

Through Rising Fog We Walk Paths Unknown Yet Comforting

Chapter 171

LUCY'S POV

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I knew I had messed up the moment the words left my mouth. I wasn't the brightest woman in the room. Fine, everyone knew that, but I wasn't stupid enough to pretend I hadn't just crossed a dangerous line.

I mean, it was obvious. The air was literally thick enough to choke on.

I stared at Bella, at the tall handsome man beside her, and a tight knot formed in my stomach. Since when did Bella get to know a man like that? The kind of man who looked like wealth, danger, and power wrapped into one?

My eyes dragged over his sharp jaw, his cold expression, and the kind of confidence that filled the air around him. Jealousy rose in me instantly. Bella? With him? Impossible. Or so I thought.

But something about him tugged at my memory. His face felt familiar, like a name everyone whispered but didn't dare say too loudly.

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The room froze.

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The manager's eyes nearly popped out. Mr. Teals actually stumbled back like he wished he could melt into the floor and disappear. I had never seen a grown man look that horrified. The air th

ickened around us, and I suddenly felt like I had just ripped open a grave with my bare hands.

The man smirked at me, but the look he gave me was colder than winter. His eyes weren't just icy. They were dangerous, like a wolf deciding whether I was worth the effort of tearing apart. For a second, I forgot how to breathe.

"Lucy, what nonsense are you spouting?!" Mr. Teals hissed. "This is the Alpha of Stonewood Pack. Alpha Kane!"

The name dropped like a stone inside my chest. My knees weakened. I stared at Bella, then at him, trying to piece everything together. My mind ran wild.

Alpha Stonewood? This was Alpha Stonewood?

I knew he looked important but I had no idea I was 21:11

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My heart pounded because there was something even worse, something everyone in the city knew. Bella had poisoned his fiancée. Sophia Monroe. The tragedy that had shaken the whole pack. The reason Bella went to prison. The reason everyone avoided her like a curse.

I felt a chill crawl over my skin.

I swallowed hard and tried to speak. "But... but Bella-"

Then Kane's eyes snapped onto mine.

One look.

That was all it took.

My voice died in my throat. The air turned razor-sharp around me, and every instinct screamed at me to shut up or be torn apart. I had never been so afraid. My skin prickled, and it felt like my blood was running backward.

I remembered something then, something I had ignored.

Before my family's fall from grace, Derek had bullied Bella in the clubhouse. It had been a stupid night, and Bérek had been drinking, but the moment he raised 21:11

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Bella just got lucky, that she happened to be in the wrong place at the right time, and Kane punished Derek for disturbing him.

But now... now that I replayed it in my head, nothing about it had been coincidence. Kane hadn't just appeared out of nowhere. He had come for her.

My stomach twisted painfully. I felt like vomiting.

"Lucy," Mr. Teals snapped. I heard the panic dripping from his voice, "quickly apologize to Alpha Stonewood and this lady!"

This lady. He couldn't even say Bella's name because of how terrified he was.

I hated that I felt cornered. I hated that Bella just stood there quietly, not gloating, not smirking, not even reacting. Her calmness only made me feel worse. I didn't want to apologize especially not to her. It would be the greatest humiliation. But Alpha Kane was right there. And an Alpha's aura wasn't something anyone could argue with. His power felt like a weight on my chest, making my bones feel weak. 4/8

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Then Kane spoke.

"Then kneel to apologize."

My heart stopped.

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I stared at him with wide eyes. My voice came out in a strangled whisper. "You... you want me to kneel and apologize to her?"

He didn't blink. He didn't soften. He didn't care.

"Do you think she doesn't deserve your kneeling?" he asked simply, like we were discussing the weather. "It doesn't matter what you think. If I say she deserves it, then she deserves it."

The room trembled with his authority. Even the air felt heavy with his dominance. It made my skin tingle with fear.

"Lucy!" Mr. Teals snapped in a harsh whisper. "Just do it. You made a mistake. Kneel and apologize sincerely. Right now!"

breath came fast. If I knelt in public, everyone would

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How was I supposed to live after this? Should I throw away my dignity just like that? Bella was just a cleaner for crying out loud.

My thoughts spiraled out of control. My hands shook.

Across from me, Bella still didn't speak. She looked like she didn't even want to be part of this. Like all of this was happening around her rather than because of her. She looked calm but also tired, like someone who had endured too much in life and no longer wasted energy on petty conflicts.

I almost convinced myself to walk away. But then Kane's aura shifted.

There were no words. Just pressure and pure dominance. It was a silent threat. My wolf whimpered inside me, bowing her head in submission.

I knew I had no choice.

I moved forward slowly, fighting against every instinct screaming at me to run. As I lowered myself, Bella flinched slightly, as if she didn't want me to kneel. She tried to take a step back, but Kane's hand was suddenly:

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to apologize, so let her do it properly."

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Their closeness shocked me. It shocked everyone. Kane was known for keeping distance from women, even from Sophia, people said. He had always been proper, cold, untouchable. And yet here he was, leaning toward Bella with his hand on her shoulder, speaking to her in a voice no one had ever heard from him.

It made my chest squeeze painfully with jealousy and fear at the same time.

I finally dropped to my knees.

It felt like I was dropping through the floor.

My face

burned with humiliation. My throat tightened. I forced my voice out. "Bella... it... it was my fault. I shouldn't have said those things to you. I shouldn't have." My voice wavered. "I'll never do it again. Please..."

please forgive me."

I hated how my voice shook. I hated how small I sounded. But there was nothing else I could do.

Kept my eyes down, staring at the floor, praying Kane:11

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BELLA'S POV

I followed Kane into the private room without saying a word. My steps were steady, but inside, my pulse was racing. It felt like my heart was being pulled in too many directions.

The door closed behind us, shutting out the noise of the restaurant. The room was warm. The place was quiet enough to hear every small sound. Kane sat opposite me. His presence filled the room as if his aura alone demanded space. Even when he was pretending to be relaxed, nothing about him was ever soft or harmless.

Once I sat down, he asked the manager to bring in some appetizers first.

“Come on,” he said as he reached for a small plate “Eat a little to ease the hunger pangs. The appetizers here taste quite nice.”

He took a piece with the chopsticks, brought it in front of me, and waited. It wasn’t forceful, but it wasn’t a 1/8 Suggestion either. It was something in the middle. The

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accepted it, and ate. The flavor was delicate and

1 min left

well-made, but it barely reached me. My tongue felt dull and heavy.

Kane then picked up the menu and placed it directly in front of me.

“Here” he said “see if there’s anything you want to try.”

“I don’t mind,” I replied. “You can order on my behalf. I don’t have any particular requests.”

His eyes got a bit darker. It was subtle, but the sudden tension in the air made the manager stiffen beside the door. Kane’s aura dropped a few degrees, enough to send a chill down my arms. The manager’s heartbeat was loud enough that I could almost hear it. I suspected Kane noticed too.

Then, just as quickly, Kane smiled.

“Alright then,” he said lightly. “I’ll order for you.”

The shift in his expression was too smooth, too controlled. It made the room feel even smaller. 2/8

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relief.

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Kane leaned back, watching me with a smile that used to warm me once. Now it made my heartbeat trip, not from comfort but from unease.

“You don’t like these dishes?” he asked, still smiling. “If not, I’ll get them to change it.”

“No

need,” I said quietly, looking at him. Once upon a time, that smile had been the only light I looked forward to. When he smiled, everything felt perfect again. I had fallen for him without even realizing it.

But now... that same smile terrified me.

“Do you mean that I can leave once I finish this meal?” I asked.

“Are you in a hurry to go home?” he asked.

“I’m tired. I just want to rest early,” I lied.

The truth was painful to face. I didn’t want to look at him anymore. The more I sat near him, the more it reminded me of the difference between us. The more it reminded:11

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and I had been foolish enough to trust it. To trust him.

“You’re afraid of me,” he said suddenly.

It wasn’t a question.

“Why?” he continued. “Because I’m Alpha Kane Stonewood?”

He looked at me intensely. It felt like he could see through everything, every emotion I tried to hide.

“Sis,” he said softly, “do you still miss the man I used to be?”

My chest tightened. I looked away.

He didn't give me time to recover.

"Have you considered," he continued, "that it's because I am Kane Stonewood that your old schoolmate knelt for you earlier? That with me around, you don't have to bother with anyone's attitude toward you? I can make anyone who looks down on you kneel. I can make them humble themselves. Beg you."

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don't want that. It's not good to use your power over people"

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"Why isn't it good? I can let you use my power however you want. What do you think?"

He leaned back lazily, watching me as if waiting to see how I'd react. As if this was a game and I was a piece on the board.

I stared at him. No matter how I tried, I couldn't see through him. I didn't understand his motives. I didn't understand what he wanted from me now. I thought after I begged him last time, after the way he rejected me, we would go our separate ways. A man like him wouldn't tolerate being rejected by a woman.

Yet here he was now, sitting in front of me, bringing me here, forcing Lucy Ronan to kneel for me earlier... all to show me what Kane Stonewood was capable of.

"What do you want, exactly?" I asked.

What do I want...?" He exhaled. "I'm not sure. Maybe I just wanted to see you again."

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He

tilted his head, looking at me. "Speaking of which... are you not planning to beg me again for your relatives?"

My breath hitched. I had tried not to think about it the whole evening, but the mention of my family slammed into me hard.

"If I beg you again..." I whispered, "will you get the police to release them?"

He shrugged lightly. "If you never try, you'll never know."

His nonchalant tone made my stomach twist. He held people's lives in his hand and spoke as if it was nothing.

Still....my grandmother. My family. Even if the hope was slim, I couldn't ignore it.

I clenched my hands tightly. My palms still hurt from the wounds I had inflicted to stay conscious in the Gomez residence. The pain made me more grounded.

I took in a deep breath "Then... I beg you. Please. Let the police release them."

Expected him to mock me. Demand I kneel. Demand 1:11

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any of that, I would have accepted it for my grandmother's sake.

But instead, Kane suddenly stood up.

I froze, shocked by the abrupt movement.

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He walked toward me slowly. My heartbeat sped up. I didn't move.

He reached down, took my clasped hands, and gently pried my fingers open one by one. His touch was warm. My breath caught in my throat.

“Sis,” he murmured. His voice was soft enough to confuse my heart, “how can you forget your hands are injured?”

The wounds on my palms throbbed as he exposed them. I swallowed hard and looked a way. I had hurt myself on purpose to stay awake that day. It wasn’t something I expected him to notice. Or care about.

“Do you want to try raising your wolf again?” he asked quietly.

I did. Deep down, I did. But not with him. Not like this! :12

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The conflicting emotions made my chest ache.

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“Your hands are always cold...” he said, almost to himself. “Shall I warm them for you, Sis?”

I didn’t answer. He didn’t wait.

His large hands took mine in them, covering the ugly wounds, the cold skin, the scars I couldn’t hide. His warmth spread into my palms slowly. I felt the warmth spreading through my fingers, then up my arms. I felt it in my chest.

I stared at his hands over mine. They felt too warm, too steady.

Too dangerous.

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BELLA’S POV

The knock on the private room door came so suddenly that I almost jumped.

Before I could pull my hands away from Kane, his fingers tightened around mine.

His voice sounded calm as he answered, “Come in.”

The door opened, and the manager stepped in with several waiters behind him carrying trays of dishes. Their eyes immediately fell to our hands. Mine were small and pale... and his, were firm, warm, confident. He had hands that did not belong beside someone like me.

My cheeks grew hot. I tried to withdraw again. Kane didn’t let me.

“Don’t move,” he said without even glancing at me. “They’re still so cold.”

His tone was simple,. As if warming my hands mattered 1/8 more than the room full of strangers. As if it was natural

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the staff

must be thinking: How could a plain girl like me sit so close to someone like Alpha Stonewood? Especially while dressed in a cheap blouse and worn-out jeans.

The manager finally snapped out of his trance, coughed lightly, and motioned for the waiters to place the dishes. They moved quickly, almost fearfully, setting plates on the table without making unnecessary noise. The manager bowed, murmured something polite, and practically rushed everyone out before closing the door.

Silence returned.

Kane didn’t speak until he was satisfied with the temperature of my hands. By then, I felt like my entire face had melted from embarrassment.

“Alright,” he said at last, releasing me. “Let’s eat while the food is still warm.”

He didn’t return to his previous seat. Instead, he remained beside me. He was close enough that I felt the heat of his body. He was close enough for his scent to fill my senses.

He began placing food on my plate.

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though he

wasn’t trying, his aura was strong. It felt like a force that made the room feel smaller, warmer, tighter.

After a while, I found the courage to ask again, quietly, “Um... will you let the police release my relatives?”

He didn’t answer immediately. His hand paused mid-air as he placed another piece of food on my plate. Then he turned his head slightly.

"It looks like you sincerely want me to release your relatives," he said.

I took a breath "I'm doing it for my grandmother. She's old. She's scared. She doesn't deserve to suffer because of anything they did."

For a moment, he said nothing. He simply looked at me. And there was something unsettling about it. He stared at me like he saw every layer I tried so hard to hide.

I held his stare anyway. "Will you?"

I saw the subtle tension between his brows, the way his eyes stayed on my cheekbones, my thin face,. I knew I had lost weight. I knew exhaustion showed in my eyes1:12

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wine?"

I blinked in shock. "Wine?"

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"Yes." He said "Let's drink. I want to see what you look like when you drink."

I felt a small wave of panic. My alcohol tolerance was really small. It's one of the reasons I barely drank. One glass could knock me out cold. If I got drunk here... with him... anything could happen. Not because he'd do something wrong, but because I might say something stupid. Or reveal something I didn't dare reveal sober.

"How... how many glasses?" I asked carefully.

"Until I'm satisfied."

My heart skipped. He wasn't joking. Kane rarely joked.

I bit my lip and stared at the glass he placed before me. I could see my reflection in the glass. I looked small, unsure, a little too vulnerable.

As if reading my thoughts, he spoke again. "You're worried I'll take advantage of you once you're drunk?21:12

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"There are easier ways for me to get women," he

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continued. "I don't need to drug or trick anyone. Another fifty females in my pack would fight each other for a night with me. And even if I wanted to do something with you here and now" he leaned a little closer no one would dare intervene."

Heat crawled up my neck. He wasn't boasting. He wasn't threatening. He was simply stating facts.

Facts I already knew.

I sighed inwardly at myself. I was overthinking.

So I picked up the glass and drank it in one go. The bitterness hit my tongue first, then the warmth spread down my throat.

Kane watched me with a small smile. He looked amused, like watching me drink was the highlight of his evening.

He refilled the glass.

I drank again.

Férefilled.

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Soon, glass after glass disappeared, and my head started to feel light. My fingers felt clumsy against the tablecloth. My feet felt disconnected from my thoughts. My voice started to lose its coordination each time I tried to speak.

I wasn't just warm. I was floating.

At some point, I pushed another filled glass toward him with an exaggerated, dizzy grin. "Join me for a drink..."

He looked at me, then at the way I was holding the glass. His expression shifted. I knew he remembered that he had seen me drink once long ago. But this was somehow different.

"You want me to drink?" he asked.

“Yup.” I nodded, overemphasizing every movement. “Drinking alone... is so boring. Drink with me, please.”

One of his brows lifted slightly. “Say it again.”

My head tilted awkwardly. He reached out and used his fingers to brush my lips lightly, too lightly, just enough to steal my breath.

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beautiful. Goddess, he was gorgeous.

This time, his reply was soft... almost gentle. “Okay.”

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He took the glass from my hand and drank slowly. His eyes never left my face.

I smiled then reached for the wine bottle to pour another glass.

His hand shot out and stopped mine.

“Bella,” he said firmly, “you’re drunk. You don’t need to drink anymore.”

I blinked. “Don’t need... to drink anymore?”

“That’s right. No more.”

“But...” My mind struggled to piece together the thought that had been floating somewhere behind the haze.

Then suddenly, everything clicked.

I looked up at him with blurred vision. My words slurred as Bspoke. “Then... Kane, will you release my... luncleahid2

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KANE'S POV

"I will," I replied quietly, because I had promised her.

Bella rarely asked me for anything, but tonight her words carried weight. If she wanted those idiots spared, then I would spare them. I might not have understood the exact reason behind her request, but I understood her – her compassion ran deeper than her scars.

I owed her this much.

I took the glass from her unsteady hand and brought it to my lips. The wine was bitter, and warm. She was definitely drunk. Her eyes were hazy and soft. Her guard was lowered in a way I had never witnessed.

And when she called my name "Kane" so gently, so quietly, as if she trusted me in a way she did no one else, something in me stirred..

My feelings toward this woman were... complicated. They were dangerous. They were real.

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against my collarbone. I could feel her breath against my skin.

"Kane, I'm... I'm so sleepy. I feel like... sleeping..." she whispered, then she went completely limp in my arms.

I held her, stunned by the way she fit so effortlessly against me. When she was awake, she watched my every movement, as if expecting me to turn into the monster everyone whispered about. But in sleep – this deep, wine-heavy sleep – she trusted me without question. Without fear.

"Bella, you look much cuter when you're drunk," I murmured under my breath.

I lifted my hand and brushed aside the loose strands of hair stuck to her forehead. Her cheeks were flushed from

the wine. She looked breakable and strong all at once. She was beautiful.

My heartbeat kicked faster. I reached for the jacket I had tossed aside earlier. I shook it open and wrapped it over her shoulders. Without another word, I slid one arm beneath her knees and lifted her fully.

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I carried her through the quiet hallway.

When I reached the door, Jayden was already there by the car. He took one look at the sleeping woman in my arms and immediately opened the backdoor without a word.

I lowered Bella gently into the seat, making sure she didn't hit her head. She slumped sideways until her cheek pressed into the leather, still holding onto the fabric of my sleeve even in sleep. Her fingers wouldn't let go.

I paused for a second, watching her breathe, watching her chest rise and fall as if nothing in this world ever hurt her. My jaw tightened at the thought. Too many things had hurt her. Too many people had taken advantage of her gentleness. I brushed her knuckles with my thumb.

"Drive," I ordered.

KATHY'S POV

Not far from the entrance, I walked beside Eric toward the restaurant doors when movement caught my attention. Eric slowed too. His eyebrows lifted in surprise as he looked toward the parking lot.

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Kane.

Kane Stonewood. But what shocked me wasn't him. It was the way he held the woman in his arms. He held her carefully and protectively.

Eric muttered "Looks like Kane has a woman now."

I felt disbelief.

Kane? With someone? No. That didn't make sense. He wasn't known for caring about anyone outside his pack. But... the way he lowered her into the backseat, the way he adjusted something near her shoulder – it wasn't casual. It wasn't indifferent. That woman meant something to him.

I couldn't see her face, but then my eyes dropped to her shoes and my stomach twisted.

Those shoes. Bella had that exact pair. I remembered because Bella rarely bought new things, yet she liked those shoes so much she cleaned them every night when we lived together.

My breath hitched. My palms grew cold. Don't tell m22:18

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Why? How?

Are they still acting out this marriage thing? I thought he'd be tired of her by now.

My mind spun, piecing together memories. I remember seeing them at her cabin.

Kane's car disappeared out of the lot, and Eric nudged my arm lightly. "Let's go."

I followed him to his car, but my mind was locked on the image of Kane carrying Bella so gently.

I swallowed hard, trying to sound casual as I climbed into the passenger seat. "Eric... earlier... was that Kane? Alpha of the Stonewood pack?"

"Alpha Kane Stonewood," he corrected dryly as he started the engine. "Yes. That was him."

I forced a smile "Then... do you know who he was carrying?"

Eric turned his head slightly. "Why? Are you curious? If you want to know, ask him yourself next time."

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"N-no," I said quickly, giving a small awkward laugh. "I'm just... curious."

"Sometimes it's better to be less curious," he replied. He focused his eyes back on the road.

I nodded immediately. "Okay. Understood."

I softened my voice, careful to sound obedient. I knew the type of woman Eric liked. He liked them quiet, agreeable, never pushing. I had spent weeks watching him, learning him. If I wanted to stay by his side long enough to become special, I needed to be patient.

"Eric," I said gently, running my fingers across the necklace he'd bought me earlier, "thank you for the necklace today. I love it so much. I just... don't think I have many chances to wear something so luxurious."

His expression didn't change. He had seen countless women put on this exact act before. I could tell.

"You can wear it at the Starlight Banquet."

I blinked. My heart skipped with excitement. The Starlight Banquet was filled with producers, directors, 2:18

"But I'm just an unknown actress," I said softly. "I don't think I'll be invited."

"You don't need an invitation," he replied. "Just follow me. I'll introduce you to a few directors."

My smile broke free before I could stop it. "Eric, you're the best."

He kept driving. He kept his expression frozen and cold, as if none of this meant anything. The excitement pulsing through me didn't touch him at all.

We reached my residence, and I hesitated before unbuckling. "Eric... thank you for driving me home. Would you... like to come up?"

His face leaned close. My breath caught. My heart pounded. Was he finally going to kiss me?

Instead, he pressed his finger to my lips, wiping away a smudge of lipstick. His expression was filled with disapproval. He reached for a tissue and wiped his finger clean before speaking.

Don't use this color again. It's too bright. It doesn't suit 9

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My face warmed with embarrassment. "O-okay. Understood."

"You may get out now."

The door shut behind me, and the car sped away without a second glance.

I stood frozen on the driveway, biting my lip. I didn't understand him. He gave me anything I asked for – bags, clothes, jewelry, even paid for roles in small films.

He raised me from
nothing like it meant little to him. But to say he liked me? No. He didn't look at me
like a man who cared. His eyes were always cold.

It was confusing. I felt frustrated.

But I refused to give up.

It's just the beginning. I will get into Eric's heart, slowly and carefully.

But then another thought clawed its way to the front of my mind.

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What is going on with her?

Are Bella and Kane... together?

The question circled in my head endlessly, refusing to
leave.

And it terrified me.

Chapter 175

KANE'S POV

The tiny cabin was quiet when I carried
Bella inside. I walked carefully, making sure her head rested against my chest, and gently placed her on the bed.

She was lighter than I remembered. That thought made my wolf growl inside me.

"You can go home for the night," I said to Jayden.

Shock
flashed across his face. He hesitated for half a second, then straightened. Jayden had followed me for years. He knew when silence was required.

“Yes,” he replied simply and turned to leave.

The door closed, and the place fell completely silent.

It was just Bella and me now.

I removed her shoes carefully, then helped her out of her coat. She didn’t resist. She barely stirred. I pulled the blanket over her and dragged a chair to the bedside,

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This place used to have traces of me – my clothes, my scent, my presence. Now there was nothing. Looking at it, there was no proof that I had ever lived here with her. The thought of it made me a bit irritated.

So she had thrown everything away. The thought displeased me more than it should have.

Just as I was lost in it, Bella suddenly opened her eyes and tried to sit up.

“What is it?” I asked immediately, reaching out.

Her eyes were unfocused, heavy with sleep and alcohol.

“Water...” she mumbled. “I need water...”

So that was it.

I pressed a hand lightly against her shoulder and guided her back to the bed. I was worried about her. I didn’t want her to be dehydrated.

“Sit here. Don’t move,” I said firmly. “I’ll get it for you.”

She nodded obediently, like a child being instructed, and

I turned toward the small table where her flask was. I remembered this habit of hers clearly. During winter, she always mixed cold and hot water so it wouldn’t burn her throat. Even after everything, she hadn’t changed that.

I poured the water carefully, tested the temperature, then returned to the bed.

She was sitting straight with her hands placed neatly on her knees. Her eyes were still half-closed. She looked so serious that I laughed before I could stop myself. She was adorable.

She lifted her chin slowly and stared at me. Her cheeks were flushed. Her lips were red. Her expression was still dazed.

“Water,” she murmured again. “I’m thirsty...”

I handed the cup to her, angling it toward her lips. “Slowly.”

She ignored that, took the cup with both hands, and drank it all in one go. When she finished, she released a long breath and smiled. She looked satisfied.

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She tilted her head, clearly trying to process my words. Then she shook her head slightly. “Sleepy... need sleep...”

“Then just-”

I didn’t get to finish. Why? Because her hand reached out suddenly and grabbed my sleeve. Before I could react, she pulled me hard. I lost my balance and landed beside her on the bed.

For a moment, I simply lay there, stunned. Then she climbed onto me.

She straddled me lightly till her weight pressed against my chest. She rested her hands on my shoulders. She looked down at me with a slow, gentle smile and lifted her fingers to my face, tracing my features like she was memorizing them.

Her touch heated every part of my body. Even my wolf felt like he was more alive inside me.

“Kane...” she whispered.

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Her voice was soft. Her scent wrapped around me and Sark deep into my senses.

+3 Bonus

My eyes stayed on her face.

“Why are you so good-looking?” she asked seriously, like it was an important question.

My jaw tightened.

How many people had seen her like this? How many had been this close to her? Damien's face flashed through my mind. Did she talk to him like this? Did she also lay on him this way?

Did they ever....? Fuck. The thought of it made me annoyed. Jealousy rose inside me fast.

"Are you saying that honestly?" I asked quietly.

She nodded without hesitation. "Yes. Kane is the most handsome man I've ever seen."

She tapped the tip of my nose with her finger and laughed softly, like I was something a musing.

Only she would dare treat me like this.

We stayed like that for a moment. Then suddenly, he?2:19

43 Bonus

Her eyes grew wet.

"Kane..." she said slowly. "I'll treat you very well. Please don't leave me, okay?"

My chest tightened. She looked at me like I was her anchor, like losing me would break her. The sight of her made something inside my chest squeeze.

"I never wanted to leave you," I said. "You were the one who chose to walk away. Have you forgotten?"

She frowned, thinking hard. "Why... why didn't I want to stay?" she murmured. "I want to stay with you. You make me happy. I really want to..."

Her fingers slid from my nose to my lips. She stared at them like she had discovered something new. Slowly, she leaned closer. Her tongue brushed my lips lightly.

Once. My body went rigid.

"Do you know what you're doing?" I asked.

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She didn't answer. She just smiled, clearly pleased, as if Shad tasted something sweet.

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forcing myself to stay still.

+3 Bonus

She lowered her head again. Her lips touched mine softly and innocently.

“You taste so sweet...” she whispered.

I shut my eyes, struggling to rein myself in. I’m struggling with control. My wolf growls inside me, wanting more of her. Scratch that. Needing more of her.

“You think I won’t do anything to you?” I muttered, more to myself than to her.

She blinked, then smiled again. Then she kissed me.

It wasn’t deep. It wasn’t skilled. It was pure and careless. Slowly, her lips moved against mine. They seemed to fit perfectly on mine.

I didn’t move. I didn’t respond. I just stayed there. I knew she was drunk. I let it end on its own.

When she pulled away, I felt warmth where her lips had been, and something in me twisted painfully. I wanted more and that was exactly why I couldn’t take it. 22:19

Chapter 176

KANE’S POV

Bella kissed me slowly. She didn’t stop.

“Bella-” I whispered “I’ll never touch a drunk woman. Get off”

“I want you” she whispered “Or is this enough for you?”

That was all it took for me to snap.

I flipped us over without warning and pressed her down beneath me. The mattress dipped softly. My arm braced itself beside her head, my other hand resting near her shoulder, not pinning her—just there. I contained her closely.

“It wasn’t enough,” I said quietly. “Not even close.”

Her face was flushed. I noticed how her lashes were dark against her skin. Her lips parted as if she had more to say but couldn’t quite form the words. My fingers moved on their own, brushing her cheek, tracing the soft line of 1/8.

22:19

her jaw. She looked nothing like the woman who faced

+3 Bonus

Her eyes shimmered whenever she looked at me. The way she smiled when she said my name, the way her arms looped loosely around my neck, the way her scent filled my senses. I realized then that I was drunk too.

Drunk on her.

"I shouldn't have said I wouldn't touch a drunk woman," I murmured, half to myself.

I had never taken back my words before. Not once. Yet here I was, undone by a single woman who didn't even realize the power she held.

I lowered my head and kissed her.

It

wasn't rushed. It wasn't desperate. It was slow and filled with restraint that was already cracking. Her lips were warm.

They fit perfectly in mine. I shifted slightly, turning us, kissing her again and again, as if trying to memorize the feeling. My body reacted instantly, fiercely, in a way it never did with anyone else.

She responded instantly to me. I felt her hands tightening around my neck. Her breathing was heavy. Passionately,

Blips moved against each other. I was drunk Un he?2:19

Her lips were the sweetest things I had ever tasted. I didn't know how long we stayed like that—kissing, pausing, kissing again...until reality crept back in.

+3 Bonus:

She stopped moving. I pulled back slightly and saw that her eyes were closed. Her breathing got slower.

She had fallen asleep.

I stared down at her, stunned. "What the hell..."

In that moment, I felt helpless. Minutes ago, she had been pulling me closer, lighting a fire she had no intention of putting out. And now she was asleep, peaceful, leaving me suspended between control and desire.

I forced myself to move away. Carefully, I pulled the covers over her, tucking them around her shoulders. She shifted slightly, murmuring something I couldn't hear then settled again.

"You owe me," I muttered jokingly.

22:19

I sat back down on the chair by the bed, staring at her Beautiful figure as she slept.

When I woke up, the first thing I saw was Kane.

He was sitting by my bedside. His posture was straight. His expression was calm,. His eyes were already on me as if he had been awake for a long time. For a second, I thought I was still dreaming.

"Why... why are you here?" I stammered, pushing myself up slightly.

He looked at me as if the answer was obvious. "Did you honestly think you could make it home on your own after drinking that much?"

Fragments of the night rushed back. I remembered us having dinner, me drinking wine, the private room, but everything after that was a blur.

"So... after bringing me home, you

dn't leave?" I asked

slowly. "You stayed?"

"Yes," he replied. "I stayed."

The idea unsettled me. "You didn't go home at all?"

4/ took care of you," he said flatly. "All night." 22:19

ated before murmuring, "...Thank you."

It felt strange. He had been the one pushing me to drink, yet here he was expecting gratitude.

Then I remembered why I had agreed to drink in the first place.

"What about my uncle?" I asked quickly. "And the others?"

He chuckled lightly. "Jayden handled it. They'll be released soon."

I felt relieved as soon as he said those words. My shoulders relaxed. "Once they're out, my grandmother's condition should improve too."

He studied me for a moment before speaking again. "After everything they did to you - locking you up, letting you suffer – aren't you worried they'll come after you again?"

I fell silent. I understood that fear very well.

"They're not people I care about anymore," I said calmly¹⁹

"What about me?" he asked suddenly.

I blinked. "What?"

He leaned closer, hands resting on the bed. "Do you care about me?"

The question caught me off guard. His eyes looked demanding. "You wouldn't care if I was bothered? What if

I am?"

I bit my lip, inhaling slowly. "I care."

He looked genuinely surprised. "Why?"

"Because you're Alpha Stonewood," I answered honestly. "You control this city. One word from you can ruin or save someone. I can't afford to offend you."

The truth tasted bitter. Prison had taught me the price of offending powerful people.

His expression darkened instantly. "Can't afford to offend me?" he said coldly. "Then why didn't you think of that when you said you wouldn't stay by my side?"

6/8

22:19

head, forcing me to meet his eyes. His tone turned low, dangerous, almost teasing.

"Do you know what happened last night in this room?" he asked.

My heart skipped. "You said you wouldn't touch me."

"I did," he agreed. "But even if I had, so what?"

Fear crept into me before
I could stop it. My fingers clenched the blanket. My mind started spiraling.

His mood shifted. He released me and straightened.

"Relax. I didn't do anything to you," he said coolly. "You were the one clinging to me."

Relief hit me first then embarrassment. I was what? Hell

1. no.

"That's impossible," I denied.

"You were drunk. You don't remember pressing me onto
the bed and kissing me?"

7/8

22:20

+3 Bonus

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I couldn't meet his eyes.

The room fell silent. The place was heavy with tension
and memories neither of us was ready to face.

Chapter 177

BELLA'S POV

In order not to fall behind at work, I stuffed my half-
knitted gloves and wool into my bag and brought them along with me. During the afternoon break, while others rested or chatted, I sat quietly in a corner and continued knitting.

My fingers moved almost on instinct, looping yarn after
yarn together. It was something simple, repetitive, and calming. It was something that made my mind feel steady.

Jasmine noticed it almost immediately.

She leaned over, looking at me with curiosity.

"Are you knitting these for yourself?" she asked, lifting the gloves slightly. "They look a bit big though."

I paused for a second, then nodded.

Her eyebrows rose. "So it's a gift?" she pressed. "This definitely isn't your size. You're knitting it for someone else, aren't you?"

I hesitated, then nodded again.

Her eyes widened in excitement. "Don't tell me you ~~fall~~ have a boyfriend?"

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"No," I denied quickly, a little too quickly.

*4 Bonus

Jasmine clearly didn't believe me. She crossed her arms and looked at me with suspicion. "Then why are you so serious about knitting? You're even using your break time. Who does that for no reason?"

I looked back at the yarn. What could I say? That I was knitting for Kane? That I wanted to finish it as soon as possible because I didn't like leaving things unfinished, especially things tied to him? If I said that out loud, Jasmine would probably think I'd lost my mind.

I continued knitting in silence, pretending not to notice her staring at me.

After a moment, Jasmine sighed. "Speaking of which, it's really a pity about Justin."

My hands slowed. I had no idea what she was talking about.

"He's about to get his heart broken," she continued regretfully. "Honestly, Justin isn't a bad choice. He has a house, he's honest, and he's stable. Marrying someone like that means a peaceful life."

A peaceful life.

2/6

18:02

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+4 Bonus

If I married Justin, my life would indeed be peaceful. It would even be predictable. Life with him would be calm but the moment that poisoning incident happened all those years ago, my fate had already shifted. Stability was no longer something I could simply reach out and take.

"I hope he finds someone who can truly care for him," I said softly.

Jasmine nodded. "Still, I heard he wants to resign."

My knitting stopped completely. "Resign?"

"That's what people are saying," she replied. "This hospital may not be glamorous, but his position is permanent. People beg for jobs like that. Yet he actually wants to quit. It sounds unreal."

My thoughts tangled instantly. Was this because of me? Because of what I said that night? Had I hurt him that deeply?

I had only wanted him to stop wasting time on me. I never intended to push him into giving up his livelihood.

I couldn't sit still anymore.

I stood up abruptly, startling Jasmine, and headed straight for the transportation fleet office.

18:02

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When I found Justin, he was in the middle of handing over

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work. He looked busy. Still, I walked up to him.

"Can we talk alone for a moment?" I asked.

*4 Bonus

He glanced at me, then said a few words to his colleague before nodding. "Alright. My office."

The sanitation department wasn't large, but Justin had his own small office. I followed him inside, closed the door behind us, and didn't waste time.

"You're resigning?" I asked directly.

He froze for a brief second, then scratched his head awkwardly.

"So you've heard already," he said with a dry laugh. "Yeah. I submitted my resignation."

I felt shocked and a bit guilty "Is it because of what I said that night? You really don't have to take it to heart. Your job is good, and if you stay, you'll rise sooner or later."

He looked at me quietly. "But no matter how far I rise, I still won't catch your eye, will I?"

The words struck harder than I expected. It felt as though something lodged itself in my throat.

4/6

Justin laughed shortly after, but it sounded bitter "Actually,

18:02

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+4 Bonus

even

before that night, I'd thought about changing jobs. You can see the rest of your life at a glance in sanitation. I'm not even thirty yet. I want to try something else."

A challenge.

If this were years ago, I would've chosen that path without hesitation. Back then, uncertainty felt exciting. Only after losing everything did I learn how precious stability truly was

.

I took a deep breath. "What I said that day wasn't meant to hurt you. I just didn't want you to keep investing feelings in me. I don't feel that way about you."

I looked at him directly and spoke clearly. "If I truly loved someone, I'd stay even if they had nothing. But since I don't... even if you rise to the top, I still wouldn't choose you."

I saw the pain on his face, but he smiled almost immediately.

"That sounds just like you," he said softly. "I knew it. The woman I like wouldn't be shallow."

"Are you still quitting?" I asked. I didn't want him to throw away his future because of me

.

"Yes," he answered firmly. "This has always been my wish. Even if I fail, at least I'll have no regrets."

5/6

18.02

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+4 Bonus

There was no anger in his eyes. He looked like he had made his peace with it.

I knew then that nothing I said would change his mind. "Then... I wish you success."

"Thank you," he replied sincerely.

As I turned to leave, he spoke again. "Bella, you're a good woman. It's just my bad luck that I couldn't make you like me. Don't feel guilty. My resignation has nothing to do with you. just want to be someone who can give the woman I love a better life one day."

I left the office with a strange heaviness in my chest. It wasn't regret, and it wasn't relief either. It was something I couldn't describe, honestly.

The gloves in my bag felt heavier than before.

And for reasons I couldn't explain, I thought of Kane.

Chapter 178

BELLA'S POV

Two days later, Justin officially left the hospital. He resigned, got approval and cleared out his office.

The sanitation department organized a farewell party for him. It wasn't anything extravagant, just a lively gathering at a modest restaurant near the hospital.

Still, the atmosphere was warm and noisy. The place was filled with laughter, clinking glasses, and people talking over one another. Everyone came – drivers, cleaners, office staff – people Justin had worked with for years.

I arrived a little late and took an empty seat beside Jasmine. The place was packed.

"What took you so long?" Jasmine asked with a smile.

"Oh, I had some things to take care of"

Justin was already surrounded by people, smiling and talking as if nothing had changed. Yet I could sense it clearly. This was his last time sitting among them as one of their own.

Someone raised a glass and shouted, “To Justin! Don’t forget us when you become successful!”

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1. d) +4 Bonus

Justin laughed and stood up. “Don’t flatter me,” he said. “I’m just going out to struggle like everyone else. But I’ll remember all of you. If one day I really make it, I’ll treat everyone again.”

Everyone cheered and clapped around the table.

Jasmine leaned closer to me and whispered, “See? He’s taking it well.”

I nodded quietly. Justin looked relaxed, but I knew him well enough to understand that this calm was hard-earned. Leaving a stable job was never an easy decision.

As dishes were served, people began reminiscing. Someone joked about the time Justin had been splashed head to toe with dirty water. Another recalled how he once worked a double shift without complaining. Justin responded to each story with laughter, never denying or embellishing anything.

“Bella,” someone suddenly called out, “you should say something too. You worked with Justin for a long time

All eyes turned to me. It made my heart beat faster. Jasmine looked a bit concerned.

I paused for a second, then lifted my glass.

“Justin,” I said simply, “I hope the road ahead treats you

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kindly. You deserve a future that matches your effort.”

+4 Bonus

He looked at me, clearly surprised, then smiled. “Thank you. I’ll remember that.”

The meal lasted longer than expected. Afterward, Justin insisted on paying from his own pocket, no matter how much everyone protested.

“This is my farewell,” he said firmly. “Let me do this.”

Then, as if that wasn’t enough, he suggested going to karaoke.

“No backing out,” he added. “Who knows when we’ll be together like this again?”

So we went.

The karaoke room was noisy and bright, filled with flashing lights and overlapping songs. People sang terribly and laughed even harder. Justin sang a few old songs everyone knew. He didn’t even bother to hide the fact that he couldn’t sing.

When it was my turn, he handed me the microphone himself.

“Just one song,” he said lightly.

I

We spent the next few minutes, spinning and singing off key 2 actually laughed. I was enjoying myself a lot. It was fun. I felt...

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free.

I sang without much emotion, but the room applauded anyway. Jasmine immediately started teasing.

“Wow,” she said loudly, “you two look like you’re saying goodbye to an old romance.”

Justin laughed and waved it off. “Don’t talk nonsense.”

I smiled and returned the microphone. It felt strange – standing there, laughing alongside him, knowing this was probably the last time we would share this kind of moment.

When it got late, people gradually began to leave. Outside the karaoke building, everyone exchanged hugs and goodbyes.

Justin turned to me and hesitated before speaking. “Bella... can I drive you home this once?” he asked. “After today, I probably won’t get another chance.”

I looked at him for a long moment, then nodded. “Alright.”

This time, I didn’t refuse.

The ride was quiet. Streetlights passed by one after another. None of us said anything.

4/7

What was there to say?

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When we reached the gate of my neighborhood, he stopped the car. I unfastened my seatbelt then opened the door.

“I had fun tonight” I said “Thanks for the treat”

He smiled “I had fun too. I hope we can see each other again

I didn’t know about that.

I just smiled “I hope you get an even better job. Thanks for the ride. See you,” I said.

With that, I got down from the car and closed the door.

JUSTIN'S POV

I hesitated before replying, then said, “See you.”

Two simple words, yet they carried an ending I couldn’t deny.

I watched her step out of the car. Her figure was calm and composed, just like always. This chase had been doomed from the start, yet surprisingly, I felt no regret.

Bella lived a life far rougher than I had imagined. Most people would have been crushed by those ups and downs, but she endured them quietly.

5/7

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+4 Bonus

Her beauty was never loud. It wasn’t something that demanded attention. But once you noticed it, it stayed with you. Being close to her felt warm, as if that warmth went straight into the

soul.

I wanted to ask her something.

I wanted to know if there was already someone in her heart. And if there was... who that person was. Still, I knew it was none of my business.

But just as the question reached my lips, an image flashed through my mind. I remembered that man from before, the one who called her "sis." I couldn't help but think of the way he looked at her and the way he stood beside her. It confused me because that's not the way a brother looks at his sister.

The way he looked at her was possessive. It seemed protective....intimate.

If that man was the one she loved, then I truly had no place to ask.

I swallowed the question.

The current me didn't have that right.

Maybe one day, if I really succeeded – if I became someone, worthy enough – I might stand before her again with

18:02

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confidence.

I started the car.

And with that, I drove away.

Chapter 179

BELLA'S POV

When I reached home, something felt wrong before I even touched the door.

The lights were on.

I stopped in my tracks. My fingers tightened around my bag strap. Before I left in the morning, I had clearly turned everything off. The house was small. There was no mistake about it.

A chill crawled up my spine in that moment, the kind that came from years of learning how danger announced itself quietly.

I pushed the door open at once.

Light

flooded my vision as soon as I did and there – sitting calmly on a chair as *if* he owned the place – was Kane. Well, he technically did own the place. It was his cabin.

“You-” My voice caught before I could finish. I stepped inside and closed the door behind me. “It’s very late. I don’t mean to be rude but, why are you here?”

I was surprised, but not completely shocked. With hi 18:02

Chapter 179

(28) +4 Bonus

nothing ever felt accidental. Besides, I couldn’t stop him from coming to his childhood home.

He lifted his eyes slowly and looked me over from head to toe “That’s something I should be asking you, sis. You didn’t have overtime today, and you weren’t on duty. Why did you come back so late?”

The word sis sounded casual, but it got on my nerves. How did he know my schedule? Why do I even bother?

“A colleague resigned,” I replied e. “Everyone went out for a farewell meal.”

“Which colleague?” His tone remained flat, but his eyes got darker.

I hesitated for a heartbeat. Then I said it anyway. “Justin.”

If I didn’t say it, he would still find out. There was no point pretending otherwise.

His brows lifted a bit. “And let me guess,” he said. “He drove you home.”

I didn’t answer. I didn’t need to. My silence said enough.

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Kane stood up. He moved toward me, one slow step at a time. 278

The pressure in the room got thicker as he walked closer to me.

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+44 Bonus

"Sis," he said quietly, "are you still going to tell me you don't care about him? If you truly didn't, why would you let him drive you back again and again?"

I looked into his eyes, forcing myself to stay still. "To me, he's just a colleague. From today onward, he isn't even that anymore. Believe it or not, that's the truth."

He stopped right in front of me.

His eyes searched my face. He studied me closely, like he was weighing every breath I took. Under that stare, my lungs felt tight. I became painfully aware of my own heartbeat, of the sweat slowly forming in my palms.

I couldn't afford to care about Justin. If I did, it would only bring him trouble. The best thing I could do for him was indifference.

After a long moment, Kane smiled a bit. The pressure vanished as suddenly as it had appeared.

"Are you that nervous?" he asked softly. He reached out and took my hand before I could react, gently opening my clenched fingers. "Your palm is soaked."

I pulled my hand back at once. "Anyone would be nervous if you stared at them like that."

18:02

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+4 Bonus

I set my bag down and turned away from him. "It's late. I want to sleep."

It was a polite dismissal. If he had something to say, he should say it quickly. If not, he should leave.

"Sleep well," he said calmly.

I paused. "What about you?"

"I'll stay here."

I turned so fast my head hurt. "You're staying here?"

He looked at me as if my reaction amused him. “Didn’t I used to stay here before? Every night, didn’t we sleep under the same roof? It’s my house, remember?”

The way he said it made my ears heat up.

“But now-”

“What about now?” he asked.

“There’s no spare bedding,” I said “Your things from before are still here, but they haven’t been washed.”

“That’s easy to solve.”

4/8

18:02

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*4 Borut

He took out his phone and typed a few short commands. Less than a minute later, there was a knock on the door.

I opened it and froze.

Jayden stood there, along with several bodyguards I recognized from the hospital. They were all holding bedding – blankets, pillows, clean sheets. One by one, they walked in politely.

“Ms. Jameson, sorry for the disturbance.” They each said.

Every single one of them said the same thing.

I forced a stiff smile. “It’s... fine.”

What else could I say?

They moved quickly. They set up and laid a bed neatly on the floor beside mine. When they were done, they left just as quietly as they had come. The door closed, and once again, it was just the two of us.

“You always bring pack mates and bodyguards to run errands?” I asked.

Kane looked at me calmly. “Efficiency saves time.”

5/8

18:03

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&

+4 Bonus

I glanced at the bed on the floor. It looked exactly like before.

Back then, he had slept beside me too.

“You really want to sleep here?” I asked hesitantly.

“Of course,” he replied without pause. “Why wouldn’t I?”

I couldn’t tell whether this was a joke to him. He had

—

everything – power, wealth, space. Yet he chose to squeeze into this tiny cabin with me.

Why? Was he still playing a game?

I looked at the floor. I had no strength left to argue.

I took my clothes and headed for the bathroom. Suddenly, arms wrapped around me from behind.

“Just tonight,” he said quietly. “I only want to stay one night. Today is his birthday.”

My body froze “Who?”

He didn’t answer.

Instead, he lowered his head into
the crook of my neck. I felt his breath on my skin. The feeling made me shiver. His voice
678 dropped as he spoke, sending goosebumps through my arms.

18:03

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“Let me stay tonight. Just like before, alright, sis?”

My heart shook violently.

“Sis,” he murmured again.

I closed my eyes. “Just one night?”

“Just one,” he promised.

“...Alright.”

Just one night.

+4 Boous

I

told myself it was repayment for saving me, for pulling me out of that nightmare, for taking me to the hospital when my own blood had tried to destroy me. If he hadn't appeared that day, I didn't dare think of the outcome.

He was too close. His presence was overwhelming. He was intense in a way that stirred things I didn't want stirred.

I slipped out of his arms and went into the bathroom, closing the door behind me.

I stared at myself in the mirror.

I looked the same, yet different. I looked thinner. The years

had carved away softness I once had.

I took a slow breath.

Just one night.

That was all.

Chapter 180

BELLA'S POV

When I got to the bathroom, I stared at my reflection for a long moment after coming out of the bathroom. My thoughts drifted back to the past before I could stop them.

When times had been good, I had eaten well and slept well. My body had been fuller then. I used to be healthy and curvier. I had even complained about my curves, countin

g calories, forcing myself to work out, worrying about how I looked in clothes. Thinking about it now, I almost wanted to laugh.

Back then, I had been afraid of gaining weight. Now, I was afraid of wasting money on clothes that would tear easily or wear out too fast. I no longer cared about how something made me look. I cared about price, durability, and whether it would last me through another winter. I had become thin without trying. There was no need to diet anymore. Life had done that part for me.

I actually preferred how I used to look. But preference meant nothing. Life had already chosen for me.

you

wanted

It was strange how people changed. When something desperately, you would exhaust yourself chasing it/When you finally got it or lost it, you realized it no longer8:03

mattered. Maybe that was life. Maybe disappointment was the

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only constant we were all promised. I let out a quiet, self-mocking laugh that echoed in the bathroom.

Then my thoughts drifted, against my will, to Kane.

+4 Bonus

I still could not understand why he insisted on calling me “sis.” Every single time. As if that word held some meaning he refused to let go of. Sometimes, the way he looked at me made it seem like he cared deeply, like he missed the days we spent together in that small, broken world we once shared. Other times, I wondered if it was all just an act.

He was good at hiding things. He always had been.

I shook my head, forcing myself to stop thinking. Overthinking had never saved me before.

I stepped out of the bathroom and saw him sitting on the mattress laid neatly on the floor beside my bed. Just like before. His back was straight. He had not laid down yet. He was waiting.

Back then, he always waited for me to say goodnight.

The memory made my chest tighten.

I walked over and said “Goodnight.”

2/6

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The word felt foreign on my tongue. Before he could respond, I

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climbed onto my bed and pulled the blanket over myself,

-4 Bonus

turning slightly to the side. I wanted this night to pass quickly. I wanted sleep to come and take away the tension I felt spreading through my veins.

But before I could close my eyes, I felt his presence draw

closer.

“Sis,” he said quietly. “It seems you haven’t called me once tonight. I want to hear you say it.”

My throat tightened instantly.

If I turned my back to him, it would be obvious. Too obvious. But if I faced him... I did not trust myself to remain calm.

“What is it?” he continued. “Didn’t you agree? Tonight *is* just like the past.”

I bit my lower lip. I had no idea what to say. My heart was beating out of control now.

“Kane,” I said at last, forcing the name out, “goodnight.”

The room fell silent.

It had only been a month since I found out who he truly was, yet it felt like years had passed. Like an entire lifetime had been 3/6 compressed into those weeks. He leaned closer, lowering

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his head slightly.

I understood immediately.

In the past, before sleeping, I always ran my fingers through his hair. I used to joke that his hair was unfairly soft, that it made me jealous. Somewhere along the way, touching his head had become a habit, something we both relied on without even knowing it.

Slowly, I raised my hand and placed it on his head.

My fingers slid into his hair, gently rubbing his scalp the way I used to. His hair was still the same. It felt thick and familiar. But my heart was not. Every nerve in my body was on edge.

He leaned into my palm and murmured, "As expected... being here with you still gives me peace, Sis."

Peace?

The word felt like mockery.

My pulse raced. His presence did the exact opposite to me. There was no peace. Only tension wound so tightly it hurt to breathe.

After a moment, he went back to his mattress and reached for 476 the switch.

18:03

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"Don't turn it off," I said quickly.

He paused and looked at me.

I spoke "If the lights are off, I'm afraid I won't be able to sleep."

He studied me silently for a few seconds "Alright. I'll leave them on."

I released a breath I hadn't realized I was holding and closed my eyes, turning onto my side.

Time passed. I wasn't sure how long.

Then his voice broke the silence again.

"Bella" he said quietly, "have you ever hated someone?"

He didn't wait for my answer.

"I have," he continued. "I hated that person so much that I imagined revenge thousands of times. I even chose the day." His tone got lower. "Even now, my heart feels restless. But when I'm here with you, it finally calms down."

I remained still. My eyes were closed. My body felt rigid as I listened to him.

5/6

18:03

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After a pause, he spoke again. His tone got darker "I want to see him again someday. So I can make him feel it. Betrayal, torture and pain delivered by someone you love. That kind of pain destroys you from the inside."

My body shook as he spoke.

A loved one.

The words echoed in my mind. I remembered what he had once said about his father. About his mother's death. If it was true... then the person he wanted revenge on was someone terrifyingly close to him.

I thought of prison, of cages and of helplessness.

Then he said softly, "Sis... in this lifetime, don't ever become someone I hate. Okay?"

The words hit me hard in that moment.

It felt as if all the blood in my body had been blown away in an instant.

What did he mean by that?