

## Broken 161

### Chapter 161 Someone New

CLARA

Mark shook his head. "I'll tell you tomorrow. There's more to this than you think." I stood up, still holding the envelope. I didn't trust my voice to say anything else. When I walked out of the café, the sunlight hit my face, but I didn't feel it because my head was spinning. I didn't know if I was angry, scared, or both. I was just having issues processing all I just saw and heard. I stopped at the end of the street and looked down at the envelope again. My name, my picture, the Alpha's crest. I had spent my whole life wondering who I was. And now that I finally had an answer, I wasn't sure I wanted it. I opened the file again, hoping I'd read it wrong, but there it was – my photo printed beside the crest of the Alpha of the South. Born in the South Pack. My mother is one of the Alpha's household companions. A line written across the paper: Child transferred for protection. That was all. No explanation, no reasons. Just a decision someone made about me without asking, without caring what I might have wanted. A wave of nausea hit me. I felt weak, my hands trembling as I let the file slip onto the table. All the anger I'd felt toward Amy, toward Selene, the loyalty I'd poured into following Selene's ideas, felt empty. Like it had no weight at all. Everything I thought I understood about my life, my choices, my place in the world, was suddenly meaningless. I and Mark the next day again and he sat across from me silently, but I could see the tension in his eyes. He'd always been calm, "Clara," he said finally, his voice low. "You need to come with me. There's someone I think you should meet." [www.move\(l\)world.com](http://www.move(l)world.com) I right now, his hands were clenched together, knuckles, I frowned, my stomach tightening. "Meet who?" "Your mother," he said, almost like it was impossible to say. "Her name is Marielle. She's in Ontario. We can find her." I froze. Ontario? That was far away. I had no idea what I'd even say if I saw her. And why Marielle? Why now? My first instinct was to refuse. I'd already spent my whole life running, and now someone wanted me to chase a ghost from my past. "I can't," I said quietly, shaking my head. "It doesn't make sense. I shouldn't go there. I don't even know if it's real." [www.now@1world.com](http://www.now@1world.com) Mark leaned forward. "I know it's hard to believe. I didn't believe it at first either. But I knew Marielle once. She asked me to watch over you from a distance. The Alpha got in the way, but she never stopped worrying. I can take you to her." I swallowed hard. My heart was pounding, though I didn't want to admit it. Anger, disbelief, and a strange, gnawing curiosity all tangled together. I wanted answers I needed to see the woman who gave me life, who had apparently been forced to give me away. "Fine," I said finally, my voice tight. "We'll go. But I don't expect anything. The drive was long and silent. Mark didn't say much, and I didn't either. The road stretched for hours, lined with forests and small towns I didn't recognize. The tension in the car was heavy, each mile brought me closer to a part of myself I hadn't known existed. Eventually, Mark spoke again. "I didn't tell you everything. Marielle begged me to keep an eye on you. She wanted to make sure you were safe. She never stopped thinking about you, Clara. But the South Alpha—he... he would have interfered. He didn't want anyone helping her, or you, outside of his control." I stared out the window, my hands gripping the edge of the seat. Anger rose up, hot and bitter. Why had no one told me? Why had my life been shaped by people keeping secrets instead of letting me decide? And how could someone have controlled my mother's life while she gave birth to me? Why in the goddess name is Mark affiliated to my past? Do I really know him? damn! Mark glanced at me, noticing the tension in my jaw. "I didn't lie to you. I wanted to tell you sooner, but I didn't know how you'd react. You have a right to know now." I didn't answer. I wanted to, but the words stuck in my throat. The anger, confusion,

and the raw need to understand my own life all competed for dominance. Finally, we arrived in Ontario. The town was quiet, smaller than I expected. Mark navigated through narrow streets and finally stopped in front of a building tucked deep in the woods. The structure was kind of weird -no signs, no names. Just a small door at the edge of the forest. "This is it," Mark said quietly. "Marielle lives here. She's careful. We'll approach slowly." I stepped out of the car, my legs were stiff from the drive. Every step toward the door felt heavier than the last. What if she wasn't there? What if this was a mistake? But I couldn't stop now. I needed to know. Mark knocked lightly. Then I heard a soft shuffling from inside. The door opened slowly. An older woman stepped out. Her hair was streaked with gray, but her eyes widened the moment she saw me. "Clara?" she whispered, her voice trembling. I froze, my mouth dry. She knew me. She recognized me. Everything inside me screamed to reach out, to ask questions, to demand answers, but I couldn't move yet. I just stared at her, trying to understand what I was seeing. Before I could say anything, a shadow moved behind her. I stepped back instinctively. A man stood there, tall, wearing the guard's uniform, the symbol of the South Alpha engraved on his chest. My stomach twisted. Mark's hand rested on my shoulder, firm and steady. "Clara," he said, quietly, "you need to be careful. We don't know how much he knows or what he wants." I glanced at the guard, then back at Marie My heart pounded.

## Chapter 162 Tell Me Everything

### CLARA

Questions crashed into my mind all at once. Who was he? Why was he here now? What did he know about me or Marielle? And how much of my life had really been my own to live? The older woman, Marielle, took a hesitant step forward her hands trembling slightly. "Clara... I—I didn't think I'd see you like this. After all these years..." I wanted to speak, to demand the truth, but the sight of the guard behind her silenced me. He was watching and waiting. Every instinct in me screamed that things were about to get more complicated, and probably dangerous. Mark's hand tightened slightly on my shoulder. "We need to be careful. He isn't just here by chance. This isn't a simple visit." I felt trapped between the person I had finally found and the unknown threat standing behind her. Questions raced through my head faster than I could answer them. Who had sent him? Why now? And most importantly, what did the South Alpha want with me after all these years? I looked at Marielle again, searching her face for clues. She looked as scared as I felt, and that only made the tension worse. I wanted to speak, to ask everything at once, but the guard's presence made me pause. All I could do was stare, frozen in the doorway, holding the envelope from the archive, with my own picture staring back at me from the files in my hand. The past I had never known was right in front of me, and I had no idea what would happen next. The guard shifted slightly, his eyes fixed on me, and I realized that the answers I'd been searching for would not come easily. The guard's hand gripped Marielle's arm firmly, his voice cold. "Inside. Now. And don't say a word." I stepped forward, anger burning in my chest. "No! You can't just treat her like this! Who are you to drag her around?" He looked at me briefly, then tightened his grip and tried to move Marielle toward the house. I wasn't about to let that happen. "Stop!" I shouted. I lunged toward them, and Mark was suddenly at my side, blocking the guard's path. "You need to let her go," Mark snarled, "You're not taking her anywhere." The guard hesitated, his jaw tightening, and in that split second, something inside me broke. "I'm her daughter!" I shouted, my voice breaking and shaking. "I'm the one she's been protecting!" Everything froze. The guard's hand slackened. His eyes widened slightly, and I noticed the radio at his belt light up as he spoke into it in low tones. My heart raced as I realized the weight of my words had stopped him in his tracks. After a tense moment, he let go of Marielle and

stepped back. He radioed something brief, then turned sharply and left without another word. I could hear the soft crunch of his boots fading as he disappeared into the trees. Marielle's hands were shaking as she pulled me inside. She closed the door and locked it quickly. I could feel her trembling, her chest heaving, and it made my stomach tighten. I had expected some calm explanation, some careful introduction to the truth, but the way it all unfolded left a pit in my stomach.

She sank into a chair, motioning for me to sit across from her. "Clara..." her voice was weak, strained. "I don't know where to begin. I've waited so long for this." I swallowed hard, keeping my hands in my lap. "Start from the beginning," I said. "Tell me why. Tell me everything." She took a deep breath, looking down at her hands before lifting her gaze to me. "You were born from the Alpha of the South... from an affair he had long ago. Your mother... one of his companions at the time... she carried you for him. But when his mate found out, there was no choice. You were sent away, given to foster care, to keep the peace within the pack." I blinked, trying to let it sink in. My chest felt tight, heavy, and my mind raced. Everything I had believed about my life, my anger, my loyalty to Selene, even my sense of identity—it all shifted in an instant. "I've tried to find you for years," Marielle continued. "I was told you'd died. I never stopped looking, but I had to stay far away. They... they would have taken you again." Her voice trembled, but she kept speaking. "I kept hoping someday you'd find me, somehow. And now you have." I didn't know what to say. I had no words. I had spent years being angry at the world, at people I thought had power over me, and now the truth made that anger seem... meaningless. Marielle reached out and took my hand. "He knows now, Clara. The Alpha knows you're alive. You're not hidden anymore." "Why are you explaining things to me as if you are not my mother? Why are you confusing me the most?" I asked in confusion. "My child, there is so much more that you do not know but I hope with time I will get the chance to tell you everything. For now, I am just really grateful to the moon goddess that you are alive, beautiful and safe." My stomach dropped. I had imagined finally meeting my mother, hearing the truth in a calm, private way. I hadn't expected this. My mind spun with questions. How did he know? What would happen now? Was I in danger? Before I could speak, a low growl echoed outside the house. I froze, my hand gripping Marielle's tighter. She stiffened beside me. Through the window, I saw several black-uniformed guards surrounding the house, their postures sharp. and precise. And in the middle of them... a man. Tall, broad-shouldered, his presence commanding. And his eyes... were mine. I had never seen eyes like that before, and yet, in an instant, I recognized them. Marielle's grip on my hand tightened. "Clara..." she whispered. I barely breathed. My chest felt heavy, my heart was pounding as I tried to make sense of what I was seeing. The man didn't move closer yet, but his gaze locked on the house, on us, and it was impossible to ignore the authority in it. I looked at Marielle, needing answers, needing guidance "Who.... who is that?" My voice was small, almost lost under the weight of the moment. She shook her head slightly, her eyes wide. "He... he's your father. The Alpha of the South." Bound To The Broken Alpha

Chapter 163 Eyes On Him

DANIEL

It has been from one drama to the other since the futile visit to the cottage. It was just another dead end and absolute waste of time. As I walked into the council chamber and immediately felt the tension. The senior pack members were gathered, their eyes all looked sharp and their conversations were low. I had called the meeting to discuss recent security issues, but it quickly became clear they weren't here to cooperate. Whispers flitted across the room. Faces I trusted looked skeptical. "Alpha," one of the council

members started, “we need clarity. Supplies are disappearing. Some patrols are failing. The pack feels unsettled.” I kept my voice as calm as I could. “I’m aware. I’ve ordered increased patrols and reviewed schedules. I want full reports by the end of the week.” Heads turned, but the skepticism didn’t fade. Something more than dissatisfaction was in play. I knew it. This was organized. I just had to find out who was behind it. Cole was waiting outside with a detailed update. “Sir, I’ve traced the movements of unusual visitors near the perimeter,” he said, handing over the data. “Some of our people are meeting late at night, moving supplies in ways that don’t match patrol logs.” I scanned the report. Faces I recognized. Faces I trusted. But something didn’t add up. Patterns emerged, they were subtle but consistent. “Cole, cross-reference all these names with internal communications. Look for anomalies.” I paused. “And check Elias. I need to know if he’s been contacted or involved in any unusual activity.” Cole hesitated. “Sir, if it’s Elias, it could be delicate. He’s not a loose member. He’s commands respect.” family, and he “I understand,” I said. “But loyalty isn’t automatic. We’re running a pack. If someone betrays that trust, it doesn’t matter who they are.” Later that evening, I called Elias into my office. His expression was calm, neutral. Nothing in his posture betrayed emotion. “Daniel,” he said, “you asked to see me.” “Yes,” I replied. “We have issues in the pack. Reports of unusual activity, missing supplies, patrols failing. I need to know what you know.” He tilted his head slightly. “I know only what I see. The pack is always moving. There are issues everywhere. That is normal.” I leaned forward. “Elias, I need you to be straight with me. There are patterns here. I suspect deliberate action. Someone is destabilizing the Northern Pack from within. Have you noticed anything?” He paused, eyes scanning the room. “I hear things. Just rumors. But that is not enough to act. You should know that.” I kept my tone polite. “I need more than rumors. I need facts. Who has access to internal communications besides you?” Elias shook his head. “Several. I do not track every movement. That is your responsibility.” I felt my patience wearing thin. His answers were precise, evasive. He wasn’t lying outright, but he wasn’t helping either. A piece of the puzzle was missing. I left the meeting without a resolution. Later, I found Amy at the estate, reviewing footage with Cole. “There are faces in these videos that shouldn’t be there,” she said, “People moving supplies at odd hours. Meetings that weren’t scheduled. Some of these people are supposed to be loyal.” I studied the images. Each one fit the pattern Cole had identified. “Amy, do you think Elias could be involved?” She looked at me, hesitant. “It doesn’t make sense. But if someone knows what he knows, it could point back to him. We need to be careful. Don’t confront him yet.”

I nodded. “Agreed. We need to move quietly. If we push too soon, it could spiral into open conflict.” The night passed without incident, but I stayed awake, reviewing reports and mapping movements. At 2 a.m., I noticed Elias’s car leaving the estate. The route wasn’t typical. It wasn’t a visit to any known ally or business contact. It was deliberate. “Cole,” I said, calling him immediately, “track Elias. Where is he going?” “Yes, sir,” he replied, his voice tight. “I’ve got eyes on him.” “Minutes passed, each one stretching longer than the last. The car headed toward the Southern border, moving fast, taking back roads that avoided the main routes.” Cole reported. My stomach tightened. He was making contact, or planning something. I didn’t yet know which, but the intent was clear. When Elias returned hours later, he carried no papers, no report. Just the calm composure he always had. But I saw the lines around his eyes. Something had changed. He wasn’t acting; he was preparing. I knew I couldn’t act alone. The council wasn’t reliable now, and too many members were unsure. I called a meeting with Amy and Cole in the strategy room. “Elias is moving outside our oversight,” I said, slamming a folder on the table. “He’s going toward the Southern border at odd hours. He’s making contacts we don’t know about. This is active, deliberate, and dangerous. We need to track him without tipping him off.” Amy leaned forward. “Daniel, if he’s involved, he’s not just undermining the pack. He could be setting us up for

something bigger. Are you sure we can handle this quietly?" "I don't have a choice," I said, my voice firm. "We have to move carefully. If he's working with the South, any open confrontation could spark a border conflict. And we don't have the resources for a war right now." Cole interjected. "We can monitor him, sir. Collect evidence. But it's going to take time, and he's clever. If he suspects us, he'll cover his tracks." I leaned back, my mind racing. The weight of leadership felt heavier than ever. This wasn't just a pack problem anymore; it was personal. Elias wasn't just a secretive member. He was a potential enemy inside the estate. Amy placed a hand on my shoulder. "We'll handle it together," she said, steady and calm. "We can do this. We'll find out what he's planning before it's too late." I nodded, appreciating her strength. But the doubt lingered. Elias had been close to the family for years. If to the family for he betrayed us, the damage would be extensive. Later that night, I stood by the estate window, watching the borders. The Northern Pack felt fragile, like a house with cracks in the foundation. And one of those cracks ran through the man I had trusted most. I picked up my phone. "Cole," I said. "Monitor all access points, internal and external. Track Elias's movements tonight. I don't care what it takes. I need proof before I move. If he's acting against us, we end this quietly but we end it decisively." – Send Gifts 90 Bound To The Broken Alpha

## Chapter 164 He Needs To Know

AMY

I woke early, still shaken from the events of the night before. Daniel had been tense, and I knew something serious was brewing. His calls to Cole had left me anxious, but he hadn't explained the full picture. I could feel it though—Elias's behavior wasn't right, and something in the pack was shifting. I made my way downstairs to find Daniel gone, the kitchen quiet except for the hum of the refrigerator. My phone buzzed. I checked and was relieved to see that it was Cole. "Good morning, Amy. I wanted to give you a heads-up. Daniel's out monitoring the border. He left instructions to keep you updated." I nodded, though he couldn't see me. "Anything unusual?" "There are reports. Patrols spotted activity near the southern perimeter. Could be scouts, could be someone else. Daniel's keeping close watch." I hung up and took a seat by the window. My thoughts wandered to Elias. I'd seen the way Daniel watched him yesterday, the suspicion in his eyes. Something I couldn't yet see was being played out right under our noses. Hours later, Daniel returned. His face was tight and his jaw clenched. He didn't speak immediately. I waited, unsure whether to break the silence. Finally, he exhaled and leaned against the counter. "Amy, I need you to stay close today. Don't leave the estate." I raised an eyebrow. "Why? What's going on?" He shook his head. "I can't explain everything yet. Just trust me. Something is happening in the pack. Elias... I'm not sure where his loyalties lie, but I don't want anything to happen to you." I swallowed, the unease settling deeper in my chest. "Okay. I'll stay." I spent the morning trying to distract myself with work, but my mind kept returning to Elias, to the missing guard, and to Daniel's tone. Something was bigger than any of us had realized. By afternoon, Daniel was called back to the council chamber. I sat in the living room, fidgeting with my phone, until a message from Cole came in. "Meet me at the study. I have updates you should see." I went down immediately. Cole was already there, scanning through reports. "Amy, these are patrol logs from the past week. Notice anything unusual?" I glanced at the files. Patterns. People moving at odd hours, unexplained communications, and a few familiar faces. My stomach sank. "Elias?" I asked quietly Cole nodded. "We've been watching him. He's unknown near the southern border." moving beyond what he should. Meeting with someone I leaned back in my chair. My hands shook slightly. "Daniel needs to know."

“Already informed,” Cole said. “But he wants you to be aware too. He’s worried, and so am I.” I nodded. My pulse quickened. “What should we do?” “Observe, record and don’t confront,” Cole said firmly. “We need proof before moving. If we act too early, we risk tipping him off.” That night, I couldn’t sleep. The silence of the estate felt heavy. Every creak made me jump. I went to Daniel’s study, hoping he might be there. The room was empty, but I found the map of the Northern Pack’s border still spread out on the desk. Patrol routes, logs, and points of interest marked in Daniel’s precise hand. I ran my fingers along one route near the southern edge. The markings were recent. Someone had crossed there. Daniel had been right; something serious was happening. Cole’s voice broke the silence. “Amy, I need to know you’re staying alert but calm. Daniel trusts you, but he can’t be everywhere. If Elias makes a move, we need to be ready.”

I straightened. “I understand. I just... I want to help.” “You are helping,” Cole said. “By knowing what’s happening, you’re part of the plan. Don’t underestimate that.” I nodded, trying to steady my racing thoughts. I realized then that I couldn’t just sit at the estate while Daniel faced the danger. I had to be aware, prepared to act if needed. The next morning, Daniel returned early. He didn’t look relieved. His expression was focused, almost tense. I met him in the hall. “Daniel,” I said, voice low, “what’s happening?” He shook his head. “We have more evidence. Elias is definitely involved. His movements last night confirmed it. He’s making contact with the Southern Alpha’s scouts.” I felt my stomach tighten. “So he’s really betraying the Northern Pack?” “Yes,” Daniel said quietly. “I have no doubt now. But we need proof before we can act. I don’t want to risk open conflict unless we’re prepared.” I nodded. “What do you need me to do?” “Stay alert. Watch the pack, watch his movements. Keep Cole informed. And stay close to me.” I swallowed and nodded again. “I will.” Hours passed, and I kept busy but watchful. Every movement outside, every message or call felt like a clue. By late afternoon, Cole approached me quietly. “Amy, there’s something else,” he said. “The Southern scouts weren’t alone last night. Elias wasn’t meeting them as a neutral party. He was giving instructions.” I felt a jolt run through me. My breath hitch. “Instructions? For them to...?” Cole nodded grimly. “Yes. For actions that could destabilize the Northern Pack. He’s no longer just actively working against us.” withholding into on. He? “We need to tell Daniel.” “He knows,” Cole said. “That’s why he’s preparing. But he careful.” you to be aware too. He trusts you to be I sank into a chair, the weight of realization settled in me. Elias wasn’t just secretive. He had been planning, acting, and now the full extent of his betrayal was becoming clear. That night, I waited for Daniel to return. When he me he didn’t speak immediately. Instead, he went straight to reviewing the border footage. I sat beside him, silent but alert. The recordings showed Elias giving instructions. My stomach churned. acting with multiple figures, passing “This is it,” Daniel said finally, his voice quiet but firm. “This is the proof we need. Elias is planning to weaken the Northern Pack for someone else. Likely the Southern Alpha.” I felt a mix of shock and anger. “How The?”

## Chapter 165 The Weight Of It All

CLARA

The room went silent when he entered. Even the guards at the doorway stiffened like they feared breathing too loudly. I froze where I stood, staring at the man who had haunted my life without ever knowing it. The Alpha of the South – my father. His presence filled the space before he even spoke. His coat was dark and fitted. For a moment, I couldn’t move. It wasn’t fear. It was the shock of seeing the reflection of my own face in his. We have the same gaze, same defiant line in the jaw. eyes. Marielle’s voice trembled beside me. “Please, Fedrick, don’t make this worse. She didn’t come here for trouble.”

He didn't answer her. His stare locked on me, and in that moment, I understood what people meant when they said leadership could be silent. He didn't have to raise his voice to remind everyone who held power here. When he finally spoke, his words were harsh and terrifying. "You should never have come here." The weight of it hit me like a slap. My throat tightened, but I kept my ground. "Why? Because it's easier to forget the daughter you threw away?" Marielle reached for my arm, whispering for me to stop, but I couldn't. Years of being told I was nothing. Fedrick's jaw tightened. "Your existence was meant to stay buried. It wasn't cruelty. It was protection." "Protection?" I laughed, but it came out sharp, humorless. "You call abandoning your child protection?" He didn't flinch. "My mate—your stepmother—would have started a war if I'd kept you. She made her loyalty to her bloodline clear. Keeping you would have destroyed everything I built." "So you saved your alliances instead of your daughter." "I saved lives," he said quietly. Marielle stepped forward. "You could have at least let me raise her here. I begged you, Fedrick. You knew what they were planning in the North. You let her grow up thinking she was no one." He finally looked at her, and for a second, something human flickered in his expression. Regret maybe. Then it was gone. "You don't understand what leadership demands." Mark, who'd been silent until then, stepped in carefully Alpha Fedrick, this isn't the time to rehash what's already done. We came here to clear Clara's past, not to" Fedrick raised a hand, silencing him without a word. His attention turned back to me. "You carry my blood, Clara. You've already proven your strength. But you shouldn't have come here thinking I would protect you or have you back, but that pack is collapsing. Daniel Carter is losing control. You'll be swallowed with the rest of them if you stay tied to that chaos." I folded my arms. "You sound concerned, but you don't even know me." "I know what you "What am I then?" are." His eyes narrowed. "A daughter of the South. Born to rule, not to serve. You think those Northerners will ever accept you once they know the truth? They'll turn on you the moment they realize whose child you are." Marielle's voice broke through the tension. "Fedrick, stop this. She's not your weapon." He turned on her. "Everything in our world is a weapon, Marielle. Every bloodline, every secret." The room grew tight again. My pulse thudded in my ears. I looked at him and saw nothing but a man who'd used everyone around him to keep his throne steady. I didn't care that we shared blood. I had no idea what he was insinuating but I knew it was something selfish. "You speak like someone who's already decided I don't get to choose who I am," I said. "You left me in a system that broke children. You let my mother hide for years. Don't stand there and act like you sacrificed anything for me."

His expression hardened. "Careful." "Or what? You'll exile me again?" I stepped closer. "You think power makes you untouchable, but it's your choices that rot everything you touch. You say Daniel is losing control – maybe you should look at the damage you caused long before his pack ever fell apart. Mark shot me a look, it was a silent plea to stop, but I didn't care. Fedrick's tone dropped lower, almost amused. "You've got spirit. I see now what kept you alive up there." He paused, studying me the way a strategist studies a map. "Maybe I was wrong to send you away. You're not a mistake. You're leverage. The North is breaking, and if you stand beside me, you can have everything you were denied." Marielle's voice cracked. "You can't mean that. You can't drag her into this brewing war." He ignored her. "Think about it, Clara. You have my blood. You belong where power stays alive." I stared at him, trying to understand how someone could twist family into a transaction. He wanted me to stand beside him, not because he cared, but because it made him stronger. "You talk about blood like it's loyalty," I said. "But loyalty isn't something you buy with a name." His gaze sharpened. "Then tell me where your loyalty lies? With Daniel Carter? With the woman who took everything you wanted?" The jab hit its mark, he knew exactly where to cut. Amy's name was the reminder of every humiliation, every comparison, every time I'd been told to stand in her shadow. I hated that it still stung. Before I could answer, the door swung

open. A guard rushed in, panting, his uniform streaked with dust. He leaned close to Fedrick and whispered something. The Alpha's eyes changed instantly, "You' "Yes, Alpha," the guard said, voice low. sure?" Carter's forces have crossed the southern border." Mark froze beside me. Marielle gasped softly. Fedrick looked back at me, a faint smirk tugging at his mouth. "Seems your husband's Alpha doesn't take warnings well." My stomach twisted. Daniel wouldn't have invaded without reason. Something must have pushed him. Maybe he'd found out I was here. Maybe Elias's plans had accelerated. Fedrick stepped closer, his presence almost suffocating now. "Looks like your loyalty will be tested sooner than I thought. Tell me, daughter when the North and South finally clash, which side will you stand on?" – I didn't answer. My mind raced, torn between the man who claimed me by blood and the man who'd fought to protect me despite everything. The sound of marching boots echoed from outside, getting closer. Fedrick turned toward the door, calm again, as if the coming conflict was just another piece of his design.

## Chapter 166 Just The Truth

### DANIEL

I called Amy and Cole to meet me at the office so that we could talk in the privacy of my personal office. I'd ordered everyone else out of the building an hour ago. On the table were the files of evidence I'd spent the last three weeks collecting. Bank transfers. Coded communications. Meeting logs that matched the dates of our border breaches. All of it pointed in one direction – Elias. Cole stood beside me, arms folded tight, his jaw clenched. Amy sat across the desk, flipping through one of the documents slowly. "He covered his tracks well," she said finally, "If you hadn't intercepted these transmissions yourself, we'd still be guessing." I nodded. "He's been at it for years. Payments routed through shell accounts, contacts hidden behind trade agreements. Every major supply shortage, every attack on our shipments – all of it connects back to him." Cole leaned forward. "And you're sure he's working with the South?" I tapped a page on the table. "This transaction right here – fifty thousand transferred to a logistics firm based in the Southern Capital. The same firm that funds the Alpha's defense force. There's no other explanation." Amy looked up at me. "You can't take this straight to the council." I met her eyes. "I know." "Half of them still owe him favors," she said quietly. "If we move without proof that they can't deny, they'll call it treason on our part." – She was right. Elias wasn't just an elder he was the pack's historian, a man who'd stood beside my father before I even took my first breath. Exposing him without the full council's backing would fracture everything. Cole shifted in his seat. "So what's the plan?" "Build an airtight case," I said. "We gather testimonies from the border guards, cross-check his meetings, and make sure every piece of evidence leads to the same name. Once that's done, I'll call an emergency session and-" The door opened before I could finish. None of us had heard footsteps. None of us had sensed him approach. Elias walked in like he'd been expected. His calm smile didn't reach his eyes. He closed the door gently behind him and looked straight at me. "Quite the meeting you're having," he said, "And I must say, you've all been busy." Amy's hand went to the table instinctively, covering the nearest file. Cole stepped forward, but I raised a hand for him to hold his position. "Elias. You should knock before entering the Alpha's office."

"I've been knocking on that door for over thirty years, Daniel. I think I've earned the right to walk in." He crossed the room without waiting for permission and stopped at the edge of my desk. His eyes flicked to the papers. "So. You found it all." I said nothing. "You've done impressive work," he went on. "But it's not enough, is it? You know it. Even if you parade these papers before the council, they won't believe

you. They say it's fabrication. Or they'll pretend they didn't see." Amy stood up. "You've betrayed this pack. The only reason you're standing here is because Daniel believes in due process." Elias turned to her, his expression softening. "Amy, my dear, you have no idea how little due process matters in a place like this. You think the truth is enough to survive politics?" I cut in. "Why are you here, Elias?" He turned back to me and smiled faintly. "Because I don't like surprises. And I don't like loose ends. I came to make you an offer."

Cole scoffed. "You think you're in a position to bargain?" "Oh, I think I am." Elias's eyes gleamed. "You see, Daniel if you destroy everything on that table – every copy, every backup and allow me to leave quietly, I'll keep certain information to myself." [www.Novelry.com](http://www.Novelry.com) Amy frowned. "What information?" He looked at her first. "Your mother's connection to the South." Amy froze. Then his gaze shifted to Cole. "And your father's affair." Cole stiffened. "What the hell are you talking about?" Elias tilted his head, "Your father, before he died, had a brief relationship with Daniel's mother. Hidden well, buried deep. But the record exists. Which makes you, dear boy, Daniel's half-brother." "You're lying." "I don't lie about things I can prove," Elias said, almost kindly. "I served this family long enough to know where all the bodies are buried. And you know that I am telling the truth. If this comes out, the council will call it bloodline corruption. They'll question every right Daniel has to lead. And your company, Daniel — Carter Holdings will fall under dispute. Half-brothers with shared inheritance hidden from the board? That's a legal disaster waiting to happen." "Daniel?" Elias interrupted, his tone casual. "Was a woman named Mara. She worked in your household before you were born. She disappeared after giving birth. Officially she moved to another pack. Unofficially..." he smiled faintly, "...she was paid to stay silent." Cole's fists tightened. "You don't know anything." "I know enough." Elias straightened his jacket. "And if I'm forced into exile by scandal, I won't go down alone." I stared at him. "You're threatening the Alpha of the Northern Pack." He smiled thinly. "I'm offering you peace. You destroy the evidence, and I disappear. No scandal, no fractures, no questions about leadership or heritage. Everyone wins." Amy's voice cut through the tension. "Except the truth." Elias glanced at her, a shadow of something almost like pity crossing his face. "Truth doesn't keep packs alive, dear. Control does." He reached into his coat pocket and placed a single folder on the desk. "Before you decide, you might want to see what's inside." Then he turned toward the door. "You have until morning, Daniel. If you choose wrongly, you'll lose more than your title." He left without another word. The silence that followed was suffocating. I looked down at the folder he'd left behind. Amy stepped closer. "Don't open it." "I have to," I said quietly. Cole's voice was rough. "He's bluffing. He has to be." I lifted the flap and pulled out a thin document. My stomach tightened the second I read the name at the top.

## Chapter 167 Sern It Coming

### AMY

Birth Certificate – South Pack Registry Mother: Marielle Child: Amelia My face was drained of color. "That's my mother's name." I sank into the chair beside me, my hands trem. "Why would he have that?" Cole looked at Daniel, waiting for direction, but he obviously had none to give. My mind was already racing. If Elias had access to the Southern birth archives, it meant he'd been in contact with them longer than I'd thought maybe decades. – I whispered, "Marielle..." Cole slammed his hand against the table. "We can't let him walk away. He'll use this to break everything apart." I closed the folder slowly. "If I expose him now, the council will turn on me before they ever look at him. They'll see chaos, not truth." Daniel opposed. The folder sat open on Daniel's desk, the papers trembling slightly under the low hum

of the ceiling fan. My eyes stuck to the name. I stared until the letters blurred. "Who is Marielle?" My voice came out quieter than I meant it to. Daniel rubbed the bridge of his nose, looking confused than I'd ever seen him. "Your mother's name wasn't on your record before. At least not officially. Elias must have had access to the old archives." I frowned. "So he knew my mother...but you didn't?" "He knew more than he should," Daniel muttered. His tone wasn't defensive. "I didn't know your mother had any link to the South. If this is true, Elias must've found something that connects her to them." Cole leaned against the wall, arms folded tight. "Or he forged it. He's desperate." "He's not desperate," Daniel said quietly. "He's confident. That's what worries me." The air thickened. Finally, I asked, "So what now?" Daniel's jaw tightened. "We pull back. I'm calling off the men I sent to the southern border. We regroup, handle Elias quietly. The pack can't take more fractures right now." That hit a nerve. "You're retreating?" "It's not a retreat," he said. "It's control." "Control?" I stepped forward. "Elias blackmailed you in your own office and you want to \*control\* the fallout by pretending it didn't happen?" His gaze hardened. "Watch your tone, Amy." "No," I snapped. "You think silence protects the pack, but Cole moved between us, trying to ease the tension. "Amy—" what's been killing it from the start." "Don't," I said. "You heard him. He's ready to erase everything to save his name." Daniel slammed his hand against the table. "You think this is about my name? If that man leaks what he knows, it'll destroy more than me—it'll tear down everything we've built!" Cole spoke up then, his voice low. "And what about me? You heard what he said, Daniel. I'm your half- brother. If that gets out, what happens to the leadership line? What happens to the pack then?"

I turned to him, stunned. "You believe Elias would do as he threatened?" He didn't answer. His silence was enough. I took a step back. "So you'd rather let him walk just to keep your bloodline clean?" Cole's eyes flicked up, sharp. "Don't twist this. I'm not defending Elias. But if he's right—if my father—" He cut himself off, then muttered, "There's too much at stake." "Exactly," Daniel said. "We can't let this blow up publicly We'll destroy the evidence, say nothing, and handle Elias later." It was like watching both of them sink into the same quicksand. I folded my arms. "You can't just erase what he's done. You can't keep protecting rot because you're scared of the smell." Daniel's eyes softened for the briefest second. "You sound just like your mother." That threw me off. "You didn't even know her." "I knew enough about her to know she was brave," he said. "And brave people die young in this game. Don't make her mistake." The words stung, but they also steeled me. "Then maybe someone needs to make it again." Cole sighed and turned away, muttering under his breath, "You're going to get us all killed." "Maybe," I said. "But at least the truth will mean something." Daniel looked torn—like a man at war with himself. "What are you suggesting?" I pointed at the folder. "We make him think we took his deal. Destroy the evidence in front of him. But before that, we copy everything—every document, every message. We keep it hidden until we're ready." Daniel didn't respond immediately. His eyes flicked from me to Cole, then to the papers. "If we get caught "We won't," I said. "Elias is arrogant. He thinks fear makes us predictable. Let's use that." Cole ran a hand through his hair. "You're insane." I looked at him. "Or just tired of losing." For a long minute, no one spoke. The only sound was the steady tick of the clock and the hum of the fan above. Finally, Daniel exhaled, the fight draining from his shoulders. "Fine," he said. "We'll do it your way." Cole muttered, "Unbelievable," but he didn't argue. He just pushed off the wall and left the room. When the door shut, Daniel turned to me. "If this fails, Elias won't just ruin us. He'll go after anyone connected to you. Are you ready for that?" "I've been ready since the first time he lied to my face." Daniel gave a small nod, then gathered the papers into a stack. "We'll start tonight." By nightfall, the house was quiet. The only light came from Daniel's study, where the three of us worked in silence. Cole handled the digital backups, while I scanned the physical documents. Daniel shredded the

duplicates we wanted Elias to see destroyed. The rhythm was calm, but beneath it I could feel the tension building. Every sound—a page flipping, a click of the mouse felt too loud. At one point, Daniel paused and said, “You know, there was a time when I trusted Elias like a father.” Cole didn’t look up. “Then you should’ve seen this coming.” Daniel didn’t answer. The weight of regret filled the silence. We worked another hour before Cole spoke again. “If what he said about your mother is true, Amy if she really had ties to the South—”

## Chapter 168 What Does That Mean?

AMY

“I don’t care,” I said. “Whatever she was, she didn’t deserve to be used like this.” Cole’s expression softened. “You really believe she’s innocent?” “I believe she’s mine,” I said. “That’s enough.” He nodded slowly. “Then let’s finish this.” By midnight, the plan was in motion. The copies were hidden, the evidence staged to look destroyed. Everything was set. Then the radio on Daniel’s desk crackled to life. “Command, this is unit nine—urgent transmission from the border.” The voice was rough, broken by static. Daniel grabbed the receiver. “Go ahead.”

“Sir, we spotted movement near the southern crossing. A small convoy under no flag. Couldn’t confirm the insignia, but one of the names came through... Clara.” My chest tightened. “Repeat that,” Daniel said sharply. “Clara,” the voice repeated. “She’s with them.” Daniel looked at me. For a second, the room seemed to tilt again. Cole straightened. “What does that mean?” “It means,” Daniel said grimly, “the South just made their next move.” The radio hissed and went dead, leaving only the hum of the fan and the sound of my heartbeat pounding in my ears. Daniel did not say anything else and instead, he insisted we all rest, saying we needed a normal routine, even if “normal” had long stopped existing in our lives. I had nodded, though sleep had come fitfully, my mind racing over Elias’s threat and the implications of the folder he’d left on Daniel’s desk. By the time we drove home, the city was dark and still. Daniel left early in the morning to the office the next day, and I had left with Cole, as we usually did. The drive was quiet, just the low hum of the engine filling the car. Cole didn’t say much, and I didn’t either. Words felt unnecessary at the moment. I glanced over at him occasionally. Cole’s hands were steady on the wheel, his eyes sharp, scanning the streets. The office was calm when we arrived. I unlocked the door and took a moment to let my shoulders drop. Even in the silence, the tension lingered like an invisible weight. Cole followed me in, setting his bag down. “Anything new this morning?” I asked quietly, keeping my voice low. He shook his head. “No reports yet. Daniel left early. Same routine as always.” He paused, glancing at me. “I take it the email kept you up?”

I nodded slowly. “Yeah. I can’t stop thinking about it. Who would send something like that and why now? I need to see it properly, not just on my phone.” Cole gave a small, understanding nod. “Then let’s take a look. But be careful. You don’t know what else he might have included.” I hesitated before opening the laptop. My hands were steady but my stomach tightened as I logged in. There it was: a message from an unfamiliar address, subject line simple and direct: Truth. The email opened with a short message, nothing extra, just instructions to view the attachments. My eyes scanned the text carefully: “You asked for proof. This is everything. I am not joking about knowing the truth you’ve been searching for. I swallowed and clicked the first attachment. It was a DNA report. My eyes skimmed the results quickly, but I already knew what I would find. The markers, the sequences, the confirmations—they left no room for doubt. I froze, reading it again to be sure. The report confirmed it. My father’s genetic signature matched mine. The Southern Alpha—Fedrick was my biological father. My heart thumped in a

way that wasn't panic, but it was strong, insistent. This was the confirmation I had suspected, the truth that had been kept from me my whole life. Cole watched me quietly, his expression neutral but alert. "Is it... what you expected?" he asked. I hesitated. It wasn't exactly what I expected. I had suspected, but seeing it confirmed in black and white made the reality undeniable. "It's him," I said finally, my voice steady but low. "The Southern Alpha. He's... my father." Cole nodded slowly, processing the implications. "That explains a lot of the secrecy. And the timing of Elias's moves." I leaned back in my chair, trying to let the information settle. I had questions—so many questions—but I also knew that Elias wasn't done. That email, the DNA report, and the promise of more truth meant that the next move had to be calculated. I couldn't let emotion drive me, not now. I clicked the second attachment. It was a photograph. I recognized the woman instantly, though I hadn't seen her in years. Marielle. Her expression was calm but tired. The photo seemed recent. Elias had included no note, just the image itself. I studied her face, memorizing the lines, the eyes, the subtle curve of her mouth. Cole leaned closer. "That's her?" he asked, a trace of disbelief in his voice. I nodded. "It's Marielle. She's alive. And he sent this... Elias. He's not exaggerating. He really knows everything." There was a pause. We both understood the consequences: this was no longer just a matter of pack politics or betrayal. It was personal, and it could change everything. I scrolled back to the email text. Elias had deliberately phrased his message to make the point clear: he had information, confirmation, and proof of the connections I had been searching for. And he was in control of how or whether I accessed it. "This changes everything," I said finally, more to myself than to Cole. "If Daniel doesn't know, it could shift our strategy completely. But if he does..." I trailed off, realizing that the implications extended beyond our immediate pack issues. My connection to the Southern Alpha wasn't just a personal revelation. It meant leverage, politics, and danger. Cole's hand rested lightly on the desk, steadying. "We have to think carefully. Elias won't stop here. This is just another step in whatever plan he has. We need to prepare for the next move before he acts again." I nodded. "We do. But first... I need to process this. I've spent my whole life searching for answers, and now I have them. But the question is, what do I do with them?"

## Chapter 169 The Long Game

AMY

The moment I closed my laptop, I felt a strange clarity. The DNA report confirming the Southern Alpha as my father and the photograph of Marielle weren't just pieces of information, they were the keys to understanding everything Elias had been orchestrating. I forced myself to set aside the immediate emotional reaction. Panic wouldn't help. Anger wouldn't help. Only action would. Elias had proven time and again that he knew the moves before anyone else did, that he could manipulate both pack loyalty and business alliances without leaving a trace. If I reacted impulsively, he would win. I wouldn't let that happen. I leaned back in my chair, hands resting on the desk, and ran through everything Elias had done in the last week. The folder he left, the threats, the timing of Daniel calling off the southern patrols, and now this evidence, all of it was connected. His manipulations weren't limited to the pack; he'd also found a way to interfere with Carter Holdings' operations. I pulled up the financial reports on my second screen and began combing through recent transactions, investments, and partnerships. Certain patterns stood out: unusually timed approvals, subtle shifts in who had authority on specific deals, and a handful of minor but consistent discrepancies in international transfers. They weren't mistakes. They were deliberate nudges, small enough to escape immediate notice but significant enough to sway loyalty and influence perception. Elias had thought he could control everything by keeping the upper hand in secrecy. He hadn't counted on someone in the inner circle seeing the threads he had pulled. That

someone was me. And I intended to turn his leverage into something I could manage. I didn't notice the sound of footsteps until a voice broke my concentration. "Amy?" I looked up to see Mrs. Carter, who returned from her trip earlier than expected. She had that observant presence about her that made it impossible to hide anything. I straightened in my chair, careful not to betray the tension I felt. "Good morning, Mrs. Carter," I said. "Welcome back." I added. She gave me a small smile, but her eyes scanned the room, lingering on the laptop screens and the folders neatly stacked. "Something's on your mind," she said softly, almost like she didn't need an explanation to know. I hesitated, then decided to trust her discretion. "There are unusual patterns I've noticed in both pack operations and in the enterprise," I said, keeping my voice low. "Some interference I think might be deliberate, subtle enough that most people would miss it." Mrs. Carter's eyes narrowed slightly. "Go on." I leaned forward, careful not to alarm her but enough to show that I wasn't exaggerating. "Transactions, approvals, and some of the alliances we've made recently—they've been nudged, influenced in ways that align with the Southern Alpha's interests. Someone is trying to create leverage over us quietly, both in the pack and the business." Her expression shifted, concerned mixing with her natural straight composure. "That is serious," she said. "And you've traced it? Do you have proof?"

"Not all of it yet," I admitted. "But there's enough to see the patterns. I'm working on securing all relevant evidence and ensuring backups are in place. I didn't want to raise alarms before Daniel and Cole are aware, but I also wanted you to know what's happening." Mrs. Carter nodded thoughtfully. "You've done well, Amy. But remember your priorities are the business and the pack. Control where you can. Don't let anyone force your hand unnecessarily." Her words grounded me. I knew she was right. I could let fear dictate my actions, but that would only give Elias an advantage. I needed to act carefully, and strategically. After she left, I returned to the files, this time with renewed focus. My first step was methodical: copying all the evidence Elias had given me. Every document, every photograph, every digital note. Each copy was encrypted and backed up to multiple secure locations. I double-checked every transfer, every password, ensuring that nothing could be intercepted or lost. I set a secure channel to communicate with Daniel and Cole. It was untraceable, fully encrypted, and set to notify me instantly if anyone tried to gain access. This wasn't about paranoia, it was about control. I needed to make sure we had coordinated oversight of everything Elias had delivered. The hours passed with me organizing the information by relevance and priority: the DNA report and photograph at the top, financial manipulation evidence next, and finally the subtle pack interference logs. I made notes on patterns I could verify quickly and those that required more time. By the time the sun had fully risen, I had created a framework for what needed to happen next. We had leverage, information, and insight. What we lacked was clarity on Elias's next move. That clarity arrived unexpectedly. A soft ping drew my attention to the inbox. I didn't recognize the sender, but the subject line was deliberate: "For Amy." I hesitated only briefly before opening it. Inside was a short, encrypted message. I didn't need to decrypt it immediately to know it was from Elias—his tone was unmistakable even in digital form. He addressed me directly, confirming the significance of everything I had discovered and hinting at a "final revelation" that would determine my future. Attached to it was a file. I opened it carefully, eyes scanning the content. It was a note, brief and calculated: "All you've uncovered is only part of the truth. I have one final piece, Amy. When you see it, your choices will define everything—your place in the pack, your role in the enterprise, and the path your life follows. Prepare carefully." There was no signature, no traceable metadata. Only the message and a single indicator: the attachment had been sent with a secure timestamp, confirming Elias's access to every communication channel I'd used to track his interference. I

leaned back, hands gripping the edge of the desk. Elias had played the long game, and now the last piece of the puzzle was on its way.

Chapter 170 Proof

AMY

It would demand careful thought, precise action, and more than a little patience. But for the first time, I felt that control was within reach. Not complete control, not yet—but enough to plan a move that Elias wouldn't anticipate. Cole glanced at me, raising an eyebrow. "Is that..." I nodded without speaking. "Yes. Elias. He's sending one last piece. Whatever it is, we can't act impulsively. This is exactly what he wants if we do." Cole's jaw tightened. "Then we wait. And prepare. Make sure everything is secure." I opened the attachment fully, careful not to jump to conclusions. The data was encrypted, detailed, and comprehensive. Even without opening the full contents, I could see the structure. It was a direct confirmation of every connection, every piece of manipulation Elias had used, and a promise that the next revelation would complete the map. I exhaled slowly, knowing the hours ahead would demand absolute focus. Elias had forced our hand in subtle ways, but he had no idea that I wasn't going to react blindly. Every step I take would be careful, precise, and designed to regain control. I backed up the attachment again, triple-checking the secure channels. Daniel and Cole needed to know when the time was right, but until then, every piece of evidence had to remain untouchable, impervious to interference. And then the final ping came. A single line in the message interface: "Amy, when you're ready, the truth will reveal itself. Choose carefully. Your future depends on it" I stared at the screen for a long moment, digesting the weight of those words. Elias had the truth, the leverage, and the timing in his favor. But now, armed with the knowledge he had provided and the systems I had put in place, the power of response was mine. The threads Elias had pulled were now visible, and for the first time, I could see the pattern. The path ahead would require precision, patience, and strategy but I wouldn't let him dictate my choices anymore. Not now, not ever. I leaned back in my chair, letting my mind map the next moves. Elias might have started this game, but I intended to finish it on my terms. And I knew, when the final revelation came, everything would change. \*\*\* The office was quiet the next morning. I had arrived early, long before Daniel, Cole, and the rest of the executive team. My fingers hovered over the keyboard as I accessed Carter Holdings' internal databases, scanning for anything out of place. Every transaction, every approval, every memo from the last few months could hold a clue. And I was determined to find it. Elias had already proven he was patient, and capable of manipulating both pack loyalty and business operations without leaving a trace. If I wanted to regain control, I needed to uncover every subtle interference he'd made. The first thing that jumped out at me were discrepancies in minor investments. Nothing that would

immediately trigger suspicion, but patterns emerged when I cross-referenced departments, approvals, and third-party contracts. Some approvals had been fast-tracked without proper oversight. Certain resources had been reallocated, consistently favoring specific partners who were known to align with Southern interests. It wasn't overt theft, at least not yet. Elias had been siphoning influence, subtly weakening Daniel's authority, and shaping perceptions within the company and the pack at the same time. I leaned back in my chair, letting my eyes trace the digital maps I had pulled together. Cole walked in, silent as always, carrying a laptop and a small satchel. He placed them on the desk, glanced at the screens, and frowned. "Everything looks messy," he said. "But you've connected the dots faster than I expected. Daniel will be frustrated that he doesn't see the patterns as clearly." I didn't respond

immediately, my mind still sorting through the web of transactions. “He’s reactive,” I said finally. “Not bad, just reactive. He trusts me to handle the details, to see what he can’t. That’s why I have to get this right. If we misstep, Elias will take advantage of it.” Cole nodded, tapping on his laptop to start scanning for digital vulnerabilities and backup opportunities. “Security’s tight, but I can make sure the logs are mirrored and encrypted. Nothing leaves this room untracked.” We worked in silence for a while, the only sounds were the quiet hum of computers and the soft tapping of keys. It wasn’t glamorous, but this was the front line. Corporate intelligence had become as dangerous as any battlefield. By mid-morning, Mrs. Carter arrived, looking impeccably poised. She walked past the reception area with that familiar air of authority, stopping by my office door to glance at my screens. “Interesting,” she said softly. I looked up, meeting her eyes. “Is something wrong?” I asked, masking the tension in my voice. She stepped inside, closing the door behind her. “Not wrong. But I’ve noticed anomalies in the enterprise files—subtle, but deliberate. Approvals, minor financial shifts, project priorities that seem slightly off. They line up with what you’ve been digging into.” I straightened, careful not to let surprise show. Mrs. Carter had always had a sharp eyes for irregularities, but to see her align her findings with mine created a strange sense of validation. I had someone in the upper echelons of the company who understood what was at stake. “Then we need to coordinate,” I said. “Elias has been influencing decisions behind the scenes. I think he’s using information from someone inside the enterprise as well, feeding him intel on both the pack and the company.” Her gaze hardened. “Do you have proof of this?” “Not concrete yet,” I admitted. “But the patterns are consistent. Someone is leaking details he shouldn’t have access to. My plan is to isolate the leak and use it to create leverage over him.” Mrs. Carter leaned back, considering. “You’re walking a fine line, Amy. The pack’s stability, the company’s reputation, and your own position—all of it hangs on your next steps. Don’t let this become reckless.”