

Through Rising Fog We Walk Paths Unknown Yet Comforting

Chapter 231

BELLA'S POV

I had never felt that exposed in my life.

I stood there half-dressed. My fingers still trembled from unbuttoning my shirt. My skin felt cold despite the heat in the

room.

The silence between us was heavy, almost suffocating.

Kane's dark eyes fixed on me. He looked shocked at first then something scary flashed on his face – anger. Real anger.

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

I knew what he saw when he looked at me. He knew my pride. He knew how I carried myself, how I refused help even when I needed it, how I held my dignity tightly even when people mocked me, even when prison stripped me of almost everything else. That was why his eyes burned now. I was breaking my own rules. And I was doing it for someone else.

"Yes," I said without hesitation. I lowered my head further. I kept my voice steady even though my heart was shaking. "If you'll take me to Tara and make sure she's safe, I'll do whatever you want."

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+14 Bonus

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The words tasted like iron in my mouth.

He stared at me as if he didn't recognize me. I saw pain flicker across his face before he buried it deep. "What if I refuse?" he asked coldly.

My body trembled, but I forced myself to lift my eyes and meet his. His eyes were dark as he looked at me. My face drained of color. I took a slow breath, the kind I used to take before delivering bad news to patients.

"All right," I said quietly. "I understand."

I turned away from him, and began buttoning my shirt. I walked toward the door without looking back.

When your last bargaining chip meant nothing, there was no point in begging. I had learned that lesson long ago – when I begged the judge to believe me, when I begged people in prison to leave me alone. Every time I pleaded, I only lost more of myself.

I reached for the door.

Suddenly, a hand seized my arm.

I gasped as Kane yanked me back. It felt like the world was spinning for a second before he pulled me outside and shoved me into the passenger seat of his car. The door slammed shut 2/7

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with a loud bang.

Before I could speak, he was already behind the wheel, starting the engine.

"Seat belt," he ordered. "Now."

I obeyed instantly. My hands shook as I fastened it. The car moved.

My heart pounded wildly. Was he taking me there?

Kane didn't say another word. His jaw was clenched. His eyes were fixed on the road.

Right now, nothing mattered more than Tara. I could thank him later—if there was a later.

When we reached Newport, tall gates and armed security blocked the road. The guards approached us.

Kane rolled down the window slightly.

“Tell Thomas that Kane Stonewood wants to see him,” he said calmly. “Ask if he’s willing to meet.”

The guards froze. Even without recognizing his face, his name

carried power. One of them stared at the car while the other reached for his radio with shaking fingers.

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I sat quietly as my heart raced

Tara, please be safe. Please.

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TARA’S POV

I glared at the man standing in front of me. My heart pounded hard against my chest.

I still couldn’t believe what he had done. One moment I was walking in broad daylight, and the next, he had pulled me into his car, taken my phone, and switched it off.

Without my phone, I felt completely helpless.

Bella must have been worried sick by now. My parents would be calling too. The thought made me even more nervous. I paced the room while he sat there calmly, watching me as if my anxiety amused him.

“Can I have my phone back?” I asked again. “I need to call my friend and my parents.”

He looked at me with that infuriating half-smile. “Why are you in such a hurry?”

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“I don’t want them to worry,” I said quickly, clenching my fists.

Something in him changed. His eyes turned cold as he stared at

1. me.

“You worry about them,” he said slowly. “Did you ever think that I might worry too?”

Guilt

hit me all at once. My shoulders sagged. I knew what he was talking about. This man and I...we have history.

“There was an emergency,” I whispered.

“An emergency?” he scoffed. “You mean running back to your country to save your friend? You left without a word. Or was I just a game to you from the beginning?”

My throat tightened. I remembered how we met overseas. We were two people from the same place, alone in a foreign country. He had followed me around shyly back then, smiling like an eager puppy, offering to show me the city, introducing me to food I had never tasted. Those days had felt so easy. I had liked him. I really had.

But I never thought of a future with him.

Now, standing before me, he felt like a completely different

person. The softness was gone. Right now, dangerous. He was still devastatingly handsome – too

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handsome. He had the kind of beauty that pulled you in before you realized you were trapped.

“No,” I said, licking my dry lips. “I wasn’t playing with you.”

“Really?” He stepped closer. “You spent the night with me and disappeared the next day. You lied about where you were studying. And now you’re saying you were the one taken advantage of?”

He reached for the buttons of his shirt and slowly opened it.

My breath caught.

There, on his chest, was the crescent-shaped mark.

“Oh... goddess,” I whispered before I could stop myself.

He leaned closer, placing his hands on either side of my chair, trapping me completely. His face was inches from mine. His smile was gentle, but his eyes were cold.

“So you remember,” he said softly. “How you marked me... and then left me behind, my mate.”

The room felt like it was closing in on me.

And I knew, in that moment, that I was far more trapped than I had ever imagined.

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TARA'S POV

I remembered that night like it was yesterday. The thought of it filled me with guilt and shame. I had blamed everything on my mood that day. I had been too happy, too careles s. I thought a few glasses of wine wouldn't affect me. I thought I knew my limits.

I was wrong.

The memory dragged me back to the very beginning.

That night, I had just arrived in the city overseas. I was tired from traveling and overwhelmed by the unfamiliar streets. I had wandered into a small bar near my hotel, hoping for something warm to drink and a quiet place to sit. That was when I saw him.

He stood near the counter. He was tall and calm. His presence was impossible to ignore . He wasn't loud like the others. He didn't laugh too much. He simply stood there, watching the room with observant eyes. When our eyes met, he didn't look

away.

Instead, he walked toward me.

You're not from here,” he said.

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I blinked, surprised. “Is it that obvious?”

He smiled. "You look lost.....and curious."

I laughed nervously. "That bad, huh?"

"Not bad," he replied. "Just honest."

I introduced myself, and he told me his name. We talked about small things at first – where I was from, why I was there, how long I planned to stay. He listened closely, as if every word mattered. That alone made me relax.

"You don't seem like someone who belongs in a noisy place like this," he said.

"And you do?" I teased.

He shook his head. "No. But I like watching people."

I don't know why, but that answer made me trust him.

He offered to walk me back to my hotel when it started raining. The streets were quiet. The city glowed softly under the lights. We talked the entire way. He told me about his life abroad, how lonely it had been, how long it had been since he felt understood.

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"I feel like I've known you longer than a few hours," I admitted without thinking.

He stopped walking and looked at me with a smile. "I was thinking the same thing."

That was when everything shifted.

Back in the room, one glass of wine turned into another. We sat close, laughing, talking about dreams and regrets. I remember leaning into him, feeling warm and bold in a way I normally wasn't.

Then the memories became broken.

I remembered pushing him down onto the bed. I remembered how my hands were everywhere, my mouth reckless. I remembered kissing him too eagerly, biting him without

thinking, whispering things that sounded like lines from the romance dramas I loved so much.

“You’re mine,” I had murmured, drunk and foolish.

He had looked at me like I was everything.

That was the part that hurt the most.

When I woke up the next morning, my head throbbed
and my heart sank. The reality hit me all at once. I had crossed a line. I 3/7

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had done something I never planned to do.

Then my phone rang. It was Bella.

Panic set in. I rushed through my clothes, scribbled a short note, and left without looking back. I told myself it was a mistake. A one-night accident. Someone like him wouldn’t expect anything more.

I never thought I would see him again.

Yet here I was.

Standing in front of him now. My past was literally staring me in the face.

“I did leave a note,” I said quietly, unable to meet his eyes.

He laughed softly, but there was no warmth in it. “Yes. A note that said, ‘I’m sorry. I have to leave.’ That was all.”

My shoulders stiffened. I couldn’t defend myself.

“So tell me,” he continued coldly. “Did you ever try to find me?”

I stayed silent. My silence answered him better than words ever could.

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His jaw tightened.

“Perfect,” he said bitterly. “While you forgot about me, I searched for you everywhere.”

My breath caught. I was surprised. I thought he’d forget about me. I never expected him to look for me.

“You... searched?”

“I checked university records, surveillance footage, old addresses. I retraced every place we went,” he said flatly. “I thought maybe I mattered.”

His phone rang before I could respond. He picked it up, listened briefly, then said, “Bring them in.”

up

and

My heart sank. Who was he talking about?

“What’s going on?” I asked.

“Kane Stonewood is here,” he replied, watching my reaction closely. “For you. Do you know him?”

My chest tightened. I knew he wasn’t here for me. He must be here with Bella. That’s the only way he could come here.

“Yes but not too well” I responded.

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That only seemed to irritate him more.

“Is he the reason you didn’t look for me?” he asked “Is he the man you’re with now?”

I laughed. He stared at me with a confused look. He had no idea that Kane had eyes for only Bella.

Before he could say anything else, the door opened. Bella rushed in.

“Tara!” she cried, pulling me into a tight hug. “Are you okay? Are you hurt?”

I sighed in relief. I was so happy to see her.

“I’m fine,” I said quickly, holding her back just as tightly. “Really.”

She pulled away and looked at me, as if making sure I was alright.

“Why did he take you?” she demanded, glaring at him. “Do you even know him?”

I forced a weak smile. “It’s complicated.”

Then I remembered something else. “Did you tell my parents?”

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“Not yet,” Bella said. “But I called the police.”

My stomach dropped. “Oh no...if you called the police, they must have called my parents”

“I’m sorry”

I cupped her face in my hands and smiled “Don’t be. You did the right thing. Let’s just go”

I tried to leave but a firm voice stopped me.

“Did I say you could go?”

Bella stepped in front of me immediately. “You have no right to keep her here. The police are already involved.”

The room filled with tension so thick I could barely breathe.

I knew, in that moment, that nothing was simple anymore

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BELLA’S POV

I stood still when Thomas spoke my name.

"You're Bella." He said.

It wasn't a question. It was a flat statement, like he already knew who I was. But how?

I felt his eyes slide over me. He looked at me like he was studying me. I knew instantly that he had done his homework. Powerful men like Thomas never acted without digging first.

I lifted my chin and met his eyes. I had learned long ago not to shrink when confronted. Prison had beaten that habit out of

1. me.

"Yes, I am," I said calmly. My voice didn't shake, even though my chest felt tight.

Thomas's mouth curved into something that wasn't a smile.

"Stay out of my business with Tara," he said. His tone was cold. "Don't think you're special. I won't go easy on you just because you're a woman."

Tara froze beside me. I could feel her anxiety without

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looking at her. Her hand twitched, like she wanted to grab

my arm and pull me back, to protect me the way I had always protected her.

"Thomas, this is between us," she said quickly. "Leave **my** friend out of it."

Her words only made him worse. His eyes got darker and his expression was one of anger.

That was when Kane spoke.

"I don't care what happens between you and Tara," **he** said. His voice was relaxed, almost lazy. "But you can't involve Bella."

The room shifted. I felt it instantly, like the air itself had tightened. When Kane spoke, people listened, even when they didn't want to.

Thomas turned toward him, clearly surprised. "I didn't expect a visit from Kane Stonewood at this hour."

I glanced at Kane then. He stood with his hands loose at his sides. His posture was calm. He didn't look aggressive. He didn't need to. There was something about him that was controlled, and dangerous in a quiet way.

Thomas studied him closely. I didn't know much about the Sulkins but one thing was for sure – they could never compare 2/7

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to the Stonewoods.

"I'm taking Tara with me," Kane said simply.

Thomas frowned. "Didn't you just say you don't care what happens between Tara and me?"

"I won't care after tonight," Kane replied, looking unbothered. "But right now, she's coming with me."

Their eyes locked. The tension between them was heavy. I held my breath without realizing it. So did everyone else in the

room.

I looked at Tara. She looked back at me. She trusted me. She always had. And I trusted Kane, even though I still didn't fully understand why.

"If I disagree," Thomas asked slowly, "will you take her by force?"

"I might," Kane said. His voice didn't change. He said it like he was commenting on the weather.

Thomas's jaw tightened. I could see him weighing his options. He had only recently taken over the Sulkin family. He might have power, but Kane had influence in Byron City. He couldn't be compared to Kane.

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Thomas turned to Tara. "Do you want to leave?"

Tara froze. She stared at him like she was seeing him for the first time. I had no idea what went on between them but it was obvious that they had history.

“Yes,” she said finally

Thomas’s eyes narrowed. “You are as heartless as ever.”

I saw Tara flinch. She opened her mouth to respond, but the intensity of his stare cut her off. The words died in her throat.

That was the end of it.

Kane turned without another word and led us out. He didn’t even say anything. There was no drama. No threats.

Outside, I could finally breathe. I was so scared in there. Tara climbed into Kane’s car first. I followed. My heart was still pounding.

“Thank you,” Tara said quietly.

“I’ll take you home first,” Kane replied. “Where do you live?”

She gave him the address quickly. I watched her shoulders relax slightly. I felt relieved. At least she was safe now.

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As the car moved, I turned toward her.

“Did Thomas do anything to you?” I asked.

“He just made me sit and stare at him for three hours,” she said bitterly. “I wanted to call you, but he took my phone.”

She looked outside like she was remembering something. She seemed uncomfortable. The look on her face made me concerned.

“What’s wrong?” I asked gently.

“Nothing,” she said, shaking her head. She glanced at Kane through the mirror, clearly still amazed. Then she looked back at me. “Sorry for making you worry.”

“What matters is that you’re all right,” I said firmly. And I

meant it.

When we arrived at her place, Tara stepped out of the car. I watched until she was safely inside. Only then did I move to the

passenger seat.

I turned to Kane. "Thank you for helping me today."

He looked at me then. Moonlight came in through the window, highlighting his face. The moonlight caused shadows that made his eyes look even darker. My breath caught before I 5/7

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could stop it.

He didn't answer immediately. He studied my face for a moment.

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"Was it because Tara was your lifeline?" he asked quietly.

I hesitated "What do you mean?"

"If I were ever in danger," he continued, "would you do anything to save me?"

The question hit me harder than I expected. My body reacted before my mind did. My heart skipped.

For a brief moment, I wanted to say yes.

But I thought about it. The question almost made me laugh. Kane didn't need saving. He was powerful. He was capable.

What could I possibly offer him? I had nothing but scars and experience earned through suffering. I would only slow him down.

How on earth could someone like me save him? I was helpless.

I stayed silent.

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The darkness in his eyes deepened. Without another word, he 6/7

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started the car.

We drove off.

The car was quiet. Too quiet. The tension between us was heavy.

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I stared out the window. My chest was tight, knowing something had shifted between us – even if neither of us said it

aloud.

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BELLA'S POV

I met Tara for lunch at a small local place. The place was quiet.

The moment she sat down in front of me, my chest tightened. Her face looked pale. Her eyes were dull, and she had dark shadows under them.

She looked like she hadn't slept at all. One look at my friend and I could tell she's been through it. I don't blame her. I'd feel the same too if I was kidnapped by my crazy ex.

I studied her carefully before speaking.

"How did it go when you got home last night?" I asked softly.

Tara let out a long breath and dropped her head back against the chair.

"It was awful," she groaned. "My parents were losing their minds. They were about to call the police. I got into so much trouble."

I frowned. "Didn't you explain about Thomas?"

She shook her head "No. How do I even tell them about **him**? I just told them an old friend played a prank **and** told them not to

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to worry, I couldn't tell them the truth. If my dad knew I spent the night with a man I barely knew, he'd explode. He'd probably hunt Thomas down himself."

I watched her fingers twist together on the table. She looked embarrassed, tense, and still shaken. My mind drifted back to yesterday, to the moment I had seen Thomas clearly. He was the same man I had noticed through the restaurant window before, watching Tara and I with an angry expression.

He didn't seem like a coincidence. He looked like someone who had been waiting.

"What's really going on between you and Thomas?" I asked. "Why did he take you away like that yesterday?"

Tara's cheeks flushed. She hesitated, then met my eyes.

"If you don't want to talk about it-" I started

"There's nothing I can't say," she interrupted, then sighed. "It's just... complicated."

She told me about years ago, about a brief connection that never had a proper ending, about leaving without explanation. She thought time would erase it. As she spoke, her voice grew quieter.

"Then I got your call and rushed back," she continued. "I 2/8

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honestly thought he'd be more relaxed about it. He grew up overseas. I thought he wouldn't take it seriously." She let out a small, humorless laugh. "Turns out he thinks I'm some kind of heartless flirt. A woman who uses people and disappears."

I could see the discomfort on her face, the shame she didn't deserve. Listening to her, I felt a knot form in my chest. If Thomas hadn't been talking about Tara, I would've thought he was describing a cruel stranger, someone cold and careless. Not my best friend.

This wasn't her fault. She thought it was a harmless one night stand. I mean, men did the same thing all the time without an explanation even.

"He accused you?" I asked quietly.

She nodded. "If the roles were reversed, I'd be the villain in one of those dramas. The playgirl everyone hates."

I sat back slowly, stunned. Kane's words echoed in my head. Thomas wasn't a simple man. He was clever, strategic, and patient. A man like that didn't forget easily.

"He's been looking for you all these years?" I asked.

"I think so," she said. She looked even more embarrassed. "At least... that's what it looks like."

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"Even though we got you away yesterday, I don't think he'll let this go so easily," I said honestly. "What are you going to do about him?"

Tara scratched her head and forced a weak smile. "I don't know. I'll figure it out as I go."

She explained that her phone was still with Thomas and that she needed to buy a new one and report her number as lost. Hearing that made me even more worried.

"If you can't settle it," I started, "just tell me and I'll--"

She cut me off quickly. "You've already done so much, Bella. If it weren't for you, Kane wouldn't have come. I wouldn't have gotten out of there. This started because of me. I'll deal with it myself."

I searched her face. She was trying to sound calm, but I could see that she was nervous about it too. I knew too well what it felt like to underestimate danger.

She waved her hand lightly. "Don't worry. I left without saying goodbye, but it's not like I committed a crime. It was just one night. I doubt he'll go that far."

I wasn't convinced. Thomas seemed pretty intense. Could this be obsession?

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"If anything happens, you tell me," I insisted. "Even if I can't help directly, I can ask Kane."

The words made my face warm. Just saying his name like that stirred something complicated in my chest. Kane was danger and protection all at once. He was a man who scared me, yet he would protect me without hesitating. That, I was sure of.

Tara noticed my hesitation and smiled. "Alright," she said gently. "I got it."

We talked a little longer, about small things, about work and bills. When I checked the time, my heart jumped. I had to

leave.

"I have an interview," I said, standing up.

"For what?" she asked.

"A delivery rider position," I replied. "I sent my resume two days ago. They called this morning."

She smiled sincerely. "Good luck, Bella. I hope it works out."

I nodded and squeezed her hand before leaving.

As I walked away, I couldn't shake the uneasy feeling in my chest.

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Trouble had a way of circling back, no matter how calm things seemed on the surface.

TARA'S POV

After Bella

left, I stood outside the restaurant for a moment, breathing slowly. I planned to take the bus to the parking lot and retrieve my car. Thomas had dragged me away yesterday so suddenly that I had left it there overnight. Just thinking about the parking fee made my head ache.

Money was already tight. My design studio had announced they would only pay eighty percent of our salaries monthly, calling the rest a “year-end bonus.” Everyone knew it was just a quiet pay cut. Life felt heavy lately.

I had just started walking toward the bus stop when a car pulled up in front of me.

My heart dropped. I recognized it immediately.

The window rolled down, and there he was.

Thomas.

I stepped back. My pulse raced. His eyes darkened when he noticed my reaction.

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“You want your phone back or not?” he asked calmly.

I swallowed hard and stared at him. “Will you actually give it to me?”

“Get in,” he said in a flat tone.

I hesitated. My phone mattered, but my freedom mattered more. Yesterday still haunted me. If Bella and Kane hadn’t come, I didn’t know how long I would have been stuck.

“It’s fine,” I said carefully. “I was thinking of getting a new phone anyway.”

He tilted his head slightly. “So you don’t need your photos? Your accounts?” He paused, then added casually, “There’s also some internal information from your company on there.”

My breath caught. That wasn’t casual. That was a warning. He was right. I needed that phone more than anything.

“If you don’t want it,” he continued, “that’s your choice.”

I felt annoyed. I felt my blood boil with anger.

“How could you?” I snapped. “Did you go through my phone?”

“Are you getting in or not?” he asked, ignoring the question

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entirely.

My hands shook. My phone was locked, but I started to doubt. Had he found a way? Had he seen everything?

This wasn't the man I remembered. The one who used to smile so easily. The one who felt safe.

Without another word, I opened the passenger door and got in.

Coin Package: get more free bonus

get it

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TARA'S POV

The car door had barely closed when I saw it.

My phone.

It was in his hand.

Thomas sat in the driver's seat, relaxed. He had one arm resting on the wheel while the other held my phone as if it belonged to him. The screen glowed in the dim space of the car. My heart slammed hard against my ribs.

“My phone!” I blurted out without thinking and tried to take it.

I didn't even touch it.

He caught my wrist easily. His fingers closed around mine firmly. The sudden contact made my breath hitch. His grip wasn't painful, but it was strong.

“Careful,” he said calmly, his eyes never leaving the screen. “You’re still as impatient as you used to be.”

He scrolled with his thumb while holding my hand. His touch felt calming and unsettling at the same time.

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“Looks like you’ve been living quite well,” he added casually as he looked through my phone.

The screen flashed image after image. Me smiling on vacation. Me holding desserts in cafés. Me dressed up in restaurants with warm lighting and pretty plates. Anyone looking at those pictures would think I had a perfect life.

I swallowed hard. What did he mean by that?

“Not too bad... I guess,” I said quietly, trying to pull my hand free.

He didn’t let go. Instead, his thumb paused, and he finally looked at me. For a split second, time folded in on itself.

His hand felt exactly the same. I still felt the same sparks I felt that night. My chest tightened against my will.

I hated that my body remembered him before my mind could stop it.

Back then, I had been fascinated by his hands. He had soft hands and long fingers. I loved how clean his nails were. I had even laughed and told him, You’ve got pretty fingers, let me feel them.

And he had let me. He had simply held out his hand and watched me touch it.

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What was wrong with me?

I jerked myself back into the present. I felt heat rushing to my face.

Idiot, I scolded myself. Look at the situation you're in.

looked up and met his eyes. They were dark and intense. They weren't the gentle eyes I remembered. Something heavy moved behind them, something like anger.

He released my hand suddenly. The loss of contact felt colder than I expected.

"How do you plan to get your phone back?" he asked flatly.

I stared at him, stunned. "You're... not giving it back?"

"Not yet."

I spoke through gritted teeth "Should I... pay you?" I asked awkwardly.

The moment the words left my mouth, I regretted them. Thomas had money. My money didn't matter to him.

He laughed softly. It wasn't warm. It wasn't amused. It was a laugh without humour in it.

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"You think money matters to me?" he asked, tilting his head slightly. His eyes scanned my face, like he was studying me "You really haven't changed."

I took a slow breath. "Then what do you want?"

If this was his way of dealing with what I had done years ago, then fine. I deserved to hear it.

He leaned back in his seat and studied me.

"Have you been with anyone these past three years?" he asked suddenly.

The question caught me off guard. Why did he ask that? It wasn't any of his business.

"What?" I blinked. "No."

It wasn't exactly a lie. Nothing serious had lasted.

"Did you like anyone?" he asked again.

Faces flashed briefly through my mind. I thought of the people who had caught my attention over the years – celebrities,

passing crushes and other people I admired from afar.

But under his gaze, I shook my head.

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"No." I said.

His eyes got even darker. I couldn't tell if he believed me or not.

"You once told me," he said calmly, "that you'd be happy with a boyfriend like me."

My throat tightened.

"That was—" I rushed out "That was a long time ago. I was young. I was drunk."

"You also said I was the only one you liked."

I laughed nervously. "Thomas, you're... you're too much. I'm fine with an average boyfriend. I'm not picky at all."

The words sounded ridiculous even to my own ears. He didn't respond. Instead, he looked back down at my phone.

Panic shot through me. He was scrolling. He wasn't looking at just photos. Now, he was checking my history. My heart leapt into my throat.

No. No. No.

"Wait!" I blurted out.

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He paused and glanced at me.

"This is my private space," I said quickly. "You can't just go through it like that."

"Privacy?" he echoed softly, then looked straight at me. "Tell me, Tara. How much of my privacy did you invade back then?"

Heat flooded my face. I opened my mouth, then closed it. He wasn't wrong.

"I didn't force you," I muttered weakly.

"You didn't," he agreed. "But you said things you never meant."

He leaned closer. "That night, you told me I was the only man you'd ever like. You said you'd never look at anyone else. You called me handsome. You said I was sweet."

Each word hit harder than the last. I dropped my eyes.

"You promised you'd love me until the end of time," he continued quietly. "Do you know how ridiculous that sounds now?"

His face was inches from mine. My chest tightened painfully. I regretted every word I said. I was so drunk and horny. It didn't really mean anything then.

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"I'm sorry," I whispered. I meant it. "I really am."

"You should be," he replied.

Silence filled the car. It felt thick, suffocating. For a moment, it felt like I couldn't breathe. When the car finally stopped, I stepped out slowly.

My stomach dropped. We stopped in front of the mansion, the same one as yesterday. My body stiffened without permission.

"What?" he asked, watching me carefully. "Scared to go in?"

I forced a weak smile. "We can talk outside."

He chuckled softly. "Tara, if I wanted to keep you here, I could. And I promise you – Kane wouldn't get you out so easily this time."

My heart skipped. What did it matter? If he wanted to hurt me, he already had the advantage.

I walked inside with him. The mansion was huge and quiet. The whole place was cold.

He gestured to the couch. "Sit."

I obeyed. He moved to the bar then he mixed liquids smoothly.

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+14 Bonus

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I watched him. I didn't have anything else to do anyway. The colors layered beautifully in the glass.

"Remember this?" he asked, holding it out. "Your favorite."

My stomach twisted.

"I'm fine," I said. "I don't want it."

"I learned to make it for you," he said softly. "It's the only cocktail I know how to make."

He walked over to me then pressed the glass into my hand. For some reason, it felt really heavy.

"Still refusing?" he asked.

I took a breath.

"If you want revenge," I said firmly, "take it out on me. Leave my parents alone."

He studied my face for a long moment.

"All right," he said finally.

I lifted the glass and drank it in one gulp. The taste was sweet then bitter.

"So?" he asked. "Good?"

"It's... very good," I muttered.

I set the glass down and looked at him.

"Just tell me what you want," I demanded. "How do I make this right?"

The room felt like it was holding its breath.

And so was I.

Chapter 236

TARA'S POV

Slowly, he leaned closer to me. The warmth from the drink spread through my chest, but his eyes were cold and intense.

"You know exactly what you owe me," he said slowly. "It's time to settle this."

I tilted my head and stared at him, trying to understand his words through the haze in my mind. My thoughts moved slowly, like I was walking through water. The drink was already taking effect inside me.

"So... I just have to pay what I owe?" I asked.

"Yes," he replied without hesitation.

I stood up, but the room swayed. I steadied myself, laughing weakly. The cocktail was strong, stronger than I remembered, but it made me bold in a way that scared me. My words a bit slurred as I spoke.

I felt...free. I felt like I was floating in the sky.

"All right," I said. "Then I'll pay."

I reached for the zipper of my coat and pulled it down 08:45

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slipped it off my shoulders and let it fall to the floor. I felt his eyes on me, staring at me like I was the only thing that mattered. My hands trembled as I removed my sweater next. The air felt cold against my skin.

As my fingers touched the hem of my shirt, his hand shot out.

"Stop." His voice was cold. His tone was hard enough to cut through the fog in my head.

"If you think that's what I want," he said, "you're wrong."

I blinked at him, confused. My words slurred slightly. "Of course... You probably despise me too much for that. I can pay another way or I could just find someone else. I just want to fix this."

I swayed. My balance was unsteady.

He stepped closer and lifted my chin, forcing me to meet his eyes. His grip on my hand was firm.

"Do you let just anyone treat you like this?" he asked.

I laughed softly, though my chest hurt.

"I'd just think of it like being bitten by a dog," I said foolishly. "How else can I repay you? Just... promise me one thing."

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His eyes narrowed.

"Don't touch my parents," I said quickly. My voice got serious despite the alcohol. "They're honest people. They've never hurt anyone."

He froze. For the first time, something like shock crossed his face. He was probably thinking – Did I really think he would harm my family? I didn't know what to think. It was obvious he came back for revenge. What if revenge included my family? I couldn't risk it.

His grip loosened.

"Is that what you fear?" he asked quietly.

I didn't answer. After a moment, he spoke again "Do you regret it?"

He leaned closer until our faces were only inches apart. "Do you regret leaving without a word?"

I looked at him, really looked at him. His face was flawless. He was damn beautiful, like the dolls I used to admire as a child. He had the most beautiful eyes I had ever seen. His features were perfect. His face looked like it was carved from stone.

"You're so pretty," I said suddenly, smiling.

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I reached up and cupped his face with both hands. I used **my** fingers to brush his cheeks. His skin was warm. He went still.

I saw it then. He looked at me with recognition in his eyes. He knew.

I had done this before.

That night, years ago, I had touched his face the same way. I had said the same silly words. I had promised things I didn't understand. If I hadn't left the next morning, that night might have been the happiest memory of his life. Instead, it became a wound.

Back then, he had told me the truth about himself, about being born out of wedlock. He also told me about the shame people placed on him.

"That doesn't change who you are," I had told him with a smile. "Your life is shaped by your choices, not by how you were born."

"Don't you think it's shameful?" he had asked quietly. "I'm basically a bastard"

I had shaken my head. "When people have children, they should be serious. If they weren't ready, that's their failure. It's unfair to bring a child into chaos."

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I frowned slightly now. The memory drifted through my mind. It was three years ago but I remembered it like it was yesterday.

"Casual relationships hurt people," I had continued back then. "That fault belongs to the adults, not the child."

I felt his breath hitch. No one had ever spoken about his parents like that before. No one had defended him so simply. I could see it in his eyes.

"So you only date with marriage in mind?" he asked.

"Yes," I replied without hesitation. "When I marry, it'll be for love, real love. Even when passion fades, we'll walk through life together until the end."

He stared at me with something like shock in his eyes.

"Do you like me?" he asked suddenly.

"Yes," I answered, nodding.

He inhaled slowly. "Then here's my offer," he said. "Be with me. If you fall in love with me, I'll forget everything you owe me."

My mind spun.

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"Be... your girlfriend?" I repeated. "Fall in love with you?"

"Yes."

He released my face, but I noticed the way his hands hesitated, as if he didn't want to let go.

I stared at him, then smiled brightly. "All right!"

The word hit him hard. I saw it in his eyes.

My eyelids grew heavy. My arms slid around his neck. I was starting to feel sleepy. My body felt like a sack of potatoes now. My eyes kept spinning.

"I'm sleepy," I murmured. "I didn't sleep much last night. I'll take a nap. Wake me when it's time for dinner."

The world faded.

I felt myself being lifted, carried carefully. I felt him climb up the stairs then open a door. As I drifted off, he laid me on a soft bed. The room smelled clean.

I felt him take my hand.

"I found you," he whispered. "You agreed today. I won't let you take it back."

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I heard him but I was already drifting,

The room fell silent, filled only with the sound of our breathing.

And then everything went dark.

Chapter 237

BELLA'S POV

After the interview, I returned to Stonewood Residence alone.

The building looked the same as – stone walls, quiet corridors, and the heavy silence that always made my footsteps sound louder than they should.

Still, my chest felt tight. I walked slowly, replaying every moment of the interview in my head, searching for mistakes.

The interview itself had been simple, too simple.

The woman across from me had been neat and polite. She wore a grey blazer and spoke in a calm voice, the kind people used when they didn't want to get involved. She flipped through my documents carefully, stopping at my health certificate for a long moment.

"This is valid," she said, nodding. "You passed all medical checks."

"Yes," I replied quietly, keeping my hands folded on my lap.

She asked a few basic questions after that. How long I had lived in the city. Whether I was familiar with delivery routes. If I could work long hours. I answered everything calmly. head:45

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practiced these answers many times in my head.

Then she paused and looked directly at me.

"You have a medical degree," she said. "Why apply for a delivery rider position?"

I smiled tightly. I already knew what to say. I had said it before. I would say it again.

"I was involved in an incident years ago," I said evenly. "There was a poisoning case. I lost my license after that."

She didn't ask who was poisoned. She didn't ask for details. Her eyes moved briefly to my name, then back to her file.

"I see," she said.

That was it. There was no sympathy. No judgment. Just distance.

She closed the folder and stood up. "You may go home. We will contact you if we proceed."

I nodded, thanked her, and left.

Now, back in my room, I was exhausted. It felt deeper than physical tiredness. It felt like living itself was exhausting. I was tired of breathing. I was tired of trying and hoping.

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+14 Bonus

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The question about my medical license played over and over in my mind. I knew it was a hurdle I could never truly clear.

In this city alone, there were more than ten companies hiring delivery riders. I had sent my resume to all of them. I didn't know if any would hire me.

I lay back on the bed and stared at the ceiling.

Maybe it was everything that happened after I left prison that made me feel this way. Freedom had not been kind. It had been heavy.

That evening, I went to dinner as usual.

Kane sat across from me calmly. His posture was relaxed as if nothing in the world could disturb him. Halfway through the meal, he spoke.

"You applied for a job as a delivery rider today?"

My hand froze. The fork nearly slipped from my fingers. How did he know that? Was he spying on me?

I looked up

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“What?”

He smiled. He looked amused by my reaction. “Why are you surprised?”

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“How did you-” I stopped myself.

“I received a call this afternoon,” he said calmly. “From the boss of a delivery company. She said you applied and she wanted my opinion.”

My chest tightened.

I suddenly remembered something. During the interview, the woman hadn’t asked who the victim of the poisoning was. I’d assumed Kane would not know. I’d hoped he would not know.

But of course, she had called him.

“What should I tell her?” Kane asked, watching me closely.

I looked at the table. My thoughts raced.

Why would they call him over a simple job application? They could have rejected me quietly. No. They must have thought they were helping him, helping the Stonewood family. Telling him where to find the woman believed to have killed his

fiancée.

The realization made my stomach twist. Even after prison, people still wanted to throw me under the bus to please Kane.

When would it end?

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+14 Bonus

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“Do you want me to talk to them?” Kane continued. “I can make them hire you.”

“No,” I said quickly.

He raised an eyebrow. “You don’t like that company?”

“I don’t want help,” I said softly.

He leaned back “I don’t like them either. In that case, I can make them disappear.”

I looked up at him in shock. “What did you say?”

“Did you hear me?” he asked calmly. “If you dislike them, I can make the company vanish.”

His tone was casual, too casual. He said it like he was talking about the weather. My mind reeled. That company wasn’t small. They had just secured massive funding in billions. They were rising fast.

“You would do that,” I said slowly, “just because I don’t like them?”

He shrugged “I don’t like people who sell others out. A leader who profits from betraying people won’t last long. I would only speed it up.”

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I couldn’t speak.

This was Kane. He was gentle one moment then terrifying the next. He spoke of destruction the way others spoke of rain.

Before I could respond, he reached across the table and placed vegetables onto my plate.

“You’re not eating enough,” he said quietly.

To anyone else, he looked caring and attentive but I knew better. His kindness and his cruelty came from the same place – control.

I ate without tasting anything.

“Do you want me to help you find a job?” he asked after a while. “You could do whatever you want. You could even return to medicine.”

“I can manage on my own,” I replied.

The air shifted. I could feel his eyes on me even without looking up.

After a long pause, he stood. “All right. Do whatever you like.”

Then he left. Only when his footsteps faded did I breathe again.

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His plate was half full. He hadn’t finished eating.

Had I irritated him?

I laughed quietly. If I had offended him, it probably started long ago when I refused to stay with him.

My fingers were almost healed now, yet I still couldn’t leave.

And the longer I stayed, the deeper something pulled us both together.

TARA’S POV

When I woke up, the ceiling above me was unfamiliar. I noticed a crystal lamp above me.

Where am I?

The question barely formed before memories rushed back. I remembered bits of what happened last night – drinking, laughing, losing control. I realized that Thomas had brought me back to his mansion.

I sat up suddenly.

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"You're awake?" a voice asked.

I froze. Turning my head slowly, I saw Thomas sitting on the sofa, watching me quietly.

"Y—

yes," I said, quickly standing. I looked down and sighed in relief when I saw I was fully dressed.

Still, panic crept in.

"Did I... do anything while I was drunk?" I asked.

"You did a lot," he replied casually. "Which part do you want?"

My jaw dropped. "What... what did I do?"

His face turned red. He looked away, clearly embarrassed.

"Did I force myself on you again?" I blurted.

His blush deepened. Goddess, I felt so embarrassed. I felt shame spreading all over me.

"About that," I asked carefully, "how exactly did I force myself on you?"

"Enough," he groaned.

He explained quietly. I had wrapped my arms around his neck 8/9

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414 Bonus

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then kissed his face repeatedly. He said I told him he smelled good.

I covered my face in total shame.

Then he said calmly, "From today on, we're dating. You agreed. You said you'd fall in love with me."

I looked at him in disbelief. For a moment, I thought I had heard wrong.

"What?" I stared at him.

He played the recording from his phone. It was my voice.

"Be... your girlfriend?" I asked "Fall in love with you?"

"Yes." He responded

"All right!" I replied excitedly.

My heart sank.

Was this revenge? Was he going to make me fall for him just to break me?

Chapter 238

TARA'S POV

"Fine," I said at last, letting out a long breath. "Let's date."

The words felt heavy as they left my mouth. I didn't say them because I wanted to. I said them because I felt cornered. If revenge was coming, then I would rather face it with my eyes

open.

At least this way, I could prepare myself.

Thomas looked at me closely, as if trying to read whether I was serious.

"Now," I added quickly, before I lost my nerve, "can I have my phone back?"

That was the whole reason I had followed him here in the first place. Without my phone, I felt helpless. I needed it. I needed to know what my parents were doing, what time it was, and whether the world had collapsed while I was gone.

He stared at me for a moment with an unreadable expression. Then, without warning, he picked up my phone from the coffee table and tossed it toward me.

08:46.

Wh!" I gasped, lunging forward and catching it just in time

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My heart nearly stopped.

This phone had cost me ten thousand dollars. I had hesitated for weeks before buying it. If it had fallen and cracked, the repair alone would cost over two thousand. I would never dare ask him to pay for it.

I clutched the phone tightly and glared at him. "Do you enjoy giving people heart attacks?"

He didn't answer.

I turned the phone on immediately and checked the time. It was already past nine. My stomach dropped when I saw the missed calls one after another, all from my parents.

Panic rushed through me. I called them back at once.

The call had barely connected when my father's angry voice filled my ear. "If you weren't coming home for dinner, couldn't you at least call? You didn't answer your phone at all. Were you trying to make us go to the police again like yesterday?"

I started sweating.

"I—I got caught up," I said quickly. "I'm on my way home now."

I didn't wait for him to reply. I ended the call and pressed my

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phone to my chest, breathing hard.

When I looked up, Thomas was standing closer than before. Given how loud my father had been, he must have heard everything.

"Well," I said awkwardly, forcing a small smile, "if there's nothing else, I should go."

"I'll take you home," he said.

"It's fine," I replied immediately. "I can take a taxi. I also need to pick up my car from the parking lot."

Before I could step away, he reached out and gently held my wrist.

"I'll take you," he said firmly. "We're in a relationship now."

I froze. I had no response to that.

Fine. If he wanted to drive, I would let him. Fighting him now would only make things worse.

We walked out of the mansion together.

"Your car keys," he said, stopping suddenly.

I blinked in confusion but took them from my bag and handed 3/6

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them over. He passed them to the driver standing nearby.

"Retrieve her car from where she parked it yesterday and bring it back to her neighborhood," he instructed calmly.

"Yes, sir," the driver replied before leaving.

Thomas got into the driver's seat of his car and looked at me coldly. "Get in."

"Oh okay," I said quickly, snapping out of my daze and climbing into the passenger seat.

The drive was quiet.

He focused on the road and didn't look at me even once. The silence was so heavy that it got my nerves. To distract myself, I unlocked my phone. The first thing I did was head to my settings to change my password.

After all, he had gone through my phone. Who knew what he

had seen?

Just as I opened my video folder, my fingers froze. Something was wrong.

Several videos were missing.

My heart skipped painfully as I scrolled faster, then faster, then 4/6

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wildly.

They were gone....all of them. Every single video of my idols- – concerts, fan meetings, signings – they were all gone.

“What happened to my idol videos?” I blurted out, turning to him in panic,

“I deleted them,” he replied calmly, without even glancing at

1. me.

“You... deleted them?” My head spun.

Getting my phone back should have felt like relief. Instead, it felt worse than losing it entirely. If I had lost the phone, I could have mourned everything at once. But this? This felt cruel.

“I spent thousands to meet Jimin from BTS,” I said. “I recorded everything.”

“Yes,” he said evenly. “I deleted them. And even if you take your phone to a professional, you won’t be able to recover them.”

It felt like I could cough up blood.

“Those were memories of my youth,” I said. I felt my eyes burning and my heart breaking.

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“Memories?” he sneered.

He pulled the car over suddenly.

Before I could react, he unbuckled his seatbelt and leaned toward me. His face was close, too close. My heart raced despite myself. Time had been kind to him. Even after all these years, he looked young, handsome, dangerous.

Chapter 239

TARA’S POV

Stop thinking nonsense, Tara.

“You can’t just delete people’s videos,” I said angrily.

"I saw how you spoke in them," he said quietly. "I wondered if I wasn't the only one you said those things to."

—

I opened my mouth, then closed it. Fans said things like that all the time. It was normal. I loved my idols sincerely – just... temporarily. I mean, who wouldn't tell Felix from Stary Kids that they loved him. The guy looked even more ethereal in person.

He brushed my fringe aside gently.

"From now on," he said. His voice was low and cold, "you don't say those things to anyone else. You say them only to me."

"I-" I started.

"Don't test my patience, Tara," he snapped "I'm your boyfriend now. How do you think it makes me feel when you tell other men you have feelings for them?"

Histouch was gentle but his voice was ice.

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I froze.

In that moment, I remembered clearly – he was no longer the sweet man from before. He was Thomas, the head of the Sulkin family.

When I got home, the living room lights were still on. My parents were sitting on the couch, waiting for me. The moment I stepped inside, I knew I was in trouble.

My mother stood up immediately. Her arms were crossed, and her face was tight with anger.

"Where were you?" she demanded. "Do you know what time it is?"

I glanced at the clock on the wall. It was already past ten.

"I told you on the phone," I said, forcing myself to stay calm. "I got held up. I came back as fast as I could."

My father slammed his hand lightly on the arm of the couch. "Held up by what? You disappeared all night yesterday, and today you didn't even answer your phone. Do you think we won't worry?"

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"I called you back," I replied. "I didn't disappear today."

"That's not the point," my mother snapped. "You didn't tell us you wouldn't be home for dinner. Do you know how disrespectful that is?"

I bit my tongue. My chest felt tight. They were angry, but they had no idea what I had just been through. They had no idea how close everything had come to falling apart.

"I was busy," I said again. "I'm home now."

My mother stared at me for a long moment, then sighed. "Enough. Sit down."

I sat on the edge of the couch.

She took a deep breath, then said in a firm voice, "I've talked to Mr. Smith."

My heart skipped. "Mr. Smith?"

"Yes," she continued. "He has arranged a blind date for you next week."

I froze. She couldn't be serious.

"A blind date?" I repeated. My voice rose before I could stop it.

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My father nodded as if this was the most natural thing in the world. "He knows a good family. The man has a stable job."

I nearly choked. "Mom, Dad – what are you talking about?"

"What do you mean?" my mother said. "You're almost twenty-eight. Do you think time is waiting for you?"

"I just started—" I stopped myself in time.

I clenched my hands in my lap. "Can't I find a boyfriend on my own? I promise I'll find someone you'll like."

My mother laughed, but there was no warmth in it. "You've said that before. And what happened? Nothing."

"That's not fair," I protested. "I haven't even had time to—"

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"Time?" she cut in. "You've had years. Do you want to wait until you're thirty and still alone? People will start calling you an old maid."

Her words hit hard. People get married at thirty. There was nothing wrong with that.

"I don't care what people call me," I said quietly. "I don't want to marry just anyone."

My father frowned. "Marriage isn't about liking someone too 4/6

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much. It's about stability."

I shook my head. "I won't marry someone I don't like. I won't."

As I said that, a face suddenly flashed in my mind.

Thomas. I thought about everything – His eyes. His voice. The way he looked at me in the car.

My heart jumped, and I hated myself for it.

My mother noticed my silence and pressed on. "The blind date is next week. You'll go."

"No," I said firmly.

Her eyes widened. "What did you say?"

"I said no," I repeated. "I won't go."

The room went quiet.

My father stared at me, shocked. "Why are you suddenly so stubborn?"

I stood up. "I'm tired. I don't want to argue. We'll talk later."

"Tara!" my mother called after me.

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"I said I'm tired," I replied. "I need rest."

I turned and went straight to my room, closing the door behind

1. me.

My heart was pounding. What was I doing?

I leaned against the door and let out a long breath. I didn't plan to tell them about Thomas. This relationship wasn't real. It was temporary. There was no reason to drag my parents into it.

As I picked up my phone, a new message appeared on the screen.

Thomas: This is Thomas. Save my number for easy contact.

I stared at the screen for a long moment.

Then I sighed and saved the number.

"For now," I muttered to myself, "I'll take this one step at a time."

6/6

Chapter 240

BELLA'S POV

I kept searching for a job, day after day, moving from one company to another. Each interview followed the same pattern. The process would go smoothly at first. They would

look at my documents, ask about my experience, and nod politely. But once they reached the final stage and saw my criminal record, everything changed.

Their expressions would go stiff Their tone became distant. Then came the rejection.

When I walked out of yet another office building that morning, I couldn't help but smile bitterly. I thought I was prepared for this. I had already lowered my expectations as far as they could go. I was even willing to work as a delivery rider without a base salary, something many companies preferred. Still, they turned me down.

As noon approached, my body felt heavy with exhaustion. I stopped at a small roadside restaurant and ordered a bowl of plain noodles for one dollar. It was the cheapest option on the menu. The place was simple and crowded. The tables were old, and the chairs did not match. An old television sat in the

corner. Its screen was slightly blurred as it played the news.

I hated quietly, barely listening, until a familiar comparison

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suddenly reached my ears.

I froze.

The reporter mentioned the delivery company where I had first interviewed as a rider. It was the same company whose boss had contacted Kane about me. Kane had once said, in a calm voice, that he could make that company disappear.

The screen showed chaotic footage. People were gathered outside the company building, shouting and holding banners. The news explained that a large investment had been suddenly withdrawn. Because of that, the company was now facing a serious financial crisis. Those who had invested privately were demanding their money back.

I stared at the screen, my chopsticks paused midair.

My chest tightened. Did Kane do this? Could he really destroy a rising company in just a few days?

If he did, then his power was far greater than I had imagined. If he didn't, then the timing was terrifying. Either way, the thought left me unsettled.

I forced myself to look down and continued eating, but the noodles tasted bland.

Suddenly, I felt a small hand clutch my shin. 2/7

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I looked down and saw a little boy standing beside me. He looked about three years old. His clothes were dirty and worn, but his face was beautiful. His skin was fair and soft, and his eyes were large and dark. He stared straight at my bowl of noodles.

Without thinking, I reached out and gently pinched his chubby cheek. He was so darn cute.

“Do you want some noodles?” I asked softly.

He didn’t respond. He only kept staring at the bowl.

I looked around the restaurant. It was crowded, and many people were eating, but I couldn’t see where he came from. I lifted him slightly, resting him on my knee, and realized his eyes never left the noodles.

Before I could say more, a woman rushed toward us.

“I’m so sorry,” she said quickly. Her face was filled with worry. “I didn’t watch him properly. Please forgive us.”

I recognized her immediately. She was the cashier who had taken my order earlier. I remembered hearing someone call her “boss.”

“It’s okay,” I said gently. “He didn’t bother me. Your son is very

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cute. He seems really interested in the noodles.”

The woman smiled helplessly and waved her hands lightly in front of the boy. “If you give him noodles, he might eat them, or he might not. He just likes watching people eat.”

That was when I realized she was using sign language.

I froze. “He... he...”

“He can’t hear,” she explained calmly. “But he understands simple sign language.”

She bent down and signed slowly to the boy. “Say sorry to Aunty.”

The little boy bowed seriously. My heart softened completely.

I reached out and patted his head. As I watched him, I wondered what his world was like. Was it silent all the time? Did he ever hear laughter or music? The thought made my chest ache.

The woman picked him up and carried him away.

I finished my noodles quietly. When I stood up to leave, a small piece of paper on the door caught my eye.

Hiring delivery riders.

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I stopped and turned back. Walking up to the counter, I asked, “Are you looking for riders?”

“Yes,” the woman replied with a nod.

“Can I apply?” I asked.

She looked surprised. “As a rider?”

“Yes,” I said. “Why not?”

She hesitated. “You’re still young. Women your age usually don’t choose **work** like this.”

I

took a breath. “It’s hard for me to find a job,” I admitted. “I’ve been to prison. I have a criminal record for poisoning someone. It was an accident. If possible, I really want this job.”

Her eyes went wide a bit when I mentioned prison. She was silent for a few seconds, like she was considering it.

“The pay is fixed,” she said after a moment. “You’ll deliver food during rush hours and help in the restaurant when you’re free. The salary is seven hundred dollars a month. You’ll get lunch and dinner. Work hours are from nine—thirty in the morning to nine at night.”

Seven hundred dollars. That was almost double what I earned

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as a sanitation worker. I knew it was tiring but I didn't care. When survival was on the line, exhaustion no longer mattered.

"Yes," I said immediately. "I'll do it."

She smiled. "You can start tomorrow. We have an electric bike. You can use ours."

"Thank you," I said sincerely. "I'll be here on time."

"My name is Jazz Sinclair," she added. "Call me Jazz. What's yours?"

I smiled "I'm Bella."

For the first time in days, my chest didn't feel so heavy.

I left my contact information and walked out of the restaurant, feeling something close to hope.

THIRD PERSON POV

After Bella left, an older woman approached Jazz. She was in her fifties. She had a serious expression on her face.

"What were you talking about with that woman?" she asked.

"She applied to be our delivery rider," Jazz replied. "I agreed to let her start tomorrow."

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"A woman her age?" Mrs. Sinclair frowned. "That's strange."

"She has a criminal record," Jazz added quietly. "For poisoning."

Mrs. Sinclair's face darkened. "Have you learned nothing? You trust people too easily. What if she harms someone? Are we responsible?"

Jazz sighed. "She was kind to Riley. I don't believe she's bad. The poisoning must have been an accident."

"Riley still needs treatment," Mrs. Sinclair snapped. "And we don't have money to take risks."

Jazz gave a bitter smile. "That's exactly why I want to give her a chance. No one gave me one before."

Mrs. Sinclair fell silent.

Jazz added softly, "I've been to prison too."

Mrs. Sinclair sighed deeply and said nothing more.

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