certain before."

"My grandmother is sick," I said quietly. "She's in the hospital. I don't want her stressing about any of this."

He hummed softly. "So she matters to you that much. Enough for you to come to me and beg."

His voice was softer now. I hated how my heart responded to it.

He leaned slightly closer, still rubbing my hands gently.

What about me, Bella? What position do I hold in your10

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< Chapter 167

2 min left

The question hit me unexpectedly. My breath stopped.

He stepped in closer, lowering his face until his breath warmed my cheek. His eyes locked onto mine. My pulse raced.

"I don't think I'm very important," he continued softly. "If I were, you wouldn't have left me so easily. You didn't even hesitate."

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My heart dropped. His tone remained gentle, but the ice in his eyes told the truth. He wasn't saying it to seek comfort.

He was punishing me.

His hands were warm, but the coldness in his eyes was devastating.

Still, I forced myself to speak. "Will you... let them go?"

"No."

Just one word. It was final.

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Of course he said no. He was Kane. Alpha Kanel 21:10

Chapter 168

BELLA'S POV

2 min left

A proud man like Kane would never let himself bend for anyone, least of all me. He already told me that if I rejected him, there would be no going back.

Clearly, he planned to keep his words.

"So you only agreed to see me today just to prove a point," I asked "To show me you won't give in no matter how much I beg, right?"

Slowly, he lifted his hand and brushed away a few strands of hair from my forehead. The simple touch sent a shiver down my spine.

“Back then,” he said softly, “you told me you didn’t want to stay by my side. You said you didn’t need me to help you. You said you wouldn’t regret walking away.”

His voice was low, almost dangerous. Not a single word sounded angry, yet I felt the weight behind his words.

He leaned closer. He was so close that I could feel his

21:10

< Chapter 168

2 min left

“I’m only seeing you now,” he murmured, “so you can understand how ridiculous those words were.”

I froze. His breath against my skin, made it hard to breathe. I felt trapped by how intense his presence was.

When he pulled back to look at me, I saw nothing but cold truth in his eyes. He wasn’t trying to hurt me; he was simply stating a fact.

And that was what made it worse.

In that moment, I felt like I had fallen into icy water. My heart hit the bottom first, and the rest of me followed slowly, I was powerless to stop it.

I couldn’t remember how I left his office. I only remembered the humiliation I felt.

He never intended to help me. He only wanted me to face the consequences of my decision. I had no right to ask him for anything. Going to him had been nothing but self-inflicted shame.

By the time I reached home, my chest hurt so much that I Couldn’t even cry.

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< Chapter 168

2 min left

The next morning at work, I tried to focus on my tasks, but nothing stayed in my head. My mind kept drifting to Kane’s voice, to

his cold stare, to the way he had tucked my hair behind my ear as if I still meant something to him. I hated how my body reacted to him even now. I hated how foolish I had been .

Just after midday, my phone rang. It was my mother's relatives. I stepped into the empty hallway to answer.

"Bella, your grandmother's condition has worsened." Elena told me.

My breath hitched. "Worsened? How?"

"She woke up this morning but she wasn't herself. She doesn't remember things properly anymore. She keeps asking for her sons. The doctor says it's Alzheimer's and it's progressing quickly. Too quickly."

My heart sank. "That fast...?"

"Yes. Usually it takes years for someone to reach this stage. But she's declining rapidly. Bella, the doctor said she needs to see her sons before her memory gets any

Rose. How much longer are you planning to keep them

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< Chapter 168

She sounded angry, like she was accusing me.

2 min left

"I'm not-

" I swallowed down the frustration rising in me. "I'm not the one keeping them locked up. I already tried

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"You reported them, didn't you? You started this! Now your grandmother is suffering because of you!"

I closed my eyes. My grip tightened around the phone.

The situation was slipping out of my hands, and there was nothing I could do to stop it. My grandmother was fading right before me. Everything else in my life was collapsing.

It felt like drowning.

When the call ended, my hands shook.

I leaned against the wall for a long moment, breathing in deeply, trying to calm myself down.

By the end of the day, I was tired. My body ached, my21:10

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< Chapter 168

front of me, blocking my path.

2 min left

“Bella,” he said quietly, shifting nervously from foot to foot, “let me help you get home. I have my car here. It’s not a problem.”

I blinked at him, surprised. Justin was kind, too kind for someone like me. I knew he liked me, and I knew I had to shut it down before he got hurt.

“I’m fine,” I said gently. “I live close by. It’s just a short walk.”

“But you look pale,” he protested softly. “You haven’t been yourself these past few days.”

“I’m okay,” I repeated. “Really.”

Without waiting for his response, I stepped past him and

headed down the street.

The truth was, I wasn’t fine. I hadn’t slept well in days. My grandmother’s health hurt my heart. My family blamed me for things I couldn’t fix. And Kane... he disappointed me in a way I didn’t want to admit. 5/9

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< Chapter 168

2 min left

After a few minutes of walking, I accidentally brushed shoulders with a passerby and lost my balance. I stumbled and fell to the ground. My palms smacked the pavement. My thick clothes cushioned the fall, but the shock still knocked the breath out of me.

Before I could get up, hurried footsteps approached. I felt someone grab my arm, helping me up.

“Bella! Are you okay?”

I turned and my eyes widened. It was Justin again.

“What are you doing here?”

He scratched the back of his neck. “My car is parked just up ahead. I... I was tailing you slowly to make sure you got home safely.”

I blinked, stunned. “Justin, you didn’t have to-”

“I did,” he said firmly. “You fell just from brushing a stranger. You expect me to relax knowing you’re walking home alone in that condition? Please, Bella. Let me take you. My car is right there. If we keep standing on the road like this, a police officer will fine me for parking illegally.”

< Chapter 168

His concern was so genuine that I felt guilty refusing again. I sighed heavily. “Fine. I’ll ride with you.”

2 min left

His shoulders relaxed in relief as he led me to his car. We got in, and the heater warmed the air as he started driving toward the cabin.

During the drive, he spoke hesitantly.

"You don't have to worry," he said. "I'm not expecting anything in return just because I'm helping you get home. I know I'm not... well, I know I can't match up to your ex-boyfriend. I'm not pretending I can compete with him. I just... I want to make sure you're safe."

"Thank you," I murmured. "Really."

Inside, I was hollow. The past few months felt like a lifetime ago. And now? I wasn't even sure anyone would consider me worthy of being loved. I had a criminal record. I was a rogue in the eyes of the pack world... who would want that?

Justin hesitated again. "The other day... I saw you getting into a Porsche. I didn't want to pry, but if you've met someone else... someone good... I'd be happy for you21:10

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something that belonged to him, and he treated me to lunch as thanks. That's all."

"Oh." His face brightened slightly. I could see the hope creeping back in.

Soon his car stopped at the cabin. I unbuckled my seatbelt and looked at him seriously.

"Justin," I said softly, "you're a good person. Really good. But I'm not suitable for you. Don't waste your time on me. You deserve someone who hasn't gone through what I have."

"You're good enough for me," he whispered. "I can wait. I don't mind."

I shook my head. "You said yourself... my ex-boyfriend comes from money. That's the kind of world I used to be in. So I'll be honest with you. If I ever marry again, it would have to be someone capable of matching that kind of status. That's why we're not suitable. Don't pin your hopes on me."

I said those hurtful words on purpose. Gentle rejection. wouldn't stop a man like Justin. But harsh truth might:10

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you for today. But you don't need to send me home anymore."

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Before he could respond, I opened the door and stepped out. I walked toward the house, forcing myself not to look back.

Only when I heard his car start and drive off did I allow my shoulders to slump. His kindness, Kane's coldness, my grandmother's decline, my family's resentment – everything weighed on me.

Right now, I felt like a cracked shell barely holding together.

And that was where the day ended.

Chapter 169

JAYDEN'S POV

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Bella paused in her steps and slowly turned around.

From where I sat in the front seat of the black Bentley,

I watched her stare after that damn car like she was watching her last chance at peace drive away from her. Her shoulders drooped. She looked small for the first time since I'd known her.

She stood there until the car disappeared behind the bend. Then, she turned around and started walking toward her little house. She didn't notice us. How could

she? Our Alpha had ordered me to park far enough that

she wouldn't sense him.

Kane sat in the back seat with the window slightly down. He watched her with a lazy half-smile, but there was nothing relaxed about him. His wolf was pacing inside him like a caged thing. I could see it in the way his fingers tapped the leather seat.

I glanced at him again through the rearview mirror. 178

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appear. The air in the car felt charged. I had worked for him long enough to know when violence was rising off him in waves.

I swallowed hard. Why did Miss Bella let another man drive her home? Why did she allow that? I mentally slapped my forehead. If you want to go home, just go home. Don't make things worse for me, please. What is Alpha. Stonewood going to think?

At first, I had thought it would be good for him to see her tonight. Maybe it would calm him. Maybe it would help him snap out of that cold, distant mood he had been drowning in for days. Now I realized I had been a fool. I might not survive tonight.

Kane finally spoke. "She accepted another man's help."

That wasn't even a question.

I cleared my throat "I suspect... Miss Jameson had some matters that required someone to drive her back. She didn't mean-"

Kane's eyes snapped toward me. The full amber of his wolf's eyes reflected in the mirror. "Why? Are you?"

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like someone had poured ice water through it. I immediately shut my mouth. One thing everyone very pack

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member knew: when the Alpha's voice dropped that low, something in him was one step from snapping.

Kane stared back out the window. I didn't dare move or breathe too loudly.

Damn it, I thought. I never should have let her into Stonewood Corporation's building. Or let her meet him. Or let him see her again.

But it was too late. The bond between them – whatever

weird, painful thing it was – kept pulling them back into each other's orbit. And I was stuck here, praying I'd still be alive by dawn.

When Bella disappeared inside her house, Kane finally spoke. "She's acting like she belongs to someone else."

I knew better than to answer.

A few moments later, he stepped out of the car.

I took a deep breath, shut my eyes, and prayed for all our lives.

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When I reached home, everything felt quiet, too quiet. I switched on the lights and placed the cheap food I'd bought for eight bucks on the table.. My legs felt heavy with exhaustion, but I forced myself toward the bathroom to wash my hands. The harsh light revealed what I already knew: my hands no longer looked like a doctor's hands. Years of working dirty jobs, scrubbing floors, lifting crates – they looked tired and rough.

As I scrubbed my palms, I replayed the earlier events. I only hoped the things I said today wouldn't scar Justin too deeply. He was young. He was innocent. He deserved better than someone with a past like mine.

I stared at my reflection on the mirror. I looked drained.

I stepped out of the bathroom and froze.

Kane was sitting at the small table like he belonged there. His posture was relaxed. His left hand twirled the key to the cabin, the key he had practically forced into my life. He looked at me and something in my chest tightened painfully.

My heart slammed hard against my ribs. "Why... are you Here?"

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He stood up slowly "If I didn't come," he said in a quiet tone, "how would I find out that someone else had taken you home?"

My throat dried. "You... you saw Justin drive me home?"

He walked toward me, closing the distance in seconds. He didn't answer. Instead, he lifted his hand and gripped my chin firmly, tilting my face up to his. His fingers were warm and strong.

"The guy who dropped you off today," he murmured, "is that the same man who works as a driver at the hospital?"

I couldn't speak. I pressed my lips together, refusing to say anything.

His expression darkened. "Why? Is he the reason you refused to stay by my side? What exactly is he to you?"

"It's none of your business," I snapped, trying to look away. But I couldn't move. His grip didn't allow it. His strength made resistance pointless. Then he leaned closer.

None of my business? You forget what kind of man 21:10

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I felt a chill go down my spine. My anger and fear tangled together. "What are you planning to do? We're just colleagues, Kane, damn it, you've met Justin. You know I'm not interested in him. There's nothing between us!"

"But he wants you," Kane murmured. He used his thumb to brush across my lips. The touch burned, sending heat racing under my skin. "He looks at you like he's already halfway in love."

My breath trembled. "Don't... don't do anything to him."

Kane's eyes narrowed. "Does that mean you care about him?"

"No." I shook my head, trying to pull away. But his scent wrapped around me. My chest tightened. My lips throbbed where his thumb had touched. My pulse raced. too fast. My whole body felt warm. I felt trapped by something I didn't want to name.

“Really?” he asked. “You have no feelings for him at all?”

“No,” I whispered.

And then, he smiled. A real smile. Not the cold,

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had once fallen for. The one who had protected me despite everything.

My heart twisted painfully.

“You should remember what you said today,” he murmured, “and keep your word.”

Before I could respond, my stomach betrayed me.

My tummy rumbled.

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Heat rushed to my face. Kane blinked, surprised, then looked down at my stomach. His expression softened just a little. “I forgot you haven’t eaten.

He let go of me. I stepped back quickly, breathing hard, finally able to move. He walked to the table and touched the food container with the tip of his finger. “It’s cold.”

“I just need to heat it,” I said quietly.

He looked up at me. Then, he reached out, took my hand without giving me a chance to pull away, and said, “Since it’s cold, let’s get hot food. And I remembered something you once said that I’d buy you a good meal when I’d earned o

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ago... it had meant something beautiful. It had meant future, safety, hope. Now, that same sentence tasted.

bitter.

But Kane didn't give me time to answer. He simply intertwined his fingers with mine and pulled me toward

the door.

Outside, Jayden nearly jumped out of his skin when he saw us. He hurried to open the car door.

The moment Kane guided me toward the Bentley, I knew this night was far from over.

Coin Package: get more free bonus

Chapter 170

BELLA'S POV

Kane didn't give me a chance to breathe. The moment we got into the car, he spoke to Jayden.

"Get us to Royal Court," Kane ordered.

Jayden answered immediately from the driver's seat. "Okay, sir."

I kept my head down, both because I didn't want Kane to see my expression and because I was trying to understand what was happening. My pulse was still racing from

the tension earlier, and sitting beside a cold Alpha in a confined car didn't make it better.

I felt Kane's presence like heat against my skin. He wasn't touching me anymore, but it felt like he was. His energy filled the entire backseat. Even his silence had weight.

Jayden kept glancing into the rearview mirror. I didn't look up, but I could feel his eyes on me. He was probably relieved. 1/8

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believe it.

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When we arrived at Royal Court, the car stopped beneath the gold-lit entrance. The building towered above us. Even the scent in the air smelled expensive .

I was about to step out alone, but Kane moved faster. He got out first, walked over to my side, and held out his hand. I didn't take it. I didn't want to. But he took my refusal as nothing more than an amusing delay. His fingers wrapped around mine, pulling me out gently.

I tried to pull away.

"Sis," he murmured, bending toward my ear, "don't move. Otherwise, I can't guarantee what I'll do to rein you in."

I stared at him in shock. Kane didn't smile, but his eyes held a kind of quiet warning that made heat crawl up my

neck.

So I stopped struggling.

He led me through the elegant glass doors like he owned not only the restaurant but the entire street it stood on. 2/8

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But then, they looked at me.

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I saw the quick side-eyes, the hidden judgments. My clothes were clean but simple. They were cheap in a place as luxurious as this. I stood out like a mistake in a perfect painting. They looked at me like I was an intruder.

I felt all of it.

Kane didn't. Or he didn't care.

"Alpha. Stonewood, you're here," the restaurant manager hurried forward with a smile so bright it almost looked painful. "The same private room?"

"Yes," Kane replied.

The manager turned to lead us when something in the corner of my eye froze me.

I noticed a familiar posture. It was a familiar face.

I blinked once. Then twice.

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She was leaning on a short, chubby middle-aged man, holding onto his arm like he was the love of her life. Her head rested lightly against his shoulder. She was smiling at him. Her body language screamed intimacy.

My mind reeled.

Rachel – the same Rachel who called fat boys "walking embarrassments," who only chased handsome jocks, who swore she would rather die than date someone without looks – was now all over a man she wouldn't have glanced at twice during college.

What happened to her? Why him?

I stared before I could stop myself. As if sensing it, Rachel turned.

Her eyes met mine. Instantly, her smile shattered.

Her face drained of color, then flushed hot with panic. I saw the way her fingers tightened on the man's sleeve. I saw the look of humiliation. The horror of being caught out. The anger that followed.

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ella?" she snapped. "Why are you here? Is this the kind

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Her words hit me hard but I had heard worse in prison. Much worse. I just lifted an eyebrow slightly, not giving her the reaction she wanted.

She didn't even notice Kane beside me. All her hatred was pointed at me, as if I'd ruined her life by simply existing.

I could practically feel her mind racing. Her family's recent business failures. The bank's refusal . Partners

backing out. Her forced relationship with this older man just to save her lifestyle.

We hadn't been in touch but I had heard the rumours.

She wasn't angry because she saw me. She was angry because I saw this.

Rachel would rather die than let anyone know she was no longer untouchable.

"Rachel, do you know her?" the middle-aged man beside her asked.

His tone made my stomach twist. He was looking at Rachel like she was property he had paid for. 5/8

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came out of jail not too long ago and now works as a road sweeper.'

Her words were triumphant. She wanted the entire world to hear it. Then she turned to the manager.

"Since when does Royal Court allow even a street cleaner to dine here?" she asked the manager.

My fingers stiffened in Kane's grip. I felt him go still beside me. Dangerously still.

Rachel still didn't see him. But the manager did. His body went rigid. His throat bobbed. He looked like he'd swallowed burning coal. Even his hands began to tremble.

He opened his mouth. "It's not up to you to decide who can dine at our restaurant. You must apologize to this lady."

Rachel stared at him like he had slapped her.

"Apologize? To her?" she repeated, scoffing. "Are you trying to lose your job?"

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Mr. Teals growled as if preparing to defend her until another voice cut through the air.

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"What's the big deal with an apology?" Kane asked. "Even if you need to kneel, you should do it."

The entire lobby froze. Rachel's face went blank.

Mr. Teals jerked his head up. His eyes widened the moment he recognized Kane.

“Alpha Stonewood,” he breathed in shock.

The color drained from his cheeks. Sweat immediately formed on his forehead. His thick fingers loosened their hold on Rachel.

I felt Kane shift beside me. His aura got even more dominant. He didn’t yell. He didn’t move aggressively. Yet every person around us seemed to stop breathing.

“Alpha. Stonewood, it’s a misunderstanding,” Mr. Teals stammered. “A... a misunderstanding!”

Kane tilted his head slightly, studying him.

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misunderstandings are so easy to form in this world, then there will be plenty of them circulating.”

The words were calm. Calm yet lethal.

Mr. Teals’ flesh trembled.

Rachel’s mouth hung open. She looked at him in disbelief..

And that was where the moment froze.