

Through Rising Fog We Walk Paths Unknown Yet Comforting by Arlo Mason Jett 241

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Chapter 241

BELLA'S POV

That evening, the mansion felt unusually quiet. The lights in the hall were soft, but the space still felt too large, too empty.

I stood near the window for a long moment before turning to Kane. He was seated calmly, one leg crossed over the other. His posture was relaxed yet commanding, as if the entire Stonewood Residence belonged to him by right. Well, it did.

"I got a job today," I said at last. "But I'm worried I might finish work late. I don't want to disturb you. I think it might be better if I move back to the cabin."

Kane lifted his eyes slowly. His brows rose just a little, but that small movement carried pressure. "Are you trying to move out again?"

His words made my chest tighten. Not move out, I thought. Move back.

The way he said it made it sound as if this place was already my home. But a mansion this grand could never belong to someone like me. I wasn't even sure if I deserved a home at all

anymore.

It's too big," I said carefully. "I'm not used to living . 48:47

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small place like the cabin suits me better. Nobody is there. It would be a waste not to live there.”

For a brief second, he studied me in silence. Then he spoke. “Then you’d better get used to it, Bella. I’ll cover the cost of everything”

“No, I-” I started, but his eyes turned cold.

It wasn’t anger. It was authority.

The air between us got tight. I felt it immediately. A little bit of his Alpha aura filled the space. My breath hitched.

His dark eyes locked onto mine.

“Bella,” he said quietly, “if you’re really worried about coming home late and disturbing me, you can quit your new job and find another one. Isn’t that better?”

He leaned forward slightly. “Or do you think this job is more important than me?”

A chill ran down my spine.

My first thought wasn’t about myself. It was about Jazz. I thought about her small restaurant and about her deaf son. If Kane wanted to crush a business, a place like that wouldn’t stand a chance.

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I remembered what happened to the other company Kane threatened.

“I.... I didn’t think of it that way,” I muttered.

My fingers curled slowly at my sides. I didn’t want Jazz to suffer because of me. She already carried so much.

“It’s best if you haven’t,” Kane said with a small smile. “You can stay here in peace.”

Then, without warning, Kane reached out. He took my hands gently and lifted them to his face. He pressed my palms against

his cheeks.

“Since you’re determined to find your own job,” he said softly, “go ahead.”

He closed his eyes briefly. “But no matter how late you come back, promise me something.”

I swallowed. “What?”

“Say good night to me,” he said. “Every night.”

I froze.

It was such a simple request, yet it stirred something deep

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inside me. Saying good night to him had once been natural. At **the** cabin, he had felt like family. He felt like someone solid, someone safe.

Were we still that now?

His

cheeks brushed against my palms. I felt the warmth spreading through my hands, growing stronger until my skin felt almost hot.

“I promise,” I said quietly.

His lips curved into a small smile.

The next day, I took my credentials and went to the small restaurant as planned. Jazz greeted me warmly and gave me a quick briefing. She showed me around, explained the workflow, and finally handed me an electric bike.

“You’ll use this for deliveries,” she said. “Do you know how to ride it?”

“Yes,” I replied honestly. “It’s been years, but I should manage.”

“Good,” she said. “Practice later and don’t rush. It’s fine to be late. Safety comes first.”

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“I understand,” I said. “I’ll be careful.”

She nodded. “Your salary will be paid on the fifteenth. I’ll also cover your basic social security. If you have questions, ask me.”

“All right.” I smiled “Thank you”

Just then, something tugged at my leg. I looked down and saw a small boy clinging to me. His cheeks were round, his eyes wide and curious. It was her son.

“Riley,” Jazz called gently. “Come here.”

But he didn’t move. Instead, he held onto me tighter.

Jazz stepped closer. She looked embarrassed. “Sorry. He’s not usually like this.”

“It’s fine,” I said softly.

I bent down and picked him up. He didn’t struggle. He smiled at me and looked at me with those cute brown eyes of his. My chest tightened at the sight.

“Hello, Riley,” I said, touching his head.

He couldn’t hear me. He only looked at my lips, confused.

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“Could you teach me sign language?” I asked Jazz. “I want to talk to him.”

Her eyes softened. “Of course.”

Around noon, I started my first delivery shift. The electric bike wasn’t so hard. I rode slowly at first. The lunch rush was intense, but by two o’clock, things finally slowed.

When I sat down to eat, Jazz asked, “Are you tired?”

“I’m fine,” I replied.

She smiled. “How old is Riley?”

“He’s four,” she said quietly. “He should be in kindergarten, but they wouldn’t take him.”

“Because of his hearing?” I asked.

She nodded. “I’m saving for a cochlear implant. I should get one in two or three more months.”

Her face glowed with hope as she looked at her son.

At three o’clock, another order came in. I glanced at the address and froze.

The delivery address was the hospital. The one where I used to 6/7

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BELLA'S POV

I felt nervous before I even left the shop.

Delivering food to that place meant walking straight into my past. It meant faces that once knew me as Doctor Bella, not as an ex-convict carrying food boxes on an electric bike. I stood still for a moment. My hands rested on the handles. My chest felt tight.

Back then, I had been confident. I had been respected. Now, I was someone people would whisper about.

I felt bitter inside me. I pushed it down. I had chosen this path. Life didn't stop just because mine had broken once. The world didn't soften itself for people who had fallen.

Life was long, and sooner or later, you always ran into people from your past. Going to prison didn't mean I had to hide forever.

"I just have to get used to it," I told myself quietly.

I loaded the food onto the bike and drove away. The air brushed against my face as the streets passed by. The closer I got, the more familiar everything felt. I recognized the roads immediately. I knew the turns. I remembered the sidewalk.

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and even the tall trees lining the road.

My chest tightened when the hospital finally came into view.

I parked the bike and looked up at the building. It looked exactly the same. It seemed untouched by the years that had destroyed me.

When I first walked into this place, I had been full of ambition. I wanted experience. I wanted growth. I wanted my own hospital one day. I had believed the future was wide open.

Now, those dreams felt distant. In fact, they felt foolish.

I picked up the food boxes and pressed the button for the elevator. As it went up my reflection stared back at me in the mirrored walls. I looked calm on the outside, but my stomach was twisted into knots. I adjusted my grip and forced myself to breathe slowly.

When the elevator doors opened, I walked toward the glass entrance and dialed the number on the order. A young woman stepped out a moment later. She looked fresh and eager, like someone who had just graduated. She was most likely a student doctor. I recognized that look too well.

“Thank you,” she said politely as she took the food.

“You’re welcome,” I replied with a small smile. 2/7

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That was when I heard a familiar voice. “Hey... isn’t that Bella?”

I froze.

The receptionist stared at me openly, Her surprise was obvious. Her mouth was wide open as she stared at me.

“You’re delivering food now?” she asked.

“Yes,” I answered simply.

The word tasted bitter, but I kept myself calm. Embarrassment burned under my skin. Hurt followed close behind. Still, I straightened my back. I would not shrink.

The young woman looked between us, confused. “Do you know each other?”

“Of course,” the receptionist said quickly. “Bella used to work here. She was famous for...”

She stopped mid-sentence. Her expression shifted to one of sympathy.

I smiled before she could finish. It was a calm, polite smile, one I had practiced many times. Then I turned and walked toward the elevator without another word.

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As the doors closed, I heard them talking. I didn't need to hear the words. I already knew they were talking about me.

Still, I felt relieved as the elevator went down. I hadn't run into

anyone else. It could have been worse.

When I stepped outside, I took in a deep breath then mounted the bike and rode away. I reminded myself why I was doing this. I was surviving. That was enough.

By the time I returned to Stonewood Residence, it was past ten. My body ached with exhaustion. All I wanted was to sleep. I walked quietly through the halls, ready to go straight to my room, when I remembered Kane's words from earlier.

Say goodnight.

I hesitated, then stopped outside his door. I knocked once.

The door opened almost immediately. Kane stood there, with a calm expression as always.

“You're back,” he said.

“Yes. Well... good night,” I replied, already turning away.

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Suddenly, my arm was caught. In one smooth movement, he pulled me into him. His arms wrapped around me firmly.

His body was warm against mine. I gasped and tried to pull back, but he tightened his hold on me.

“What a half-hearted good night, Bella,” he murmured near my ear.

My body trembled. His breath brushed my skin, sending a strange heat through me. My face burned.

“Let go,” I said.

“Tell me about your first day,” he said calmly. “Then I will.”

“It was just a delivery job,” I replied. We were close, too close “Someone orders. I deliver.”

My heart pounded too fast. I hated how aware I was of him. His face was just inches away from mine. One more move and we would kiss.

“Did you eat?” he asked softly.

“Yes. I ate with the boss. She gives us two meals a day.”

The warmth from his body spread through me. I felt overwhelmed. I wanted distance. I wanted air. 5/7

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+8 Bonus

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He turned my face toward his. His eyes searched mine.

“Are you nervous?” he asked.

“No,” I said quickly. “I’m not.”

“You are,” he replied with a small smile. “Your face is red.”

He leaned down and kissed my cheek. I shivered.

“Is it because of me?”

“I’m not blushing,” I said.

“You’re lying,” he said. His tone was teasing

I pressed my hands against his chest, but they felt weak. My thoughts tangled. Was this fear? Or something far more dangerous?

After a long moment, he released me. He touched my lips gently with his fingers before he stepped back.

“Good night, Bella,” he said softly.

I didn’t reply. I couldn’t. My body was out of control. I walked away quickly.

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Inside my room, I pressed my hands to my face. My skin was still burning. My heart refused to calm down. This was wrong. It had to be.

He used to hug me without this feeling. I had once thought of him as family. Then I learned who he really was, and fear took over. But now... this was different.

Had I fallen in love with him?

“No,” I whispered, shaking my head. “That’s impossible.”

Men like Kane were dangerous. They were unpredictable. Love with someone like him was never safe. Even if he seemed

sincere now, it could vanish at any time.

I lay down but even at that, my mind refused to rest.

Late into the night, the door between our rooms opened silently. A tall figure stepped inside. Kane stood by my bed, looking at me.

“Good night, Bella,” he whispered.

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BELLA'S POV

The next day at work was busy from the moment I arrived.

The restaurant was small, and most days were predictable. I usually delivered seven or eight orders at a time. That was manageable. But around noon, Jazz suddenly called out my name. Her eyes were filled with surprise.

“Bella,” she said, holding the tablet. “We just got a large order.”

“How large?” I asked, wiping my hands.

She turned the screen toward me. I froze. It was an order of

over thirty items. My first thought was that it looked like half a day's work packed into one delivery. For a small restaurant like ours, this was huge.

Jazz moved fast. She packed the food with excitement.

“Thank you so much for delivering these,” she said sincerely. “This order alone could cover a lot of today's expenses.”

I hesitated. “What about the other orders?” I asked. “If I take all of these now, the rest will pile up.”

“It's okay,” she replied calmly. “My mom will watch the register

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after she puts Riley to sleep. I'll handle the other deliveries. We also have an extra electric bike.”

I nodded slowly. I was glad she had a plan. This job mattered to her. It mattered to all of us.

When I checked the address, my hands stopped moving.

Stonewood Group.

I was shocked when I saw it. My eyes scanned the order details again. The phone number was unfamiliar. It wasn't Kane's. That brought a small sense of relief. Maybe it was just a coincidence. Stonewood Group was large. It had many subsidiaries. It didn't have to involve him.

I didn't say anything. Jazz finished packing everything neatly. I loaded the boxes onto the electric bike, securing them carefully. The weight was heavy, too heavy to carry all at once. I planned to make several trips after parking.

With that, I took off. The ride there felt longer than usual. My thoughts wouldn't slow down. When I finally arrived, the Stonewood Group building stood tall. As I parked, a security guard walked toward me.

"Excuse me," he said politely. "Are you Miss Jameson?"

I blinked in shock. "Yes... I am."

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+8 Bonus

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"You can put the food on the trolley," he said, motioning behind him. "It will be easier."

Two more guards joined him, pushing a clean stainless steel trolley. They moved forward, loading the food boxes with ease. I stood there, surprised.

I didn't expect them to know who I was or even to help me. This was....weird

"Thank you," I said slowly. "But... how do you know my name? And who arranged this?"

"Beta Jayden did," the guard replied. "He told us to prepare."

Jayden.

That name was familiar. He was Kane's Beta. I had seen him before, back when I worked at the hospital. The name made my heart feel unsettled. I bit my lip without realizing it.

As I pushed the trolley inside, I heard another guard speak quietly.

“Captain,” he asked, “why did Beta Jayden tell us to watch this delivery girl?”

The older guard glanced at me briefly.

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“That’s not your concern,” he said firmly. “Just remember this – she’s not an ordinary delivery rider.”

I swallowed hard as I heard their words. I ignored them and walked inside.

Inside, the receptionist smiled warmly. “Your name?” she asked.

“Bella Jameson.” I replied.

She nodded and pressed the elevator button without asking me to sign in. That alone confirmed my suspicion – they knew I was coming. I would have wondered how but I already knew.

My chest tightened.

When I reached the designated floor, a tall woman in a fitted business suit approached me.

“Miss Jameson?” she asked. “I ordered the food. You can leave most of it here, but please take these two to the president’s office.”

My heart sank.

The president’s office.

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+8 Bonus

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I picked up the two boxes. I stopped in front of the dark wooden door and took a slow breath before knocking.

“Come in,” a familiar voice said.

I pushed the door open. Kane sat behind his desk, reading documents. He looked calm, and totally unbothered. My chest felt tight.

"I'll leave the food on the table," I said, keeping my tone professional.

I pretended not to be affected by him even though my heart was racing inside.

He looked up and his eyes met mine instantly.

"Why are you rushing?" he asked.

Slowly, he stood then walked toward me. The sight of him coming closer made my chest tight. I struggled to breathe.

He was dressed in a navy suit that fit him perfectly. His hair was neatly combed. Not to mention the aura of dominance around him.

He looked...amazing. Seeing him looking so good knocked the air out of my lungs.

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I finally shook my head, snapping out of it.

"I have other deliveries," I replied. "I need to get back."

"Have you eaten?" he asked suddenly.

I froze. "I..."

"You haven't," he said calmly.

He guided me toward the sofa and pressed my shoulders gently. I tried to stand, but the pressure was firm.

"You don't want to eat with me?" he asked, looking amused.

"I'm busy," I said honestly.

His eyes got a bit darker "Then I'll return the food."

My heart skipped. Panic flashed through me. If he did that,

Jazz would suffer. Worse, Kane could easily ruin her business. I had to do whatever he wanted.

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“.....Just one meal,” I said quietly.

He smiled. “That’s all I want.”

He opened the containers with slow movements and handed

one to me. I ate quickly, keeping my eyes down.

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“Why so fast?” he asked softly.

I choked, coughing hard. He took my hand gently. The action sent shivers through me. His hand was warm in mine.

“My hand is dirty,” I said quickly.

“Not at all,” he replied.

Before I could react, he brought my hand to his lips then kissed it, licking the grains of rice away. Heat spread through my body instantly. My heart raced.

What the-?

“They’re sweet,” he said softly, still holding my hand. “I wish you had more.”

I looked away. I couldn’t breathe. It felt like there was a lump inside my throat.

He released me soon after. I kept eating but my thoughts were

a mess.

Then he leaned close and whispered, “Eating with you feels like going back in time.”

I froze. I knew what he meant. He was referring to the times

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when we would sit in the cabin's dining table and eat together.

Time could never go back.

And yet, for a moment, it felt like it almost could.

Chapter 244

BELLA'S POV

By the time I returned to the small restaurant, it was already close to one o'clock. The sun was high and the lunch rush was

in motion.

Jazz looked up when she saw me with a calm expression. There wasn't even a hint of worry on her face. I expected her to be mad at me for taking so long.

"I'm sorry it took so long," I said anyway, removing my helmet and setting it aside.

"It's nothing," Jazz replied easily. "That was a huge order. You probably had to make several trips on your own. Thank you for handling it so well." She paused, then asked what really mattered to her. "They didn't complain, did they?"

"No," I answered quickly.

I felt a bit guilty but I kept my face neutral. I just hoped Kane wouldn't do anything to affect her business. If he did, I'd never forgive myself. I'd try to be extra careful because of her and Riley.

"Everything went fine." I assured her.

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She nodded, relieved, and moved on without another question. I was grateful for that. I didn't think I could explain everything even if I tried.

The rest of the afternoon continued in a blur of deliveries.

When two o'clock finally came, we sat down for lunch. I barely touched my food. My appetite was gone. My thoughts were still tangled.

Jazz noticed immediately. "What's wrong? You've hardly eaten. Don't you like today's dishes?"

No," I replied gently. "I ate too much this morning."

It was a lie, but a harmless one. She had no idea that I didn't eat because my thoughts were all over the plates. For some reason, I couldn't get my mind off Kane. I thought of how amazing he looked in that suit. I remembered how his lips felt when he kissed my hand. Thinking about it made my skin tingle.

Bella, snap out of it! I shouldn't be having these thoughts.

I glanced at Riley, who was sitting quietly nearby.

"Why aren't you eating, little guy?" I asked softly. "I'm full. I'll share some fruit with you."

I picked up an apple, peeled it carefully, and cut it into small 2/8

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pieces. Riley watched my hands closely with those adorable bright eyes of his.

When I fed him, he opened his mouth eagerly. He chewed slowly and smiled at me. His face lit up in a way that made my chest ache. After a while, his movements slowed. He yawned, stretched his little arms, and reached for me. I lifted him into my arms and rocked him gently. I hummed softly, even though I knew he couldn't hear it. His fingers brushed against my lips, as if he was trying to feel the sound. When he finally fell asleep, his face was peaceful.

I looked at him for a long moment. Looking at him made my heart ache. It felt unfair that such a beautiful child couldn't hear the world. But there was hope. One day, with a cochlear implant, he might hear laughter, music, voices. He might hear someone call his name.

“I’ll take him to his room,” Mrs. Sinclair said quietly, stepping forward.

I handed Riley to her carefully. Jazz watched me with a gentle smile. “You’ll be a great mother someday,” she said.

I returned a small smile, but inside, something sank. She didn’t know. No one here knew. In prison, during one of the beatings, I was kicked in the abdomen. The doctors later told me the damage was severe. He told me that pregnancy would be difficult. Carrying a child to term might be impossible for me. 3/8

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+8 Bonus

By three o’clock, new orders came in. I checked the next address, and my brows drew together. The address was the old hospital I used to work at.....again. The name on the order was Julia West.

My heart sank. Of course. I remembered her voice and her smile from the last time we met. I could never forget the way she looked at me when I was at my lowest.

This wasn’t an accident. This was probably an opportunity for her to embarrass me but I had faced worse. I took the food Jazz prepared and rode out again.

When I got to the hospital, the receptionist greeted me then said “Wait a moment, Bella. Julia asked me to call her when you arrived.”

She refused to take the delivery from me, so, I had no choice but to wait. A moment later, Julia appeared. She looked flawless and confident. She was dressed in a lovely pink suit

with black heels.

Her lips curved into a smile that didn’t reach her eyes.

“So it’s true,” she said with a gasp. “You’re really delivering food now.”

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She took my hand warmly, as if we were close friends. "It's been so long. Everyone misses you. Since you're here, why don't you come say hello?"

I looked at her. I saw the trap clearly. But I straightened my back. I wouldn't give her the satisfaction of seeing me humiliated. I had gone through worse. This was nothing compared to the things I had endured.

"Sure," I said calmly. "I'll say hello."

Julia looked stunned for a moment. She didn't expect me to react so calmly.

She smiled again "Come on. Let's go"

I followed her down the corridor till we got to a room. Inside, Julia clapped her hands. "Everyone, look who's here. Bella, our former colleague."

Heads turned. Some faces were familiar. Others were strangers.

A young woman asked, "Did she work here before?"

"Yes," Julia replied. Her tone was filled with false regret. "She was very promising. She used to be one of the best doctors we had."

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"And now?" the woman asked.

I stepped forward before Julia could answer. "I deliver food for Jazz's Kitchen," I said clearly. "If you'd like, I can bring menus next time."

The room fell quiet. Julia's smile tightened. She didn't expect me to take this so well. I had nothing to be ashamed of. It was honest work. I felt blessed that I was given another chance after prison.

"Well," she said slowly. Julia turned to me "How about your boyfriend? He looked amazing that day"

“He’s fine” I said.

“If he seemed so rich, why are you delivering food. He could be pretending you know. A lot of people keep up the act to use ladies or impress them. I just worry you might be taken advantage of. Your boyfriend looked rich, but people pretend these days. For all you know, he might have loan sharks after him.”

I’ll ask him,” I replied simply.

She looked even more surprised. Nothing she said seemed to land. Maybe this was her way of payback for all those days when she was second best to me.

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I smiled at everyone “Have a lovely day, guys. Please, order from us next time. Bye!”

I turned and left.

Behind me, I heard her voice rise, telling someone about my prison sentence. About the poisoning. About Kane’s fiancée.

I smiled to myself. Hard times always revealed the truth about people. When I reached the elevator, footsteps rushed toward

1. me.

“Bella, wait.” A voice said.

I turned to see one of my co workers from my days as a doctor. It was Neil.

Neil stopped in front of me. He looked sincere.

“If you ever need help,” he said, “you can come to me.”

I forced a smile “It’s good to see you too, Neil”

He shook his head “I’m sorry. It’s good to see you, Bella. I just want to-”

“I don’t need anything.”

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“I could help you find a better job,” he insisted.

I tilted my head. “You remember who the victim was, right?”

Kane Stonewood’s fiancée.”

He looked uncomfortable. “I know. I regret not helping you back then.”

I shrugged “It’s fine. I’ve moved on,” I said honestly. “There’s nothing to blame.”

The elevator arrived. Without another word, I stepped inside.

As the doors closed, I let out a quiet breath. I was still standing.

That was enough for today.

Chapter 245

BELLA’S POV

By noon the next day, the routine repeated itself.

+6 Bonus

Kane’s Beta placed a large order, just like clockwork. Jazz didn’t even look surprised anymore when she saw the order details. She only glanced at me, gave a small knowing smile, and started packing the food with excitement. She was just happy to have lots of orders.

I was the one responsible for delivering it every day, without exception.

At first, I thought it was coincidence. Then I told myself it was business. Now, I knew better.

Every single time I arrived, Kane insisted I stay for lunch.

At first, I tried to refuse politely. I told him I was working. I told him I had other deliveries. I even told him it made me uncomfortable. He never got angry. He never pushed openly. He only raised one eyebrow slightly then his lips would curl into that calm, confident smile that always made my heart lose its rhythm.

“Don’t you enjoy having lunch with me?” he asked once. “I only want your company.”

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I never knew how to answer that.

The longing in his eyes was there. It wasn’t loud but I saw it. It made my excuses sound weak even to my own ears. So I stayed....again and again. And each time, I left feeling more unsettled than before.

Lately, I noticed something frightening.

Whenever I was around Kane, my thoughts slowed down. My senses got sharper. My body seemed to have a mind of it’s own. It felt like everything inside me reacted to him.

I caught myself staring at him when he wasn’t looking. And when he did look at me, I felt exposed, like he saw far too much.

It confused me.

That night, unable to make sense of it, I texted Tara.

Me: “I keep zoning out when I’m around him. I keep having these weird feelings when I’m with him. It’s strange.”

Her reply came quickly. “It must be because of his INCREDIBLY GOOD looks.”

I frowned at the screen. “Good looks? What do you mean?”

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“Kane looks like a million bucks,” she replied immediately. “Be honest. How many men look like that? It’s natural you’d lose focus staring at his face every day.”

I hesitated, then typed, “You really think it’s that simple?”

“What’s going on between you and Kane, Bella?” Tara asked. “I honestly think he might be serious about you. If he were just playing around, he wouldn’t help me because of you, or st and up to Thomas.”

I stared at the message for a long time. Something about it felt wrong.

“Bella?” Tara texted again. “Are you there?”

“Yes,” I replied at last, then quickly changed the subject. “What about you and Thomas? Wh at’s going on between you two? I need all the details”

She sent back a laughing emoji. “That’s a long story. I’ll tell you when we meet. When’s you r day off?”

“Saturday afternoon,” I replied. “After two.”

“Perfect. Let’s meet then.”

Before I could say anything else, Jazz’s voice cut in. “Bella, it’s

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time to deliver the order.”

I put my phone away and looked at the mountain of packed food. My chest tightened. More money for the restaurant. More savings for Riley’s cochlear implant. T hat thought alone made me pick up the delivery list without complaint.

I loaded the food onto my electric bike and rode toward Stonewood Group.

When I arrived, the guards already recognized me. One of them greeted me with a polite nod.

“Miss Bella,” he said. “We’ll help you.”

They brought out a trolley, loaded everything neatly, and pushed it inside for me. One even pressed the elevator button. The receptionist smiled and nodded respectfully, as if I belonged there.

I knew why they treated me this way. It was all because of

Kane.

When I stepped off the elevator, Kane's secretaries rushed forward to help unload the food. They respected me. Some even bowed their heads at me. Anyone watching would think I was someone important.

I took two lunchboxes and walked toward Kane's office. 4/9

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I knocked twice.

"Come in," he said.

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I opened the door and froze. The room was full. Well-dressed men and women sat around the long table. I recognized their faces from the company boards. They were executives, decision-makers. They looked like people who moved the city quietly.

I stood there awkwardly with the lunchboxes in hand. I wanted the ground to open up and swallow me so bad.

"There you are," Kane said calmly. "Come. Sit."

I walked over stiffly, placed the food on the table, and sat on the sofa like my legs belonged to someone else.

"You can eat first," he said gently. "I'll join you once we're done."

I wanted to disappear. He wanted me to eat here? In a room filled with people?

As soon as he said that, some of them started to murmur in surprise. I didn't blame them.

I didn't want to start an argument in front of them. I knew how

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at

+8 Bonus

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persistent Kane could be. So, I ate.

I ate slowly. Every bite I took was filled with tension. I felt their eyes on me. They were watching me with curious looks.

When I finally finished and looked up, my eyes met Kane's. He was watching me. His own lunchbox was untouched.

Heat rushed to my face. I felt even more nervous. I felt like a slide under a microscope that everyone was looking at.

"I-I have to go," I stammered, standing up quickly.

As I reached for the empty box, his hand covered mine. I stopped breathing.

He tilted his head slightly as he looked at me.

"Can you call me your Kane again?" he asked softly.

My throat tightened. "Why are you suddenly-"

"Say my name," he said, stepping closer.

I pressed my lips together, silent. He can't do this. Not right here...

He leaned in. His scent filled my senses in a way that made my head spin.

6/9

09:15

+8 Bonus

< Chapter 245

"Just once," he murmured.

My heart pounded violently. I was about to stop but he leaned in dangerously close to my lips. Just one more move and we would kiss....right here....in front of everyone!.

"Kane," I blurted out. "My Kane."

He stopped just short of my lips. A slow, satisfied smile spread across his face.

"I like that," he said.

My face burned. The moment his hand released mine, I turned and rushed out of the office. My pulse raced out of control.

What the hell just happened?

That evening, after cleaning up, Jazz handed me a book.

"It's about sign language," she said. "If you want to learn."

"Thank you," I replied sincerely.

She hesitated. "Actually, I should be thanking you. Most people don't even try with Riley."

&

+8 Bonus

< Chapter 245

"Riley is lovable," I said softly. "And he likes me."

She smiled. "Maybe this is fate."

JAZZ'S POV

After Bella left, I closed the restaurant and headed to the small room behind it. Riley was already asleep. Mom sat beside him, patting his back gently.

"Is he asleep?" I whispered.

"Yes," she replied softly.

I nodded and sat down. "Bella is learning sign language."

Mom smiled. "That's sweet. She has a good heart."

I sighed. "Sometimes I wonder if she was really guilty."

Mom grew quiet. "She's suffered enough."

I nodded. "Once we save enough for Riley's implant, things will get better."

"Are you really not going to find him?" Mom asked carefully.

I shook my head. I knew who she was referring to – Riley's

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dad. The thought of it made me shiver in fear.

I sighed. "He put me in prison while I was pregnant. He doesn't care."

Mom sighed. I could tell she was worried. I smiled gently.

"I can handle it," I said. "As long as I have you and Riley."

When she lay down, my smile faded.

Running away was the only choice.

I never wanted to see that man again.

Chapter 246

BELLA'S POV

I was on my way home when a black car slowed beside me. Two men in suits stepped out and blocked my path. One of them spoke politely but firmly.

"Sir Allen Stonewood wants to see you."

My heart skipped. I froze where I stood. Allen Stonewood. That name sounded familiar. I thought hard about it and that was when I realized who he was.

He was Kane's grandfather.

The former ruler of Byron City. He was a man whose name alone carried fear and authority. I never imagined he would want to see someone like me.

Why did he want to see me? Was Kane in trouble?

I thought about it. Prison had taught me how well people could be set up. I was a bit skeptical.

"I need to call Kane," I said immediately. "I have to be sure"

My voice stayed steady, but my palms were damp.

1/8

09:15

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48 Bonus

“That won’t be necessary,” the man replied.

Before I could argue again, more men in suits stepped out from nearby cars. They surrounded me calmly. I knew then that resistance would be pointless. I was outnumbered.

“This is a private matter” the man spoke.

I swallowed hard. Fear gripped me hard. What if this was a set up? What if these men hurt me?

If I went missing, Kane would come. I knew that with certainty. That thought gave me enough strength to lift my head.

“Fine,” I said. “I’ll come.”

I got into the car with them. They drove me for what felt like hours. In the car, my heart kept racing.

Where were we going? Why would the master want to see me?

The ride felt long and heavy. My mind raced, but I forced myself to stay calm. I had survived prison. I had survived blame, hatred, and loss. I reminded myself of that over and

over.

Finally, the car stopped at a hospital. When we arrived, they escorted me through quiet halls and into a private room. The door closed behind me.

2/8

09:15

8 Bonus

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Allen Stonewood lay half-seated on the hospital bed. He looked frail in body, but his presence filled the room. I could feel his aura even though he was sick.

His dark eyes locked onto me immediately. I felt them cut through me. As he looked at me, his eyes were filled with disgust.

A nurse stood nearby, looking silent and tense. The man who brought me here stood beside the bed.

"I'm Master Allen's private Beta" the man said "He summoned you here for a matter of great importance"

After that, there was silence. No one spoke at first. Allen studied me slowly, as if I were an object placed before him for judgment.

"Do you know why I brought you here?" he finally asked.

"Yes," I answered honestly. "It's because of Kane."

I had been nervous on the way here, but seeing the contempt in his eyes strangely didn't affect me. People looked at me with disgust all the time, like I was the dirt under their shoe all because I went to prison. I had already lost everything once. Fear no longer owned me the way it used to.

+8 Bonus

9

< Chapter 246

Allen snorted. "That's obvious."

"What are you trying to say?" I asked directly.

I was tired. I had no energy for games or polite lies. If he wouldn't respect me then I wouldn't respect him either.

"I never imagined he would let you live at Stonewood Residence," Allen said coldly. "Do you really think you can join our family this way? Who the hell do you think you are? Someone of your level shouldn't even be living there!"

His words were meant to crush me. I understood that clearly. I lowered my head and stayed silent. No explanation would matter to a man who had already judged me.

He stared at me for a moment, then asked sharply, "You don't have a wolf?"

I bit my lip and slowly shook my head.

He scoffed "You're even more useless than I thought."

The word pierced straight through me. My chest tightened painfully. He knew nothing about what I had endured. He knew nothing about my years of suffering, my time in prison, or the life I had rebuilt with bare hands. Yet he dismissed me

with one word.

+8 Bonus

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Allen turned away from me, bored. He looked at his Beta. "What do you think my grandson sees in this woman?"

"I don't know," the Beta replied. "But there must be something special about her."

Allen waved his hand impatiently.

"I see nothing special," he said. "She has a pretty face, though. Ruin her face and see if Kane still wants her."

"All right," the Beta answered without hesitation.

My breath caught. I looked up at Allen in disbelief. He had spoken about destroying me so casually, as if he were discussing weather. A bitter laugh escaped me before I could stop it. I finally understood how powerful he truly was.

The Beta pulled out a dagger and walked toward me. The blade gleamed under the light.

I didn't scream. I didn't beg. I simply stood there, frozen but silent.

Allen watched me with surprise.

"Not trying to run?" he asked.

"What's the point?" I replied calmly. My voice sounded distant 5/8

09:15

+8 Bonus

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even to me. "You chose him for this. I wouldn't get far."

Even if I escaped the room, I would never leave the hospital. I knew that. Still, something inside me burned.

Why was my fate always decided by others? Why was I always powerless? I had studied medicine to save lives, yet now I couldn't even save myself.

"Smart girl," the Beta sneered.

My fists clenched. As the dagger moved closer to my face, my body shook despite my efforts. Suddenly, I felt fear. I started to panic. Instinct took over.

I ducked suddenly and ran for the door.

The moment I opened it, two guards grabbed me and forced me down. My shoulder hit the floor hard. Pain shot through me, but I didn't cry out.

The Beta approached again, smiling cruelly. "You said it yourself. There's nowhere to go."

I knew he was right, but I refused to die quietly inside myself. Even if I lost, I wanted to fight.

The dagger hovered inches from my face when the door burst

open. 6/8

09:15

+8 Bonus

< Chapter 246

Everything happened fast. Someone rushed in, grabbed the dagger, and slammed the Beta aside with brutal force.

"Getting ahead of yourself, Grandpa?" Kane's voice filled the room.

He stood between me and them. He spun the dagger once in his hand before tossing it aside.

As soon as I saw Kane, I felt relieved to the point that I almost passed out. The relief hit me so hard that I felt my heart drop to my stomach.

"I told you not to touch her," he said coldly.

Allen looked at him without fear. "She's not meant for you."

“That’s my decision,” Kane snapped. “Not yours.”

He turned to me and knelt slightly. He looked at me with a concerned expression “Did they hurt you?”

I finally exhaled. Relief washed through me so strongly my legs felt weak. I shook my head.

Kane stood and faced the Beta.

“You’re lucky she’s not hurt,” he said. “Or you’d regret it for the

7/8

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+8 Bonus

< Chapter 246

rest of your life.”

He kicked the man hard in the chest, knocking him down again, then punched him once. The Beta collapsed, unable to

rise.

“Consider yourself lucky,” Kane said, taking my hand. His grip was firm and warm. “She wouldn’t want to see blood.”

As he led me toward the door, Allen coughed and spoke again. “Are you following your mother’s path?”

Kane paused, just for a second. He stared into the empty air, like he was thinking about something.

Then he walked out with me, without a single word.

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Chapter 247

KANE’S POV

Today was supposed to be special. No – special was not the right word.

It was supposed to be significant. Tonight was my mother's birthday. Every year, no matter what happened, I stayed at Stonewood Residence until dawn. Even during wars, negotiations, or power struggles, I never left.

I sat in front of my mother's memorial tablet the entire night, reminding myself again and again not to repeat her mistakes, not to become weak because of love, and not to trust people too easily.

But tonight had gone wrong.

I guided Bella out of the hospital with one hand resting firmly on her back. She still looked pale. Her steps were a bit unsteady. I could smell the fear in her scent.

When I opened the car door for her, she paused for a second, as if unsure whether this was real or just another nightmare. Then she slid inside.

I didn't blame her for acting like this. In fact, I felt sorry for her. Knowing my grandfather, he probably sent men

+8 Bonus

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her against her will. She must have been so scared.

I got in after her and closed the door. The car moved quietly as we drove.

"Are you still scared?" I asked.

I reached out and covered her trembling hand with mine. Her

skin was cold.

She nodded slowly and bit her lower lip. "Yes."

The single word carried too much weight. I felt it deep in my chest. Her life had never been gentle to her. In between prison, blame, judgment – she had endured more than most people twice her age. And yet, today, she had almost been broken again.

"I'm sorry," I said after a moment. My voice stayed low, but I meant every word. "I didn't expect him to target you, especially not today. He moved faster than I thought."

"What's special about today?" she asked softly.

The moment she asked, something inside me snapped tight. My jaw clenched. My grip on her hand tightened without

me realizing it. I turned to look at her, and my eyes must have been too dark because she leaned back.

2/7

09:16

+8 Bonus

< Chapter 247

She tried to pull her hand away, but I didn't let go.

After a long silence, I released her hand and turned to look out the window. The passing lights blurred together. I didn't answer her. I couldn't.

The car was quiet after that. Bella sat stiffly beside me. I could feel her confusion, her uneasiness. She didn't ask again.

When we arrived at Stonewood Residence, I stepped out first and held the door for her. The estate was silent. The lights were dimmed for the night. This place had never felt like a home to me, but tonight it felt heavier than usual.

"You should get some sleep," I said as we walked inside. "The old man got what he wanted today. He won't bother you again."

That wasn't comfort. It was a warning. We were family. I knew exactly why my grandfather had chosen today. He wanted to remind me who held the past and who could still threaten my future.

I walked Bella to her room. She paused at the door, hesitating like she wanted to say something. I turned away before she could.

Instead of going into my room next door, I headed down the

stairs.

3/7

09:16

+8 Bonus

< Chapter 247

I couldn't stay near her tonight. Not on this day.

BELLA'S POV

I stood at my door and watched Kane walk downstairs instead of toward his room. His back looked straight and calm, but something about his steps felt heavy.

I lay on my bed later, staring at the ceiling. I couldn't sleep, no matter how much I tried. The image of him walking away kept replaying in my mind. He had been different tonight. He seemed tense. He had a sad expression.

I didn't understand it.

My eyes drifted to the connecting door between our rooms. One quick look would tell me if he had come back. I shook my head and scolded myself. Don't be nosy. Nothing good ever comes from being curious about Kane.

Still, I got up.

I opened the door slowly. Light from my room spilled into his dark bedroom. It was empty. The bed was untouched.

My heart raced. Where was he?

I went downstairs quietly. The main house was empty. There

4/7

09:16

+8 Bonus

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were no guards and no voices. Just silence.

I stepped outside. Only then did I realize how huge the Stonewood estate truly was. Gardens stretched out endlessly. There were pathways curved around ponds and pavilions. Most of it was dark, with only scattered lights breaking the night.

A cold breeze brushed my skin. I pulled my collar tighter.

Why was I looking for him? I told myself it was because he had saved me today. I only wanted to make sure he was all right. That was all.

I didn't care much about him....or did I? I couldn't. I wasn't

worried about him either. I was just curious.

Curious...Yeah. That's the word.

I kept walking then I saw a light in the distance.

A small building stood apart from the rest. Its windows glowed softly. As I got closer, I noticed the plaque beside the door.

"Mourning Hall"

My heart skipped.

I pushed the door open slowly. Inside, the room was quiet and solemn. Candles glowed in the room. There was a large 5/7

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09:16

+8 Bonus

< Chapter 247

photograph in front of me on the wall.

A woman stared back at me from the frame.

She was beautiful, but not in a sharp or seductive way. Her eyes were kind and calm. She looked gentle. Her features reminded me slightly of Allen's, but softer. She looked warm.

This had to be Kane's mother.

I stared at the photo for a long time. Kane's father had left them in the worst possible way. I had heard stories like that during my years as a doctor, but seeing her face made it real.

How could anyone abandon someone like her? Did he regret it now that she was gone? Kane told me he killed her with his

bare hands. How could someone be so cruel?

"What are you doing here?"

I gasped and turned around.

Kane stood behind me, his dark eyes fixed on my face. His expression was unreadable.

"I... I came to find you," I said.

"Oh?" He stepped closer. His presence filled the space. "What for?"

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+8 Bonus

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I hesitated. My fingers curled into my palm. I couldn't bring myself to say the truth – that I had been worried about him.

"Well?" he asked.

I looked up at him, my heart pounding, knowing there was no easy answer.

Chapter 248

BELLA'S POV

I stood there for a moment with my hands fidgeting in front of me. My fingers twisted together without me noticing. I suddenly felt nervous, even though I had already walked through worse moments in my life.

8 Bonus

Something about Kane made my body react in ways I couldn't describe. He affected me in ways I didn't know were possible.

"I just..." I said slowly, choosing my words. "I noticed you didn't go back to your room after walking me to mine. I saw you heading toward the stairs instead. I wanted to make sure everything was alright."

As soon as I finished speaking, I felt foolish. What was I thinking?

I turned slightly, ready to leave before the silence became heavier. But before I could take a step, strong arms wrapped around me from behind.

My breath caught.

“Were you worried about me, Bella?” Kane asked softly.

His voice was low, close to my ear. His scent surrounded me:16

+8 Bonus

< Chapter 248

His clean and warm scent filled my senses in the best way. My thoughts scattered at once. For a moment, I couldn't answer him. I stood frozen in his arms, my heart beating too fast.

Was I worried about him?

I didn't know. Maybe it was because he had saved me tonight. Maybe it was because I had seen him bleed for me before. Or maybe it was something deeper that I wasn't ready to face.

I was still trying to sort out my thoughts when I noticed something was wrong. His breathing grew uneven. It was shallow and quick, like he was struggling to keep it under control. A small muffled sound escaped his throat. His arms slowly loosened around me.

I turned around quickly.

Kane's face had gone pale. Sweat dotted his forehead, and his hand clutched his upper abdomen tightly. The sight made my stomach drop. I had seen this before.

“Is it your stomach again?” I asked immediately.

He let out a short breath that sounded almost like a laugh. “

You still remember my old issues, Bella,” he said quietly.

He smiled softly but his eyes were filled with pain. 2/8

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+8 Bonus

< Chapter 248

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+8 Bonus

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I stepped closer without thinking. I supported him and helped him sit on the nearby sofa. He leaned back, his body tense. I grabbed a tissue from the table and gently wiped the sweat from his forehead.

“Did it come on suddenly?” I asked, my voice calm but firm, the way it used to be when I was still a doctor.

“I ignored it at first,” he admitted. “I thought it would pass. Then it got worse.”

He looked at me then. His dark eyes focused on my face.

“I’m surprised you remembered,” he said. “Does this mean you care?”

I didn’t answer. Did I care?

I wasn’t sure. My feelings were tangled and messy right now. Instead of answering him, I focused on what mattered.

“Where’s your medicine?” I asked. “Do you have it with you?”

He shook his head slightly. “I hate taking pills. The pain usually fades on its own.”

“But last time,” I said, frowning, “you took them. When I brought you painkillers, you didn’t argue.”

3/8

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8 Bonus

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“That was different,” he said. He gave me a small smile despite the pain. “They were from you. How could I refuse something you got for me?”

His words caught me off guard, I fell silent, I didn’t know how to respond to that.

I looked around the mourning hall. It was late. There was no nearby pharmacy, and the servants were likely asleep. Only the security guards would still be awake.

“Is there security on duty tonight?” I asked. “Can you ask someone to go get medicine?”

He looked at me with tired eyes. “Are you really going to make me take my medicine again, Bella?”

“What if the pain gets worse?” I asked seriously.

Suddenly, an idea came to me. I pulled out my phone and quickly searched an online pharmacy. My fingers moved fast. Even though it was far, I knew paying extra would speed things

1. up.

I ordered the same medicine I had bought for him before.

When I looked back up, he had curled slightly on the sofa. His teeth were pressed into his lower lip as he held back groans.

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+8 Bonus

< Chapter 248

His breathing was strained. He looked like he was in so much pain.

This man was powerful. He was feared and respected. Yet right now, he looked fragile and alone.

My chest tightened unexpectedly.

I turned away for a moment and noticed the memorial table again. A photo sat there, the same one I had seen earlier. Next to it was a spirit tablet that read: In loving memory of Nicole Stonewood.

So that was her name. Kane’s mother.

Beside her photo was another picture of a handsome man with delicate features and eyes exactly like Kane's. His father.

I had many questions, but I pushed them aside. Kane mattered more right now.

I noticed a water dispenser nearby. I filled a glass with warm water and brought it to him.

"Here," I said gently. "Drink some water. It might help."

His eyes opened slowly. He looked at me through half-lidded eyes.

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+8 Bonus

< Chapter 248

"Do you want me to feel less pain, Bella?" he asked quietly.

I didn't answer. I helped him sit up and held the glass to his lips. He drank slowly until the glass was empty. Then he leaned back again and closed his eyes.

"You know," he murmured, "sometimes I wish I could hurt more."

I frowned. "Why would you say that?"

His voice was low. "I'm afraid my pain is nothing compared to what you've endured. If I hurt more, would you hate me less?"

My heart skipped. I didn't expect those words from him.

Did he feel guilty about what happened to me in prison?

Before I could respond, my phone rang. It was the deliveryman.

"I'll be right back," I said quickly. "The medicine is here. Wait for me."

I hurried out of the mourning hall and ran to the iron gate. The deliveryman stood under a streetlight, looking confused.

"Are you Miss Jameson?" he asked.

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+8 Bonus

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“Yes,” I replied, taking the package. “Thank you.”

I turned and ran back without another word.

I didn't know that the security guards were watching through the cameras. They whispered among themselves in disbelief, surprised that I had gone into the mourning hall and come out safely, even ordering medicine instead of being thrown out.

I only knew one thing. I needed to get back to Kane.

When I returned, he was slumped on the sofa. His face was pale, and his lips were marked with blood where he had bitten them. Sweat covered his forehead.

“Kane,” I said softly. “The medicine is here. Take it now.”

I prepared it carefully and held it out to him. He opened his eyes and looked at me. He swallowed the medicine without

protest.

I noticed the marks on his lips and stared a second too long.

“If you keep looking at me like that,” he said weakly, “I'll think you want to kiss me.”

My face burned. “I was just checking your lips,” I said quickly. “You bit them.”

7/8

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.B Bonus

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He smiled “You can kiss me whenever you want, Bella.”

I turned away. My cheeks were so hot right now.. Then I noticed the incense stick had nearly burned out.

“Should I light another one?” I asked. “This one's almost finished.”

He tried to stand, but I pressed my hand to his shoulder. "Stay here. I'll do it."

I walked to the table, lit a new incense stick, and bowed respectfully toward the photo. I placed it carefully into the burner.

When I turned back, Kane was watching me quietly.

"Is that... your mother?" I asked softly.

Chapter 249

BELLA'S POV

I immediately regretted asking about his mother.

The moment the words left my mouth, I felt the air shift. I had learned enough about Kane in the short time we had spent together to know that his mother was a wound that never healed. It lived quietly inside him. I was about to apologize and change the subject when he surprised me.

"Yes," he said.

The word was calm, but it carried weight. I looked up at him slowly. His face was hard, but his eyes were distant, as if he had been pulled into the past.

Then he asked, suddenly, "Do you think she's pretty?"

The question caught me off guard. I turned back to the large photograph on the wall. His mother's face was gentle and beautiful. There was strength in her eyes, but also sadness. She looked like a woman who loved deeply and gave too much.

I nodded. "Yes. She is."

"Yes," Kane repeated. His voice turned bitter. "She was."

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-8 Bonus

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He stood still, staring at the photo. The candle light outlined

his face.

“She worshipped my father,” he continued. “She treated every word he said like law. She gave him everything – her loyalty, her youth, her pride.”

He

let out a short breath. “She came from a wealthy family, the Stonewood family. She was a powerful heiress who was well respected. She gave my father whatever he wanted. When she chose him, she left all of that behind. My grandfather cut her off completely. He left her with no money, no protection. Nothing.”

My heart ached as I listened.

“That was when my father decided she was worthless,” Kane said quietly. “When she had nothing left to give him.”

I felt a deep sadness settle in my chest. This woman had not been weak. She had been devoted. She had loved blindly, and love had cost her everything.

“She was a victim,” I said softly, more to myself than to him.

Kane’s jaw tightened. “With how rich she was, she would have met countless men. Some of them probably more handsome than my father, more powerful, more worthy.” His lips curved into a bitter smile. “What a fool she was to give up everything 2/8

09:17

+8 Bonus

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for someone like him.”

His words were supposed to be harsh but beneath them I heard pain. I heard raw pain, the type that hadn’t truly healed.

I looked at him carefully before I spoke. “Your father might not have loved your mother just for her looks,” I said gently. “Sometimes appearances don’t matter when someone truly cares for another. People love others for who they are, for their strength, their kindness, even their flaws.”

Kane turned to me slowly.

His eyes locked onto mine. Something shifted in his eyes. They were no longer distant. They were focused on me now.

"Maybe you're right," he said. "Looks aren't always what matter when you care about someone."

The

way he said it made my breath catch. His stare held me in place. I couldn't look away. The air between us felt thick, charged with something I couldn't explain. My heart began to pound, and I was painfully aware of how close he stood.

I broke eye contact only when I noticed the incense I had lit earlier. The last curl of smoke faded into the air as it burned out completely.

Before I could say anything, Kane moved. 3/8

09:17

+8 Bonus

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He stepped forward, lifted his mother's photo from its stand, and without hesitation, set it on fire using the candle flame. The edges of the picture got consumed by the fire. The scent of burning paper filled the room.

I froze in shock.

When the photo was fully burning, he placed it in the metal tray and blew out the candle. Everywhere was dark.

My chest felt tight.

"Why did you burn the photo of your mother?" I asked, unable to hide my surprise.

"I do it every year at this time," he replied calmly. "Don't worry about it. It's getting late. Let's go back."

I glanced at the clock on the wall. It was just after midnight. A new day had begun.

"That's... strange," I said slowly. "Why burn it at this time of year?" Then I caught myself. "You don't have to answer. I shouldn't have asked."

I knew I should keep my distance. I knew better than to dig into his pain.

4/8

09:17

13

+8 Bonus

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"Yesterday was his birthday," Kane said.

I looked at him.

"My father's," he continued. "Every year, my mother waited to celebrate it with him. No matter how late it got." His voice dropped. "She would bake him a cake and do whatever he wanted. Sometimes, he'd come home and wouldn't even acknowledge anything. I burn his photo to remind myself that one day, I'll find him. And I'll bring him to his grave."

The words sent a chill through me.

"This is how I make sure I never forget his face," Kane added. "So, I won't fail to recognize him when the time comes. I was young when it happened."

He reached for my hand. "Come on."

His fingers wrapped around mine firmly. Together, we walked out of the mourning hall.

As soon as we stepped outside, the guards gathered nearby. They bowed deeply as we passed. I could hear them whispering behind us.

"They're out," one whispered. "Miss Jameson is safe!"

"And look," another murmured. "Young Master is holding her 5/8

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hand."

"She's the only one who can leave the memorial hall with him like that," a third said quietly. "Anyone else would've been punished."

Their words made my heart race. I became painfully aware of his hand in mine.

Kane lifted his head and glanced at them. The guards instantly fell silent. Instantly, their eyes dropped to the ground.

I noticed Kane had stopped walking.

“What’s the matter?” I asked.

“Nothing,” he replied, looking down at me.

Back inside the main house, everywhere was silent.

“How are you feeling now?” I asked.

“Much better,” he said.

“You should still get it checked,” I insisted. “Even small health problems can turn serious if you ignore them.”

He smiled teasingly “Is that concern I hear in your voice,

Bella?” 6/8

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Heat rushed to my face. Embarrassed, I turned toward the stairs. “Good night.”

Before I could take a step, he caught my arm and pulled me

into his chest.

“Okay,” he said softly. “I promise.”

I looked up at him, stunned.

“I’ll see a doctor,” he continued. “I’ll take care of myself. And I’ll take the medicine you brought today.” His voice lowered. “Will that make you happy?”

“What?” The word slipped out before I could stop it.

He leaned closer till his face was inches from mine. His voice dropped into a deep whisper. “Would you like me more if I listened to you? I want you to like me.”

My mind went blank. My heart rate increased. I felt goosebumps spreading through my skin.

“Will you?” he asked again. His tone was slow and tempting.

“Yes” almost escaped my lips. But I couldn’t speak.

I just stared at him, frozen.

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After a moment, he stepped back slightly. “You can tell me when you’re ready.”

I felt flustered. He leaned in, like he was about to kiss me. Without thinking, I leaned in too. My body responded to him before my mind could stop it. We were so close. I closed my eyes, bracing myself for a kiss.

Then....he kissed my cheek instead.

“Good night, Bella,” he said softly.

I gasped in shock. I thought he was going to....I thought we were gonna.....Oh goddess.

I rushed to my room, closed the door, and leaned against it, breathing hard. My heart felt like it would burst out of my chest.

I slid down slowly, feeling overwhelmed.

His words replayed in my head over and over.

“Will you?” he had asked me.

I imagined what might have happened if I had said yes.

Chapter 250

BELLA’S POV

That night, I dreamed of Kane.

The dream came quietly at first, like a slow pull instead of a fall.

I lay on the bed wearing a silk nightgown. The room was dark, except for moonlight coming in through the tall windows. My heart was pounding hard in my chest, and I knew I was waiting for something. No, someone. It was a feeling I knew too well

The bedroom door opened slowly. Kane stood in the doorway. The light from the hallway outlined his tall muscular frame. His grey eyes found mine instantly. When we made eye contact, I felt exposed, like he could see right through me.

He walked toward the bed slowly. My breath caught in my throat

He sat on the edge of the bed, close enough that I could feel his warmth. His hand came up and gently cupped my face.

“Bella,” he said. He whispered my name from his lips like a prayer.

“I won’t hurt you,” he said firmly. “You know that.”

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His words made my chest ache. Slowly, I nodded.

He touched my cheek. The contact sent a rush through my body. I leaned into his hand before I could stop myself. His thumb brushed my skin slowly.

“You always pretend you’re stronger than this,” he murmured. “But you’re human.”

I felt my chest tighten. No one had said that to me in years. He called me human – not broken. Not damaged.

He leaned down, resting his forehead against mine. Our breaths mixed. My body reacted before my mind could catch

I wanted him closer. I wanted to kiss him again.

1.

“Say my name,” he whispered.

“Kane,” I breathed.

His lips hovered near mine, close enough that it felt unbearable.

I should have told him to leave. I should've pushed him away. Instead, I reached for him then pulled him down toward me. Our lips met in a passionate kiss, and everything else disappeared.

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His hands tangled in my hair, then moved to my back. He held me like he was afraid I might vanish. I pressed closer to him, my heart racing.

In the dream, I could admit the truth. I'd wanted him from the moment I understood what wanting meant.

His mouth moved from mine to my neck, and I shivered at the feeling. His fingers trailed along the straps of my nightgown. I exposed, vulnerable, and wanted all at once.

The kiss turned slow and deep. His lips tasted perfect. They tasted like everything I'd ever dreamed of.

"I could kiss you forever" he whispered against my lips.

"I don't ever wanna stop" I whispered.

"Then don't"

His hands cupped my breasts, pulling my nipples softly. I moaned into his mouth. He took the opportunity to deepen the kiss.

He-

Then, I woke up

I sat upright in bed, breathing hard. My heart raced like I had 3/8

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run

a marathon. My skin felt hot. My thoughts were scattered. The dream refused to fade. I pressed my palm against my chest and tried to calm myself.

It was just a dream.

By morning, Kane was gone.

The quiet in the house felt like a relief. I didn't think I could face him after what my mind had done to me in my sleep. I finished my half-day shift at work, grateful for the distraction. My thoughts still wandered, but the routine helped ground me.

In the afternoon, I gathered my things and went to meet Tara.

When I arrived, I found her already seated in a dessert shop. She looked miserable. She had her phone pressed to her ear. She spotted me and waved me over while still listening.

"Okay, okay, I promise I'll finish it today," she said into the phone. "Mom, please stop calling about this. Fine, if I don't finish tonight, you can make me kneel on uncooked rice like when I was a kid!"

She hung up with a groan. I hugged her tightly before sitting down.

"What did your mother say?" I asked. "You look like you're about to cry."

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"What else?" Tara rolled her eyes. "She's talking about more blind dates. She says this guy is a great catch. She literally fought other aunts so I could meet him first."

I sighed softly. I could feel how this made her uncomfortable.

"Why not meet him? It could be an opportunity."

"No way," she said immediately. "I'm already stressed. Another blind date might actually finish me off."

I studied her face. "Is there something else going on?"

She hesitated, then looked at me seriously. "Would it surprise you if I told you I'm dating Thomas?"

I nearly choked on air. What?

"You're dating Thomas? Didn't you say he wanted to get even with you?"

"Yes," she said calmly. "Get even."

I blinked in shock "Then how-"

"He probably wants me to fall for him so he can dump me later," she said with a shrug. "Like those ridiculous dramas. Heaven first, then hell."

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I frowned. Kane had described Thomas as ruthless. A man like that didn't seem childish enough for games like this.

"Do you really think that's his plan?" I asked.

"What else could it be?" she replied. "So I'll play along. Date him for a few months. When he dumps me, I'll cry properly. Maybe then he'll let me go."

I didn't like the sound of it. "Did it ever occur to you that he might still be... in love with you?"

She choked on her pudding. "Bella!" she gasped, grabbing a napkin. "Don't make me laugh while I'm eating!"

"I'm serious," I said.

She laughed after a moment. "Even if he is, it doesn't matter. Do you know what kind of family the Sulkins are? I'd be eaten alive. In their dynasty, there are powerful wolves everywhere. I don't fight. I run."

I understood that instinct all too well.

She changed the subject. "You said you got a new job. How is it?"

"It's fine," I said. "It's a small restaurant. The pay is seven

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hundred a month. I mean, it's not much, but the people are

kind."

She nodded, then hesitated. "Have you thought about getting another certificate? You're smart. You deserve more."

I smiled bitterly. "I can't even get a receptionist job. A certificate won't erase my record."

Her expression softened. "We'll overturn your case," she said firmly. "The detective is close. Once we have proof, we'll go to Melgrad."

"All right," I said quietly. Gratitude filled my chest. She had never stopped believing in me.

"No need to thank me," she said brightly. "Once you're cleared, you'll get rich and support me."

I laughed. "Deal. I'll spoil you until you're lazy."

She smiled at me warmly. "You look good when you smile, Bella. You should do it more."

I sighed inwardly. Smiling still felt like something borrowed. After prison, I never found the energy to smile that often anymore. It felt like my happiness had been stolen from me there.

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Her phone rang again. She groaned. "Another blind date. I have to go."

"Be safe," I said.

I watched her leave. As I watched her, I envied her a little. She still had a mother worrying about her future.

I didn't even have that. I didn't have anyone.

The thought stayed with me as I walked home.

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