

Through Rising Fog We Walk Paths Unknown Yet Comforting

Chapter 181

KANE'S POV

I sat in the back seat of the car. I kept my eyes closed as the city moved past outside the tinted windows. One hand rose to my forehead, rubbing slowly.

I had barely slept the entire night. Even after she had finally fallen asleep, I couldn't rest. I stood beside her bed for a long time, watching her face in sleep.

I had never understood why people liked to watch others sleep. It had always seemed pointless to me. Weak. But when it came to her, I found myself standing there far longer than necessary. Her lashes rested quietly against her cheeks. Her whole body looked finally relaxed in a way it rarely was when she was awake.

I could have stood there until morning and not grown tired of looking.

"Alpha," Jayden's voice sounded from the driver's seat. "Are we returning to the house first?"

"Mhm," I answered flatly.

The car continued moving. Then, halfway there, Jayden's 18:03 phone rang. I opened my eyes just as I felt the car slow down a

< Chapter 181

\$4 Bonus

bit. He answered the call and from the look of things, it seemed pretty serious. After a few seconds, his expression shifted. He ended the call quickly and looked at me through the rearview mirror.

"Sir," he said carefully, "Alpha Allen's condition has worsened. The doctors have started emergency life-saving procedures. Do you want to go to the hospital?"

For a moment, I said nothing.

Then I opened my eyes fully. "Turn around."

Jayden didn't hesitate. The car made a clean turn and headed straight for the hospital.

When we arrived, the emergency room lights were still on. I stepped out of the car and stood in the corridor. Inside, doctors and nurses moved quickly.

Standing there, I thought of my grandfather and his condition.

No matter how strong a wolf was, no matter how powerful his bloodline, death did not care. As age crept in, even regeneration and healing weakened. The body slowed. The beast faded.

18:03

My grandfather had always seemed untouchable to me. He was strong and cold. He was a man who ruled with iron and never

< Chapter 181

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+4 Bonus

looked back. He had loved only one person in his life – his daughter, my mother, who had died young. To everyone else, including me, he had been distant.

I was never his grandson in his eyes. I was his successor meant to inherit the Stonewood pack.

There had never been warmth between us. Not really. It was more like expectation.

Two hours passed before the emergency room doors finally opened. A doctor stepped out, looking tired.

"We managed to save him," he said. "But Master Stonewood is old. He's undergone several major procedures before. From now on, it's only a matter of time. If things go well, he might have a few years. If not... a few months."

I nodded once. I understood. Money, power, and authority meant nothing in the face of time.

My grandfather was moved into the ICU.

Two days later, he was transferred out for observation, and I finally stood face to face with him.

He lay on the hospital bed, looking thinner than I remembered. His skin was pale. His eyes were clouded but they were still sharp. When he saw me, he spoke first.

18:03

< Chapter 181

*4 Bonus

"I heard you waited outside the emergency room while they were saving me," he said. His voice was weaker than ever before. It was weaker than I had ever heard it.

"Yes," I replied simply.

He let out a breath that sounded like a laugh. "It must have been troublesome, waiting for an old man like me."

I looked at him calmly. "You had someone notify me that you wanted to see me. I doubt you called me here just to say that."

He motioned for the nurse to help him drink some water, then waved for everyone else to leave. When the ward was empty, he looked at me again.

"I investigated that woman," he said slowly. "Bella. A woman like her does not suit you. Choose someone else. Any high-born female from a ranking pack would be better. There are at least fifty suitable candidates within Stonewood alone."

"It's not your place to decide who suits me," I said firmly. "That's my decision."

The air between us got thicker.

He coughed twice, then sighed deeply. "You've grown beyond what I expected."

477

18:03

< Chapter 181

+4 Bonus

I could hear it clearly. The beast he had raised was no longer something he could control.

"You really think she suits you?" he asked quietly.

"Does that matter?" I countered.

"Then tell me the truth. Do you love her?"

He looked at me.

I had always known my answer before. Love was weakness. Love was pain. I had watched what it did to my parents. I had sworn never to fall into the same trap.

But now, the words refused to come easily.

"I don't know," I said at last.

His eyes widened slightly.

In the Stonewood family, women were tools. They were treated like wombs for heirs. Nothing more. Love was forbidden.

"You..." His breathing grew uneven. I saw the anger flashing across his face.

18:03

Trying to change the subject "The doctor said you might live a 5/7

< Chapter 181

few more years if you take care of yourself."

He laughed harshly. "No wonder you're my grandson. You really have feelings for her. Have you forgotten your father? Your mother?"

"I won't let a woman control my life," I said.

"She said the same thing," he snapped. "And look what happened. She died!"

"I am not her," I replied coldly.

I stepped closer and leaned down so we were eye to eye. "Don't confuse me with my mother."

The tension between us grew heavy with the growl of two Alpha wolves locked in silent confrontation.

Finally, he spoke again. "Then what? Are you going to marry her?"

"You say that like it's such a bad thing"

If I had to spend my life with a woman, Bella was not a bad choice. I enjoyed her presence. I was drawn to her gentleness and how strong she was. I wanted her. I wanted to hide her away from the world. The thought of another man touching her made something dark spread in my chest.

18:03

< Chapter 181

44 Bonus

"I've checked," he said. "She knows your identity, yet she still lives like a commoner. She doesn't want you."

"That will change," I said calmly. "If I want a woman, she will be willing."

He coughed and grabbed a stack of documents, throwing them toward me. Papers scattered across the floor.

"Will she still be willing," he said, "when she learns the truth? That the poisoning was part of a power struggle you were involved in? That she was nothing but a victim?"

I picked up a few pages and read through them.

"What will Bella think when she finds out?" he pressed.

I felt my eyes turn cold. "She won't."

He scoffed. "You think you can hide it forever?"

"She will never know," I said quietly. "Right, Grandfather?"

Chapter 182

BELLA'S POV

(4)+4 Bonus

Over the weekend, I took the bus to the hospital where my grandmother was being treated. The ride was long and crowded, and I could still smell the disinfectant in my clothes from work, but none of that mattered to me. All I thought about was her condition. Ever since I heard she had been hospitalized, I was worried.

When I pushed open the door to her ward, I stopped short.

The room was full.

Relatives stood and sat everywhere. Some leaned against the walls. Others gathered near the bed. The moment they saw me, the air shifted. Their eyes turned toward me at once, filled with complicated emotions I knew too well – fear, resentment, hatred, and something close to guilt. Uncle Ben, Aunt Elena, Uncle Frank and their families were all there. They stared at me as if I were a dangerous animal that had walked into the

room.

If they were to turn on me right now, they could probably tear me apart.

I didn't lower my head. I didn't greet them either. I won't be here for them.

< Chapter 182

My eyes went straight to the hospital bed.

+4 Bonus

"Bella..." my grandmother called out weakly when she saw me. Her voice trembled as if it took all her strength to speak. "Come here. Let me take a good look at you."

I

walked to her bedside and took her hand. Her skin felt thin and cold. Her bones felt fragile beneath my fingers. My throat tightened.

"Grandmother," I said softly.

She held my hand tightly, as if afraid I would disappear. Her eyes reddened.

"I know... I know you suffered. I'm sorry you had to go through all of that." She said.

"It's alright," I said quietly. "I just want you to get better."

Before she could speak again, Aunt Angela suddenly scoffed. "Mom, what exactly did she go through? We're the ones who suffered, okay? We were locked up for so long because of her!"

I felt my grandmother's fingers stiffen around mine.

"You're the one with the nerve to say that!" my grandmother snapped, turning her head to glare at her. Her eyes were

18:03

< Chapter 182

intense despite her illness. "If it weren't for your greed, would things have come to this?"

The room fell silent.

Aunt Angela's face darkened. She clearly didn't want to accept what my grandmother was saying. She opened her mouth to argue again, but other relatives hurriedly stepped in, pulling her aside and murmuring for her to stop. Someone laughed awkwardly, trying to smooth things over.

My grandmother continued holding my hand, talking to me in a low voice.

"How's work going?" she asked me softly.

I smiled at her "It's fine, grandma"

"Are you tired? You look it. Are you eating properly?"

"Of course, grandma"

We kept talking for a few more minutes but she was still sick. Before long, her eyelids drooped, and her grip weakened.

The nurse came in and politely asked everyone to leave so the patient could rest.

3/7

18:04

Outside the ward, some relatives left first, pretending they had

< Chapter 182

+4 Bonus

other matters to attend to. The rest stayed in the corridor. My grandma's husband, Old Mr. Turner, cleared his throat.

"Although your grandmother's illness is being maintained for now, the medical expenses are still quite high," he said. "How about this? Everyone contributes a bit. If we share the cost, it won't be too much for anyone."

As soon as he finished speaking, Uncle Ben, Uncle Frank and Aunt Elena, all turned their eyes toward me at the same time.

In that instant, I understood everything.

So that was why they had called me here.

My heart grew cold.

Uncle Frank wasted no time. "Dad, you know our situation. I don't have money. I can barely afford my son's wedding. Otherwise, Charlie wouldn't still be unmarried."

"Yes, Dad," Ben added quickly. "We're poor too."

Then he turned to me. I saw the bitterness written plainly on his face. "Bella, *if* our family hadn't been poor, would we have married you into the Gomez pack back then?"

I laughed softly. "So just because you were poor, you had the 04 477 right to sell me to a monster?"

< Chapter 182

He froze.

"Just because you were poor," I continued calmly, "you thought you could decide my fate?"

+4 Bonus

Frank frowned deeply. "Your cousins aren't even married yet. They need to carry on the Turner Pack line. Your grandmother has always been kind to you. Don't you want to repay her? Besides," he added cruelly, "you've been to prison. You should be grateful someone was willing to marry you."

"My grandmother is the one who was kind to me," I said evenly. "Not you. Why should I repay you with my body?"

The words came out calm, but inside, I was boiling with anger. Some people were truly shameless. They only knew how to take, never how to give.

"Well," Elena said smugly, seizing the moment, "since you yourself said it's your grandmother who's good to you, then it's only right that you bear part of her medical expenses."

She looked proud, as if she had caught me in a trap.

I said nothing. I only looked at her quietly.

She seemed encouraged and continued, "You should have told us earlier that you know such an important person. We

18:04

< Chapter 182

+4 Bonus

wouldn't have misunderstood you. We were only thinking about your future. We wanted you to have someone to rely on."

My cousin Jenny crossed her arms and sneered with jealousy flashing in her eyes. "You're really lucky, Bella. You even managed to know such a big shot. Does he know you went to prison? Or are you hiding it from him?"

I smiled but my eyes were cold.

Elena sighed dramatically and patted Jenny's arm, then turned back to me. "Since you have someone backing you now, that's your ability. You shouldn't be short of money. Why don't you take care of all your grandmother's medical expenses? We're always coming back and forth to the hospital, accompanying her. You should reimburse us for travel and meals. She also needs someone to help her eat, drink, and use the toilet. We'll need to hire a caretaker. All in all, about two hundred thousand a year. If the expenses increase later, we'll discuss it then."

She spoke smoothly, as if everything had already been decided.

Turner nodded. "Let's do it this way then. Bella, transfer two hundred thousand to Frank uncle later."

I looked at them one by one. Their eyes were filled with expectation and greed.

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< Chapter 182

"I will do no such thing" I said flatly.

Chapter 183

BELLA'S POV

I watched their faces change the moment I said no. It was almost fascinating how quickly greed peeled away whatever mask they had been wearing.

Aunt Elena was the first to lose control. Her eyes widened, her mouth fell open, and she blurted out, "What do you mean by that?"

I looked at her calmly. My voice stayed steady, cold even. "It means I'm not giving you two hundred thousand."

The corridor outside the ward suddenly felt tight, like the walls were closing in on me. My relatives stared at me as if I had just slapped them. I continued without raising my voice. "I never said I knew any big shot. And even if I did, my grandmother is your mother. She didn't give birth to me alone. Don't you think it's ridiculous to demand that a granddaughter cover your travel expenses, your meals, and all of Grandmother's medical bills? What exactly do you think I am?"

Elena scoffed, clearly offended. Before she could respond, my grandfather frowned deeply and said, "Bella, you're wrong. Frank and Ben saw it with their own eyes. That day, the big shot personally carried you out of your intended husband's place. You expect us to believe that meant nothing?"

19:28

< Chapter 183

20 min left

Their words hit me like something sour rising in my throat. I felt no fear anymore. All I felt was bitter clarity.

I smiled at him coldly. "I don't know anything about a big shot," I said slowly. "All I remember is being drugged by my relatives, my uncles especially."

The air froze.

I continued. My tone was almost mocking. "Maybe that man just couldn't stand watching people cheat their own niece. If Frank and Ben remember him so well, why don't you tell me who he is? I'll go thank him personally."

They exchanged uneasy glances. For the first time, I saw doubt on their faces.

They wondered how I knew about this. I could feel the questions in their mind – Did I really not know? Or was I pretending?

My grandfather's brows knitted together. His voice grew heavy. "Bella, your grandmother only fell ill because you reported your uncles and aunt to the police. If you hadn't done that, none of this would have happened."

I felt something twist inside my chest. It wasn't pain, but disbelief. I looked straight at him. "Grandfather, I was the victim. The police were doing their job. If Uncle Ben, Uncle Frank and Aunt Elena hadn't conspired to sell me and have me raped, they would never have been arrested. That's trafficking.

< Chapter 183

20 min left

They should still be in prison. If you believe I wronged them, we can go to the police together and let them decide.”

My grandfather’s face got darker. My aunts and uncles visibly trembled. They all remembered what it was like inside that police station – the fear, the waiting, the humiliation. None of them wanted to go back.

He glared at me “So you won’t give a single cent?”

I looked into his eyes without flinching. “No.”

“And are you not afraid,” he said coldly, “that your grandmother will be driven out of the hospital if there’s no money to treat her?”

That was the moment I knew exactly how far they were willing to go.

I inhaled slowly and answered without hesitation. “If money is really the issue, Grandmother still has the demolition compensation. The house you live in is joint property. She owns half of it. Based on current estimates, that’s about a million. Her share alone is five hundred thousand. You can mortgage it now and repay the loan when the compensation is released.”

Their faces turned pale, one by one. I could see the calculation spinning wildly in their eyes.

Frank suddenly exploded. “What does the demolition money

< Chapter 183

20 min left

have to do with you? You’re only a maternal relative! How dare you talk about that!”

I looked at him calmly. “So you do remember that I’m just a maternal relative. Then why are you asking me to pay everything?”

I straightened my back. “I will pay one quarter of my grandmother’s medical expenses. I will pay it directly to the hospital. I will not give money to any of you. And if any of you neglect her care, I will take this to court.”

The argument broke out immediately.

"This is outrageous!" Elena shouted.

"You're heartless!" Frank snapped.

"You've changed since prison," Jenny muttered bitterly.

I let them talk. I had heard worse behind bars. When they finally paused, sounding breathless and angry, I said quietly, "I've changed because I learned how to survive."

I turned and walked away without looking back.

Third Person's POV

The Turner family stood frozen in the hallway as Bella left. They were all in disbelief.

< Chapter 183

20 min left

"Dad," Frank asked carefully, "Bella's only paying one quarter. What about the rest?"

Old Mr. Turner's face was dark with anger. "Then I'll say the illness can't be cured and bring your mother home. Let's see if Bella still refuses."

"But what if she sues us?" Ben asked nervously.

Frank swallowed hard. "She was a top medical student. She used to be a doctor. She might still have her connection. And the man backing her... that Alpha. If his pack steps in, we're finished."

Old Mr. Turner rubbed his chin. His expression turned ugly. "Then the three of you cover the rest."

"You want us to pay?" Elena exclaimed.

"What choice do we have?" he snapped. "If she sues, you won't get a single cent from the demolition compensation."

Silence fell.

Elena clenched her fists. The expropriation money was their last hope. If Bella went to court, she might even claim a share.

In the end, they could only look at each other helplessly and agree to pool the money between the three families.

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Chapter 184

BELLA'S POV

I returned to my grandmother's ward quietly. She had already fallen asleep. Her breathing was shallow but steady. I watched how her thin chest rose and fell under the blanket. I sat down beside the bed and watched her face in silence.

When I was young, she had been the one who protected me. Back then, before I was sent to live with my grandfather's side of the family, it was my grandmother who stood between me and the cruelty of others. She fed me, shielded me, and spoke up for me when no one else would. Now she was old, frail, and lying in a hospital bed, and it was my turn to protect her.

Wolves were strong. They could be fierce and dominant. But even wolves aged. Their claws faded. Their bones weakened, and their power faded with time. In a true pack, the strong protected the weak, the young respected the old, and no one was abandoned. That was something I had always admired about pack life. It had loyalty and belonging.

My own family had never understood that.

From my father, to my stepmother, to my stepsister, to my uncles and aunts, they had taken from me endlessly. Money. Time. Dignity.

They had even tried to trade my body to save themselves.

Chapter 184

20 min left

Thinking about it still made my stomach twist. The resentment ran deep.

But my grandmother was different.

She was kind. She was gentle. She had never once asked me for anything in return.

If I

truly had the money, I would have paid all her medical expenses without hesitation. I did not care about fairness where she was concerned. But I couldn't afford it. I was earning minimum wage. My days were spent measuring meals, and calculating bus fares. I barely had enough to survive, let alone shoulder hospital bills.

I reached out and gently held her hand. Her skin felt cold.

“Just hold on a little longer,” I whispered, though I wasn’t sure if she could hear me. “I’ll figure something out.”

Today, I had mentioned the expropriation compensation on purpose.

I hoped that my grandfather and my uncles would at least treat her properly now that money was involved. If they dared to neglect her, I would fight them to the end. I would use the compensation, the law, anything I could to protect her remaining years.

For now, though, there was very little I could do.

Time passed without me noticing. Outside the window, the sky

<Chapter 184

19 min left

slowly darkened from gray to deep blue. It was only when the nurse came in to check the ward that I finally stood up and left quietly.

As I walked out of the inpatient section, my thoughts were heavy and scattered. That was when I saw him.

Eric.

He was walking out of the clinic area alone. There was no assistant, no entourage. It was just him. I stopped in my tracks, genuinely stunned. I had never imagined I would run into him here.

He noticed me at the same time. His eyes brightened up a bit when he saw me and a small smile appeared on his face as he walked toward me.

“Hey Bella. What a coincidence,” he said lightly.

“It really is,” I replied.

I stepped around him, intending to leave.

Before I could take two steps, he reached out and stopped me. His hand didn’t touch me, but it blocked my path.

“About last time,” he said, “I invited you to dinner and caused you some trouble there. How about this? I’ll treat you to another meal today. Consider it an apology.”

Chapter 184

19 min left

I knew exactly what he was referring to. Sarah. His ex-girlfriend. The encounter had been uncomfortable, to say the least.

I looked at him for a moment, then said, "You don't need to apologize. Things like that happen."

He studied my face, as if trying to read my thoughts. I suddenly remembered something and spoke before I could stop myself. "What happened to your ex-girlfriend?"

The moment the words left my mouth, I regretted them. Why did I ask that? It wasn't in my place to ask.

Eric did not seem surprised. He shrugged casually. "Nothing much. She did things she shouldn't have done. Naturally, she had to bear the consequences."

His tone was indifferent. But my heart skipped a beat.

Consequences.

What did he mean by that?

That single word carried weight. In his world, consequences were never gentle.

Had Sarah been silenced? Forced out of the spotlight? Erased from the media?

Chapter 184

19 min left

I had noticed that there was no news about her anymore. No interviews. No scandals. No updates. It was as if she had vanished overnight.

A man like

Eric, like Kane, did not solve problems the way ordinary people did. Power was their language. Authority was their weapon. If Sarah had been stripped of her career, her fame, her wealth, that alone was a brutal punishment.

Luxury spoiled people. Once someone tasted it, it would be unbearable to return to a plain life. I doubted Sarah would handle that kind of fall well.

Eric looked at me closely. "What? Are you feeling sympathetic toward her?" he asked. "She wasn't exactly polite to you that day."

"I'm not sympathizing," I replied calmly. "And I don't think she would want my sympathy anyway." I paused, then added, "You also don't need to treat me to a meal. I need to catch the bus back to the city."

"I still want to treat you," he said

"Are you planning to use force to make me eat with you?"

He chuckled softly. "I don't like using force. But using it occasionally isn't such a bad thing."

Before I could react, he grabbed my hand and started pulling me

< Chapter 184

toward the parking lot. I looked at our hands in shock.

19 min left

"Eric, what are you doing?" I asked in a low voice, trying to keep calm.

"Having a meal with you," he replied casually.

Something felt off. If a man like him wanted company, countless women would volunteer without hesitation. There was no

reason for him to force me.

We reached his car quickly. He opened the passenger door, clearly expecting me to get in.

I pulled my hand back and met his gaze. "Mr Simpson, I really don't have time. If I miss the last bus, I won't be able to go home tonight."

I stood my ground, waiting for him to answer me.

Chapter 185-1

BELLA'S POV

"If you really don't wanna have this meal with me," he said calmly, "I can guarantee you won't catch a single bus tonight."

My throat tightened. I knew what he was capable of. If he wanted to block every route out of this town, it would take him nothing more than a phone call. I believed him without doubt.

"Why must I eat with you?" I asked. "If this is about apologizing for last time, this is too much."

"Because I have questions," he replied simply.

Questions.

Finally, I opened the passenger door and got in. Fighting him now would only make me even more tired than I was.

I had survived three years in prison. I had learned when resistance was useful and when it was pointless.

People like him could change another person's fate with ease.

Sarah was the best example. She had disappeared from the public eye as if she had never existed. Compared to her, I was insignificant. I was just a sanitation worker. A woman with a criminal record. If he truly wanted to erase me, it would be even

Chapter 185-1

easier.

19 min left

The car door shut. The interior was quiet and clean looking. Eric started the engine smoothly. Then the car started moving.

"Why were you at the hospital?" Eric suddenly asked, breaking the silence.

"My grandmother is sick," I replied. "I went to see her."

Even if I refused to answer, a man like him could easily investigate. There was no point hiding it.

"Does your grandmother live in this town?" he asked.

"Yes."

"Then you lived here to

"For a while," I said. "When I was little, I stayed with my grandmother. I also lived with my grandfather's pack for some time. Later, my grandfather took me to the city so I could attend school."

"I see." He hesitated briefly, then asked, "When you lived here as a child, did anything unusual happen?"

I turned to look at him. His hands tightened slightly around the steering wheel.

19 min left

"I don't understand what you mean by 'unusual,'" I replied. "I was very young back then. Even if something happened, I either wouldn't have understood it or I would have forgotten it."

He did not respond.

The rest of the drive was silent. The car eventually stopped in front of a small restaurant. The moment I saw the sign, I recognized it.

It was a local hole-in-the-wall restaurant.

Most of the people who ate here were townsfolk. Outsiders rarely came. This place was old, simple, and far from polished. But it had been here for decades. When I was a child, it already existed. My grandmother used to bring me here often when she had a little extra money.

I looked at Eric in surprise. I hadn't expected him to know this place at all.

"The food here is decent," he said as he got out of the car. "The environment's rough, but it's honest." He looked at me "You lived here before. Have you eaten here?"

"Yes," I answered.

"Did you like it?"

"It's good," I said truthfully. "Cheap, filling, and some dishes are

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19 min left

hard to find elsewhere."

I assumed this kind of food would be beneath him. He was used to luxury yet he seemed to like it. Together, we walked in

The boss looked up and immediately smiled. "Alpha Simpson, you're here again. I always know you'll come around this time every year." He then looked to me. "And this is...?"

"A friend," Eric said simply.

The boss laughed. "That's rare. You don't usually bring friends. Same as usual?"

“A bit more than usual,” Eric replied. “You decide.”

The boss nodded cheerfully and went back to the kitchen.

Eric led me to a table near the window. I sat down slowly. My thoughts were unsettled.

“Every year, around this time, I come here for a meal,” Eric said quietly after we sat down. “And every year, on this same day, I go to that hospital and stay there for a while.”

“So that’s how it is,” I said softly.

I had a strange feeling that he had said those words deliberately, as if he wanted me to hear them, as if he wanted to see my reaction. Eric’s ink-black eyes were fixed on me. His eyes were

< Chapter 185-1

2 19 min left

focused on me, like they could see straight through my thoughts.

“Back then, I was separated from someone in that hospital,” he said calmly. “That person once told me she really liked the food here. So every year, on the day we were separated, I come back to sit here and eat.”

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Chapter 185-2

For a moment, I didn’t know what to say. The noise of the restaurant faded into the background. I looked at him carefully, trying to imagine a p

ast version of this man, someone younger, standing in a hospital hallway and losing someone important.

“Then,” I said slowly, “that person must mean a great deal to you.”

“Yes,” he replied. “Very important. To me, her life is almost as important as my own.”

His tone was flat, as if he were stating an obvious fact. Yet his words stunned me.

I had always thought that someone like Eric – an Alpha who moved through women easily, who could discard an ex-girlfriend without blinking – was incapable of this kind of attachment. In my mind, powerful men were often detached, even cold.

“Since she’s so important,” I asked quietly, “haven’t you tried to find her?”

“I have,” he said. “Of course I have. But back then, many places in this town didn’t have surveillance cameras. And I only started searching after several days had passed. By then, the trail was already cold.”

< Chapter 185-2

I heard the regret in his eyes.

19 min left

I wondered how many years he had spent looking for that person. How many faces he had scanned in crowds. How many disappointments he had.

“Then,” I said gently, “I hope you can find her soon.”

“Yes,” he replied. “I hope so too.”

He paused, then shifted the topic

What about you? When you lived in this town, did you ever have any special experiences? For example... saving someone. Or telling someone that the food here is really good.”

I couldn’t help but

laugh. “I probably told many people that this place serves good food,” I said honestly. “But the locals all know that already. As for saving someone... I don’t think so.”

At least, I couldn’t remember anything like that.

“You really didn’t?” he asked.

“Alpha Simpson,” I asked, meeting his gaze, “are you hoping that I did save someone?”

For a brief second, I saw sadness in his eyes. It vanished quickly, but I saw it.

So it wasn't me.

<Chapter 185-2

19 min left

Maybe from the very beginning, he had only suspected it was me. When he first saw me, maybe my face had reminded him of a memory from years ago. But memories from childhood were unreliable. The girl from his past would have been much younger then.

"You're not her," he said casually

The words caught me off guard.

Eric picked up his chopsticks. "Alright. Let's eat. Want some wine?"

My mind immediately flashed back to the time I had been drunk in front of Kane. I shook my head "No. I'll just have a regular drink."

Eric nodded then asked the boss to bring two bottles of soda instead.

"You're not drinking wine either? I raised an eyebrow.

"Not here," he replied calmly. "Just in case someone tries to poison me."

I froze for a split second.

Then he continued casually, "That reminds me. You went to prison because of poisoning, didn't you? And driving under the

< Chapter 185-2

influence."

His words were blunt, almost careless.

"Yes," I said after a brief pause. "That's why I work at the hospital now."

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"Do you want me to speak to them?" he asked. "I can arrange a better position for you. This one must be stressful"

I looked at him in shock. Why would he want to do that?

"No need," I refused immediately

A favor from someone like him was not something I wanted to owe. There would be too many strings attached.

He frowned. It seemed like he wasn't used to being rejected.

I focused on the rice in my bowl. Even without looking up, I could feel eyes on me from time to time.

After a while, the meal finally ended.

"I'll drive you back," Eric said.

"No need," I replied. "I'll take the bus."

"If you run now," he said calmly, "can you still catch one?"

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long gone. The train would not run again until morning.

"I'll drive you," he said. "If you don't want that, you can figure something else out."

I thought about it. There was no other solution.

"Then... thank you," I said awkwardly.

We got back into the car. I sat in the passenger seat, watching the night scenery pass by outside the window.

An old song played softly on the radio, repeating over and over.

"I know this song," I said quietly. It's my grandmother's favorite."

Eric nodded.

As I listened to the song, my eyes dropped. I was exhausted.

Before I realized it, sleep began to pull me under.

Chapter 186

at him

For a moment, I didn't know what to say. The noise of the restaurant faded into the background. I carefully, trying to imagine a past version of uns man, someone younger, standing in a hospital hallway and losing someone important.

“Then,” I said slowly, “that person must mean a great deal to you.”

“Yes,” he replied. “Very important. To me, her life is almost as important as my own.”

His tone was flat, as if he were stating an obvious fact. Yet his words stunned me.

I

had always thought that someone like Eric – an Alpha who moved through women easily, who could discard an ex-girlfriend without blinking – was incapable of this kind of attachment. In my mind, powerful men were often detached, even cold.

“Since she’s so important,” I asked quietly, “haven’t you tried to find her?”

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places in this town didn’t have surveillance cameras. And I only started searching after several days had passed. By then, the trail was already cold.”

I heard the regret in his eyes.

I wondered how many years he had spent looking for that person. How many faces he had scanned in crowds. How many disappointments he had.

“Then,” I said gently, “I hope you can find her soon.”

“Yes,” he replied. “I hope so too.”

He paused, then shifted the topic “What about you? When you lived in this town, did you ever have any special experiences? For example... saving someone. Or telling someone that the food here is really good.”

I couldn’t help but laugh. “I probably told many people that this place serves good *food*,” I said honestly. “But the locals all know that already. As for saving someone... I don’t think so.”

thing like that.

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“Alpha Simpson,” I asked, meeting his gaze, “are you hoping that I did save someone?”

For a brief second, I saw sadness in his eyes. It vanished. quickly, but I saw it.

So it wasn't me.

Maybe from the very beginning, he had only suspected it was me. When he first saw me, maybe my face had reminded him of a memory from years ago. But memories from childhood were unreliable. The girl from his past would have been much younger then.

“You're not her,” he said casually.

The words caught me off guard.

Eric picked up his chopsticks. “Alright. Let's eat. Want some wine?”

My mind immediately flashed back to the time I had been drunk in front of Kane. I shook my head “No. I'll just have a regular drink.”

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soda instead.

(**) **3** min left

“You're not drinking wine either?” I raised an eyebrow.

“Not here,” he replied calmly. “Just in case to poison me.”

I froze for a split second.

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Then he continued casually, “That reminds me. You went to prison because of poisoning, didn't you? And driving under the influence.”

His words were blunt, almost careless.

“Yes,” I said after a brief pause. “That's why I work at the hospital now.”

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"I'll drive you back," Eric said.

"No need," I replied. "I'll take the bus."

"If you run now," he said calmly, "can you still catch one?"

I glanced at the time. It was already 8:30 p.m. The last bus had long gone. The train would not run again until morning.

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thought about it. There was no other solution 082

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over and

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Chapter 186

ERIC'S POV

I looked at Bella sleeping beside me and reached out to turn the volume of the radio down.

Her breathing was steady. She looked so peaceful. So... beautiful. When she slept like this, she looked even more like the person in my memories.

With her eyes open, she looked like her too, but there was always something different. When Bella was awake, she looked tired. She looked like someone who had been through a lot yet still had to stand and endure.

The girl in my memories had never looked this tired. Her eyes back then were clear and bright.

I tightened my grip on the steering wheel and focused on the road, but my eyes kept drifting back to Bella. I told myself it was coincidence. A lot of people looked alike. The world was not that small. And yet, the feeling in my chest refused to stop.

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By the time she stirred, I had already gotten to the front

< Chapter 186

disoriented for a moment, then straightened.

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“Oh-” she said. Her hand went straight to her seatbelt. “How long was I asleep?”

“It’s fine,” I replied “Not long.”

She let out a breath. She looked embarrassed then she quickly undid the belt. “Sorry. I didn’t mean to fall asleep.”

“It wasn’t a problem,” I said, and I meant it.

She opened the door and leaned over to grab her bag from the seat. Maybe because she was in a hurry, maybe because she was still half-asleep, but her fingers slipped. The bag tipped, and everything inside spilled onto the ground.

“Ah – wait-” she said. A look of panic flashed across her face.

She bent down immediately, scrambling to pick things up. I got out of the car without thinking and bent down as well. My hand reached a small woolen item before she could grab it. It was half-knitted, clearly handmade. 08:52

< Chapter 186

I paused. “You knit?” I asked in shock.

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She froze for a split second, then nodded. “Yes. I... had some time. It helps me think less.”

I looked at the glove in my hand. “This looks like size.”

She reached out quickly and took it from me.

a man’s

“It’s just old wool. I was practicing,” she said “I didn’t plan anything.”

“I see,” I replied, though I wasn’t sure I did.

She stuffed the glove back into her bag, gathered the rest of her things then stood.

“Thank you. For the ride,” she said.

“You’re welcome,” I said.

She nodded, closed the car door, and walked quickly toward the entrance. She didn't look back.

Bestayed where I was, watching through the windshield

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< Chapter 186

My chest felt strangely empty.

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I thought about the glove I just saw. The size was unmistakably a man's. If a woman knitted something like that, and it wasn't for family, then there was

one reason. Still, the yarn had been old, r

ally only

I couldn't

tell who it was meant for. I was curious even though it wasn't my business.

After a moment, I started the car and drove away.

When I returned to the Simpson pack's mansion, the place was mostly dark. Only one room upstairs still had its lights on. I went straight there.

The room was silent. I stood before the painting that had been there for years. In it, a little girl carried a younger boy on her back as they pushed through a forest. Their clothes were torn. Their faces were smudged, but the girl's expression was stubborn, as if nothing in the world could stop her from moving forward.

I lifted my hand and let my fingers trace the painted lines of the girl's face.

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< Chapter 186

"When will I finally be able to see you again?" I murmured.

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My voice sounded hoarse even to my own ears. Because of this girl, I felt a kind of pain I had never speak aloud. Some people were never eras aged to time.

Instead, their presence grew brighter, until memory itself became obsession. I stood there for a long time before turning off the light.

BELLA'S POV

When I returned to my cabin, everywhere was silent. After washing up, I sat on the edge of the bed and took out my phone. My bank account balance back at me coldly.

I had less than five thousand dollars.

Since leaving prison, every cent I had saved was right there. Earlier at the hospital, I had asked about my grandmother's medical expenses. For now, the outstanding bill was only a few thousand, but that was just the beginning. If her treatment continued, it cost

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fifty thousand. And that was without knowing how her condition would change later.

My fingers tightened around the phone.

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Even a quarter of that amount was twelve hundred. I was still short by more than seven thousand. In the past, that number would not have even slowed me down. Now, it felt like the world was crashing down on

1. me.

For the first time, I truly understood what it meant for a single penny to trap a hero.

Every shift at the hospital mattered. Every small payment mattered. As for other work, my criminal record closed most doors before I could even knock. I couldn't get a better paying job even if I tried.

I sighed and lay back on the bed. Goddess, I was exhausted. I kept thinking hard till I finally fell asleep.

"Hey, don't fall asleep. *We can still escape.*" A voice said.

The voice startled me. It sounded like mine but younger, fighter.

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< Chapter 186

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"My foot hurts," another voice said weakly. "*I... I can't move.*"

It was a boy's voice.

"Then I'll carry you," I said without hesit strong. *I can do it.*"

"I'm

The scene around us was dark and chaotic. I could feel the boy's weight on my back. I felt the strain in my legs.

"Don't sleep," I said urgently. "*Don't you know? If you fall asleep, you'll never wake up. I'll sing for you, okay? My grandmother says I sing really well.*"

I began to sing. It was the same old song.

"This is her favorite," I added. "Sing with me.

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"What if we get caught again?" the boy asked. *His voice shook as he spoke. "What if we can't escape?"*

"That's nonsense," I replied firmly. "*With me here, how could we not escape? I'll definitely take you with me.*

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you leave me,” he whispered, “you’ll escape for sure

< Chapter 186

2 min left

“There’s no way I’m leaving you!” I shouted. “I said I’d protect you, so I will. I’m not afraid of them!”

“Why?” he asked. “Why won’t you leave?”

“Because we’re friends,” I said.

“Ah!” he screamed.

I jolted awake, sitting straight up in bed. I could feel my heart racing. For a second, I wasn’t sure where I was.

I had to look around to make sure I was still in the cabin. After a few seconds, reality hit me again.

I gasped for breath and checked the time. It was three in the morning.

It had been a dream.

Yet the feelings felt way too real. The voices, the fear, the memories – it all felt painfully real. And that song... it was the same one that had played in Eric’s car.

I pressed my hand to my chest, feeling confused. 8/9

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< Chapter 186

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For a moment, it felt less like a dream and more like a memory I had forgotten.

Chapter 187

BELLA’S POV

Two days later, Uncle Ben called again.

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He sounded impatient on the phone. He reminded me again that it was time to pay my quarter of my grandmother's medical fees. He spoke like this was a simple matter, as if money did not feel like air to people like me, something you noticed only when it ran out.

After the call ended, I sat still for a long time with my phone in my hand. I had already calculated everything more than once. There was no miracle waiting for me. I had to borrow the money. I thought of who I could ask. I had nobody.

The person I wanted to disturb the least was Tara.

Still, I dialed her number.

"Tara," I said when she picked up. My throat tightened before the words came out. "Can you lend me seven thousand five hundred? I need it urgently. I won't be able to

return

to return it all at once... maybe a little every month.

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< Chapter 187

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There was a short pause on the other end, just long enough for my chest to ache. I was scared. Was she going

to get angry? Would she turn me down?

"Okay," Tara said easily. "I'll transfer it to you."

I closed my eyes. I sighed in relief. "Thank you."

"Bella," she said gently, "you don't need to say that to me. And don't rush to pay it back. Whenever you have money, just return it then."

I knew she meant it, but the weight in my heart did not lift. Owning Tara was not something I could take lightly. She had already done too much for me. I ended the call after a few more words, promising myself that I would clear the debt as soon as I could.

That was why, when Jasmine mentioned a part-time job that could bring in some extra income, I agreed almost immediately.

She told me it was work as a background actor on a filming set. There were no files, no background checks. Just register a name, leave a phone number, and show up and you would pay eighty dollars a day, lunch included.

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< Chapter 187

there was no extra pay.

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"To others, it's not much," Jasmine said, shrugging. "But it's cash."

"It's enough," I replied.

On my rest days, I had time. If I could work several days a month, I could earn a few hundred. To me, that was not small money. It meant medicine. It meant breathing room. It meant more money for me.

After work that evening, I looked at the gloves I had finally finished knitting. The stitches were not perfect, but they were good enough. I hesitated only briefly before calling Kane .

"I've finished the gloves," I said. "Should I send them over, or will you have someone come pick them up?"

"I'll come myself," he replied.

"That's fine," I said.

I returned to the cabin with mixed feelings. 3/8

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pulled out the photocopied case files Tara had given me. The papers spread across the desk as I looked at them. I looked at everything – witness statements, photographs and evidence logs.

As I read, I felt a bite in my chest all over

The wine bottle. The glass. My DNA was detected on the rim.

I stared at the page until my vision blurred. It was absurd. That was a glass I had never drunk from. Yet somehow, my DNA had been there. It was enough to seal my fate in court.

The poisoning appeared, and it was pinned on me. And the courts accepted it without hesitation. Evidence came up one piece at a time, condemning me both in the human world and within my pack.

There was no way to overturn it.

I didn't know who had wanted to ruin me so thoroughly. And Sophia Monroe... what was her role in all this? If the target had been me, then why had she died? Or had she been the target, with me used as the perfect scapegoat

< Chapter 187

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In prison, I had never been able to investigate. Every answer had stayed out of reach.

My phone buzzed.

It was the background actors' Messenger group I had just joined. The organizer tagged everyone, announcing the next job: time, location, production name, number of people needed, and requirements. I checked the date. I was off that day.

I registered immediately. A confirmation number came through with instructions.

I set my phone down and was about to search for news about the show when a knock sounded at the door.

I already knew who *it* was. I took a breath, then stood and opened the door.

Kane stood there.

He looked handsome in an all-black overcoat. His posture was relaxed but commanding. His hair was neatly styled. His presence looked impossible to ignore. The scarf

around his neck caught my eye instantly.

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< Chapter 187

It was the scarf I had knitted.

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My heart twisted. Shock came first, then I felt something warm in my chest. I felt embarrassed looking at the scarf.

Against his flawless, expensive attire, my scarf looked rough and cheap. I had rushed to finish it, worried he would be cold. I had even felt proud of it back then.

Now, seeing him wear it so naturally made my chest ache.

"There you are," I said flatly, stepping aside to let him in.

"Hi," he said, "you must have waited a while."

He walked toward the desk. His eyes landed on the open case files. As he came closer, something strange stirred inside me. For some reason, I wanted to move closer to him.

What was wrong with me?

I had felt drawn to him before, but this was different. It wasn't desire. It was a pull. The feeling was deep and undeniable.

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The answer rushed to my lips. I bit down hard, stopping

1. it.

Was he compelling me?

That wasn't possible. Compulsion worked on w

under an Alpha's authority. I was human.
I wasn't part of his pack. I should have been immune.

And yet-

I felt something at the back of my mind. It felt like a connection.

Anna...?

The thought startled me. Could it be her? Kane watched me closely.

"What is it, Bella?" he asked again.

I swallowed. "It's nothing."

"Hm."

He picked up the documents, looking at them.kfhg52

< Chapter 187

at this case again?"

My body froze.

"Yes," I said quietly.

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He glanced at me. "You always
said you were wronged. Are you trying to overturn the verdict?"

Of course, I wanted to overturn it. But witnesses were gone. Evidence was solid. Tara had tried everything during my three years in prison. Even now, I could barely afford medical bills, let alone legal battles.

I met his eyes suddenly.

"What about you?" I asked. "Don't you want to know the truth? Why your fiancée was poisoned? Whether something else was going on? Whether she chose to die or was pushed?"

The room went very still.

“Don’t you want to know,” I asked again, “what really happened to the woman you loved?”

Chapter 188

BELLA’S POV

When Kane heard my words, he let out a low ch

1. e.

“The woman I love?” he chuckled a bit, as if he had just heard something amusing. “Is that what you think?”

I frowned, feeling confused. Why did he laugh? What’s funny?

“Sophia Monroe was your fiancée,” I said carefully. “Wasn’t she the woman you loved?”

He stopped flipping through the documents and placed them down. Then he walked toward me. As he walked closer, my heart rate increased. He stopped close enough that I had to lift my chin to look at him.

“Sis,” he said calmly, looking down at me, “you’re half wrong.”

My heart skipped.

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< Chapter 188

The words echoed in my ears.

“Have you never heard of commercial marriages?” he added casually.

My eyes widened.

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Of course I had heard of them. Political marriages. Strategic unions. I had seen plenty of them in high society and among powerful packs. I believed me and Kane’s marriage to me was a commercial marriage too. Then, I thought he was an exiled Alpha.

But Stonewood? The Alpha who already stood at the top? The man every other pack bowed to? The Stonewood Pack ruled this city. What did he still need to trade marriage for?

That was why no one had ever doubted him. Online discussions, gossip within packs, public appearances – everything made it seem like they loved each other. When Sophia died, it looked like an Alpha mourning his beloved fiancée.

If that was false... then how much of Kane Stonewood

was an illusion?

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< Chapter 188

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“Since I had to marry a woman eventually,” he went on casually, like he was talking about the weather, “what difference did it make whether it was sooner or later?”

“Sophia was obedient. She was quiet. The Mon family was useful. The marriage could stabilize certain bloodlines and alliances. So why not?” he said.

I felt a chill crawl up my spine.

He spoke of marriage like a transaction.

Of a life partner like a chess piece. It struck me then—

this man didn’t talk like someone who didn’t believe in love. He talked like someone who had decided love was irrelevant.

“Sophia would’ve made a suitable Luna,” he said evenly. “But now, I think it might be better to marry someone... interesting. For real, this time”

My breath hitched

I turned my face away, telling myself not to read into it. Kane

Stonewood and I lived in entirely different worlds. Once I gave him the gloves, once this strange intersection ended, we would go our separate ways. That was how it

would be. Our marriage didn’t matter anyway. Was8:53

< Chapter 188

void now.

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"I'll get your gloves," I said quickly, trying to move past him.

"No rush."

His hand closed around my arm.

The contact was gentle, but firm enough to stop me. He bent slightly till his face was close to me. His presence was overwhelming without him needing to raise his voice.

"Sis," he said quietly, "you still haven't answered my question. Are you trying to reverse the verdict?"

My heart pounded.

Of course, I was.

If I didn't reverse it, I would carry this crime for the rest of my life. No matter how much time passed, no matter how quietly I lived, I would always be the woman who poisoned someone and caused an innocent woman to die.

What if I am?" I asked.

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< Chapter 188

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"If you truly want to reverse it," he said calmly, "I can help you."

I gasped before I could stop myself. "You believe I didn't poison her?"

He looked indifferent. "Whether you did or didn't doesn't matter to me."

I was shocked. What?

"I can help you get the conviction overturned," he continued. "I'll find the best lawyers. We'll find procedural flaws, loopholes. That alone is enough to reverse the verdict."

I understood him perfectly.

A reversed verdict didn't mean innocence. It only meant the case was legally questionable. Suspicion would follow me forever. The truth would remain buried.

"I don't want that," I said slowly. "I want the truth."

His eyes got darker.

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< Chapter 188

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continued. "Why every witness pointed at me. Why the evidence appeared the way it did. Why my DNA was on something I never touched."

These questions had lived inside me for thro

could endure poverty. I could endure scorn. But living forever as a liar in other people's eyes was unbearable.

"Is knowing the truth really that important to you?" he asked.

"It is," I answered without hesitation. "To me, the truth matters more than anything else."

He studied me in silence for a long moment.

"It's been three years," he said finally. "Even if there was evidence or surveillance, it's likely gone. Reversing the verdict is already difficult. Finding the truth is even harder."

I smiled a bit.. I had expected that answer.

To him, the truth didn't matter. Sophia Monroe's death didn't matter. Whether she chose to die or was pushed

didn't matter. She was simply no longer a suitabi 08:53

< Chapter 188

"Kane," I said suddenly, looking straight at him, "you

never loved Sophia Monroe.”

“I never said I did.”

“Then who do you love?” I asked.

The question slipped out before I could stop it.

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For a brief moment, shock crossed his face. It vanished almost instantly, replaced by his usual composure.

“Who do you want me to love, Sis?” he replied coolly.

Heat rushed to my face. I had asked something foolish.

“I’m sorry,” I said quietly. “I shouldn’t have asked.”

I straightened. “You don’t have to help me reverse my case. I’ll handle it myself.”

He stared at me. “You don’t need my help?”

“I don’t,” I said. “I’ll find the truth on my own.”

/might take years. But it wasn’t impossible.

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< Chapter 188

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“Fine,” he said after a pause. “Try it your way. But if you change your mind, call me. I’ll help you.”

I looked at him closely. “Why?”

His offer wasn’t casual. He meant it.

“What do you want in return?” I asked. “A favor? A promise?”

“Nothing,” Kane replied. “No conditions.”

I frowned. “Then why?”

“Take it as a form of compensation,” he said.

I was shocked “For what?”

“For everything you suffered in prison because of me.”

The words hit me harder than I expected.

Reverse the case. Erase my criminal record. Get my medical license back. Be a doctor again.

The temptation shook me.

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< Chapter 188

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But if I couldn't clear my name completely, would I ever truly stand tall again?

No one else had helped me. Not family. Not colleagues. Only Tara had tried and even she had failed.

“Bella,” she had said once, exhausted, “this case... no one dares to touch it.”

Now, the man I feared most was offering to overturn it at any time.

And that thought alone made my heart restless.

Chapter 189

BELLA'S POV

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The moment felt like an irony. I didn't argu

him

anymore. I simply turned, walked to the drawer, and took

out the gloves I had finished late into the night.

When I placed them in his hands, my voice came out steadier than my heart felt.

“Here are your gloves, Alpha Stonewood.” I said.

He didn't answer immediately. Kane studied them with care. I watched how his fingers tested the seams, the lining and the way the wool felt. Then he put them on slowly, one hand at a time, as if the act itself mattered. He looked at me.

"They're good," he said. "Warm. Just like the scarf you knitted for me." He brushed his fingers over the scarf around his neck. "It feels comfortable. It fits better than I expected."

"You don't have to wear it," I said quietly. "People will look at it and think it doesn't suit you."

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< Chapter 189

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That was the truth. His tailored coat, his expensive watch, his aura made the scarf look rough and old. Anyone from his circle would see it as laughable. Wolves didn't fear cold. They didn't need handmade warmth.

And Kane Stonewood least of all.

"These don't suit you, Kane." I said.

He raised his eyebrows, then laughed softly. "Don't suit me?" He looked amused, not offended. "Sis, I've never lived by other people's opinions. Whether something suits me or not is my decision."

He touched the scarf again. "Take this scarf, for example. When I say it suits me, then it does." His voice dropped a bit "And more importantly, you're the one who made it."

My heart slammed hard against my ribs. The words should have sounded simple, even casual, but coming from him, they carried weight. If anyone else had said them, I might have brushed them aside. From Kane, they felt like words that could make my heart stop beating.

A9face was serious. He looked at it as if the scarf was a88:53

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look.

“But Sis...” He took off the gloves and pulled a chair closer, sitting down on it. He smiled up at me “I’ve never liked sharing what’s mine.”

Those words made my body freeze. What?

“Now that you’ve knitted a scarf and gloves for me,” he continued lightly, “you won’t knit these things for anyone else. Understand?”

The smile stayed on his lips. It wasn’t a nice smile. It was the kind that meant something. His words made my chest ache.

His words weren’t really about scarves. No. It was a boundary. A claim.

I swallowed. Was it a warning? Probably. How many people in this city would dare to ignore a warning from Kane Stonewood?

“I knit to pass time,” I said after a pause. “It doesn’t mean anything else.”

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say it means.”

The room grew quiet. I felt that tension between us again. I felt the pull between us that made me uneasy and aware all at once.

Kane stood soon after, slipping the gloves back on as if the conversation had been no more than idle talk.

“We’ll talk again,” he said calmly.

Then he turned and left. I felt his presence long after the door closed behind him.

I stood there for a long time. My heart was still racing. My thoughts felt tangled.

Alpha Kane Stonewood never said unnecessary things. Every word had intent. And that frightened me more than anger ever could.

and

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few days later, I followed the group message arrived at the filming venue as scheduled. I was early, as usual. Jasmine wasn't there this time. I didn't recognize5?

< Chapter 189

checked our names and led us toward the set.

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The filming location was a rented mansion not far from the city center. Fans had already gathered outside, holding signs and banners. They were all so excitedly. As my eyes passed over the names written in *bold* letters, one of them made my chest tighten.

Gina.

She was part of today's cast.

Oh no.

ng

I felt my heart drop to my stomach. I felt regret instantly. *I* should have checked the details more carefully. Still, *I* was only an extra. Our worlds were not supposed to cross. *I* told myself to stay calm. There would be no trouble.

When everyone had gathered, a woman wearing a headset clapped her hands. She raised her voice as she spoke.

Everyone listen up. We'll assign roles now. *If* your name is

who said.

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< Chapter 189

checked our names and led us toward the set.

1 min left

The filming location was a rented mansion not far from the city center. Fans had already gathered outside, holding signs and banners. They were all screaming excitedly. As my eyes passed over the names written in bold letters, one of them made my chest tighten.

Gina.

She was part of today's cast.

Oh no.

I felt my heart drop to my stomach. I felt regret instantly. I should have checked the details more carefully. Still, I was only an extra. Our worlds were not supposed to cross. I told myself to stay calm. There would be no trouble.

When everyone had gathered, a woman wearing a headset clapped her hands. She raised her voice as she spoke.

"Alright, listen up. We'll assign roles now. If your name is called, step forward." She said.

Pafod quietly among the others, hands folded

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< Chapter 189

anything good.

1 min left

She held a clipboard and scanned the list. "Group servant girls. You'll be in the courtyard scene."

My name was called shortly after. "Bella."

"Yes," I answered and stepped forward.

The woman looked at me briefly, then nodded. "You'll be servant number seven. Stay with the group. Follow instructions and don't look up unless the director tells

you to."

"I understand," I said.

Another staff member spoke up too. "This scene involves kneeling. Anyone unable to kneel for an extended time should speak now."

No one said a word. I didn't either. Kneeling was nothing compared to what I had endured before.

"Good," he continued. "You'll kneel when the leads pass by. Heads down. Hands on the ground. You'll say the line together. Clear?"

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< Chapter 189

"Yes," several voices replied, including mine.

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The woman with the clipboard added, "Extra pay for this scene. Fifty dollars more."

The girls became excited when they heard that. I felt a bit relieved. I needed every dollar.

As we were being led toward the makeup room, I overheard two girls whispering behind me.

"Did you hear? Gina Monroe is filming today."

"I know. I heard she's very picky."

"She's even more beautiful in person"

My stomach tightened, but I kept walking. I told myself it didn't matter. I was invisible here. That was the safest way to be.

Inside the makeup room, the artists worked fast. Chairs were lined up in rows. Makeup artists moved from face to face without much conversation.

When I sat down, the artist leaned closer. She narrowed

< Chapter 189

"Lift your chin," she said.

I did as she said.

"You have a scar on your forehead."

1 min left

My body tensed before I could stop it. The scar sat near my hairline. It was pretty easy to miss unless someone looked closely. It was a prison wound. One of many.

"Will it be a problem?" I asked "Can I still play a servant?"

She studied my face, then nodded. "It's fine. We'll cover

it.”

A few quick strokes of powder later, the mirror reflected a version of me without that mark. I let out a quiet breath and stepped outside to wait.

That was when I saw her.

The figure approaching was not Gina.

It was Kathy.

My steps froze. My fingers went cold. Of all the faces 08:54

< Chapter 189

expected to see today, hers was the last.

13

And the worst part? She was walking straight tow?

Chapter 190

BELLA’S POV

I was stunned.

I had expected to see Gina. After all, I saw her name outside.

Mentally, I had prepared myself for Gina’s cold eyes and her cruel words. But I had not expected Kathy. Not in a million years.

What was she doing here?

She walked toward me like she owned the entire set.

Several assistants followed closely behind her. One held an umbrella even though we were indoors, another carried her designer bag carefully against their chest, and a third read lines softly beside her, reminding her of cues and expressions. Kathy walked slowly, chin raised, posture straight. Every step she took was filled with confidence. She no longer looked like the girl who once

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hovered behind others, desperate for a chance. She didn't 1/8 look like a C-list actress she once was.

< Chapter 190

Right now? She looked like a star.

She stopped. Her eyes landed on me.

13

For a brief moment, surprise showed across her. Then her lips curved upward slowly, like she had just found something amusing.

1 min **left**

I knew that look. She was already plotting something evil.

"Well," she said, drawing out the word as she walked closer. I heard the sound of her heels clicking against the floor. "If it isn't my sister."

I didn't answer.

I stood there quietly, dressed in a dull servant girl's costume, hands folded in front of me, head slightly lowered. I didn't feel ashamed. Long ago, I learned that silence often spoke louder than explanations. So times, there was no need to say anything.

Kathy looked me up and down. Her eyes stayed deliberately on my clothes. The fabric was coarse. The color was faded. There was no need for her to ask.

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< Chapter 190

1 min **left**

"What are you doing here?" she asked, though her tone suggested she already knew.

I remained quiet.

She tilted her head slightly, pretending to think. "Don't tell me..." She let out a soft laugh. "You're here as an

extra?”

I looked at her. She looked different. The Kathy standing in front of me looked polished, expensive, untouchable. The jewelry she wore alone could probably cover my grandmother’s medical bills several times over. She was dripping in diamonds and I knew they were all real. Kathy had never tolerated anything fake or cheap. Pride was stitched into her bones.

If people found out she was wearing fake jewelry. Kathy would literally die of embarrassment. That’s how

it was all real.

“Yes,” I said.

knew

She blinked, clearly not expecting such a straightforward answer.

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< Chapter 190

“Really?” she said with a soft scoff. “You? An extra?”

She raised her wrist casually, brushing her hair if adjusting it. The diamond-studded watch on caught the light. It was deliberate.

1 min left

as

wrist

“If you wanted to do background work, you could’ve just asked me,” she continued lightly. “I might’ve helped you get a few lines. That pays much better than kneeling on the ground all day.”

I almost smiled.

“I don’t think I’m suited to trading dignity for screen time,” I said calmly. “Especially not the

kind that comes with a price tag. And also, I wouldn't sell my sister as a prostitute to get to the top"

Her smile froze.

"You-" Her expression darkened before she caught herself. She knew exactly what I meant. I was reminding her of the past she wanted buried. I was reminding her of the time when she almost let a director take advantage of

1. me.

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< Chapter 190

1 min left

something," she said. "Are you that desperate for money now? No one's giving you anything? You actually have to earn it like this?"

Her words were meant to sting but I felt nothing. Why should I be ashamed of this? This was honest work.

I looked at her "My life isn't something I report to you."

Then I stepped past her.

I walked toward the extras' waiting area without looking back. My back was straight. I kept my steps steady. I had already survived worse than this.

Behind me, I could feel her eyes burning into my spine.

KATHY'S POV

I frowned as Bella walked away.

Something felt off.

She didn't look embarrassed. She didn't look angry either. She looked... calm. Too calm for someone who was Supposed to have lost everything.

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I hesitated for a stem,

just

nere,

“Go find out about her,” I said quietly. “That was now – Bella. I want everything. Who introduced what she’s doing lately, who she’s been in contact with. Don’t miss a thing.”

The assistant nodded and left immediately.

I folded my arms as the makeup team led me toward my chair. My thoughts drifted unwillingly to that day.

The day I saw Kane carrying a woman to his car.

If that woman had really been Bella, then nothing made sense. Bella wasn’t the type to linger around the entertainment industry. If she needed money, she could just ask him. An extra’s pay was laughable. They were literally married, even if it was an arranged one. seemed to care about her.

So, what went wrong? The whole thing made me confused. I mean, Alpha Stonewood was as a fucking billionaire.

While my makeup was being done, my assistant retuffed!

< Chapter 190

Lucky **Draw**

“She’s still working at the hospital,” the assistant reported. “A cleaner there introduced her to the extra work. Apparently she’s short on money and wanted to earn more.”

“What?” I asked. “That’s it?”

“Yes.”

I leaned back slowly. I felt a bit... relieved.

So there was nothing between her and Kane. Or even if there had been something before, it was clearly over. Otherwise, she wouldn’t be kneeling on set for a few hundred dollars.

Good. Very good.

Kane Stonewood was not someone I could afford to provoke. My family didn’t have power. If he wanted to ruin me, he could *do* it without lifting a finger.

I thought of the past again, of how everything had gone wrong after Bella went to prison. I had begged her to help me then. Just one word to Damien. Just one request. But

Refused me coldly.

She deserved to understand what refusal cost.