

Broken 271

Chapter 271 Not Guilty Verdicts

CLARA

I sat on the cold floor of the abandoned shed, legs pulled against my chest, breathing through my shirt as the stench of fuel crept into my nose. The car I had stolen and dumped here hours ago was still leaking. My head felt heavy, and my eyes burned, but I didn't move. I couldn't. Any sound might give me away. I stayed hidden in the ceiling crawl space until the footsteps outside faded. They had searched for hours, shouting orders, kicking through the brush, and breaking branches like they owned the forest. They didn't. Not tonight. Once I was sure I was alone, I dropped down quietly, grabbed the small bag I'd stolen, and headed out. I walked through the woods until the trees thinned and the road came into view. The air tasted cleaner, and I forced myself to keep moving. He was waiting somewhere south. We couldn't speak over the phone. We couldn't send messages. So we agreed on the one place neither Daniel nor any northern wolf would go near- an underground club far from any pack territory. A place where people went to disappear. I reached the city after midnight. I kept my hood low and my head down as I passed through the narrow alleys behind the nightclub district. The entrance we discussed wasn't marked. Just a rusted metal door behind a dumpster. I knocked twice, paused, then knocked again. It opened from inside. No words. Just a stare from a guard who looked annoyed to see anyone at all. "I'm expected," I said. He grunted but let me in. Heat hit me first. Then the loud, heavy music. Then the smell of smoke, sweat, and cheap alcohol. Women sat in corners with blank expressions. Men evaluated them like they were choosing products. No one looked twice at me. That was the point. No noble-ranked wolf would step inside a place like this. No elder. No council member. No one connected to Daniel or Amy. That was why we chose it. I walked to the back room. He was already there, leaning against the table with a drink in his hand as if this was a normal meeting. Elias lifted his eyes when I entered. "You made it."

"I said I would." My voice came out rough from breathing fuel for too long. He looked me over. "You look terrible." "I didn't come here for compliments." He smirked. "Fair enough. Sit." I stayed standing. "Just talk." He set his drink down and crossed his arms. "They halted the search." I felt a wave of relief hit me. "Good." "They have no trace. No scent. No witnesses. You dropped off the map." "That was the goal." He nodded. "And Daniel couldn't track me either. The South Alpha blocked him." "That man is insane," I muttered. "True. But he hates Daniel, so he's useful." I stepped closer. "Tell me the real update." Elias pushed aside a stack of files. "Amy was discharged from the hospital. She's back home." My jaw tightened. "So she's fine." "She's nervous. Shaken. Staying close to Daniel." I swallowed the bitter taste in my mouth. "Of course she is." Elias watched me carefully. "Are you sure you want to do this?" "Yes." "You hesitated last time." "I'm not hesitating now." He raised a brow. "You also told Daniel the truth once. That complicates things." "That was a mistake," I said. "I was desperate. I know what I'm doing now." Elias didn't push. He knew better.

I took a breath. "You found the place, right?" "I did. And it's exactly what we need." "Explain." He picked up a card from the table and handed it to me. It had a symbol-no words. Just a marking that meant nothing unless you knew what it stood for. "This club runs a hidden side operation," Elias said. "Women brought in from outside. No questions asked. No one checked. No one is protected." "I saw what it looked like outside."

"Inside is worse." I was tense. "Good." He narrowed his eyes. "What exactly do you want from this?" "I want her humiliated," I said clearly. "I want her ruined. I want Daniel broken when he realizes he couldn't protect her." "You want her kidnapped," Elias said. "Yes." "And assigned to the worst men here." "Yes." He leaned back. "You say it like you're ordering food." "I'm done caring about how things sound." He exhaled. "Clara... you understand that once she's taken, there's no going back? The moment she enters this place, she's gone." "That's the point." "And if Daniel finds her?" "He won't." I forced my voice steady. "He's stretched thin. The rogue hunters. The Council turning on him. His focus is divided. He won't expect an ambush this close to the human city." Elias drummed his fingers on the table. "We need to time it right."

"I know." "She'll need to be lured out." "I'll do it." He blinked. "You?" "I have my ways." Elias paused. "This is cold, even for you." "You're here too," I shot back. "I never said I wasn't." We stayed silent for a moment. The noise outside the room grew louder, voices clashing, someone shouting at a bartender. I didn't pay attention. My mind was already ahead. "When can we do it?" I asked. Elias glanced at his watch. "Two days. They change the security rotation then. Less guards. More opportunities." I nodded. "Fine." "We'll need a van, two handlers, and someone working the back exit. I already have names." "Good." He stepped closer. "Clara... are you sure you're stable enough to do this? After everything?" I met his eyes directly. "I'm more stable now than I've been in months." "And you don't think Daniel will suspect you?" "He won't have time," I answered. "Especially after the Council ruling." Elias smirked. "Ah yes. The grand 'not guilty' verdict." "Everything is working in our favor," I said. "We strike now before they regain control." He picked up his drink again. "You've changed." "Good."

Chapter 272 We Meet Again

CLARA

He took a slow sip. "What if Amy fights back?" "She won't win." He raised a brow. "Confident." "Realistic." He studied me for a long moment. "All right. We do it your way." I nodded once. "Will we meet again here?" "No," he said. "Too risky. I'll find another spot. This place is for the final step, not planning." I understood. He grabbed his coat. "You should leave first." "Fine." As I reached the door, he spoke again. "Clara?" I stopped. "You know Daniel will come for blood when he finds out." I didn't turn around. "He came for mine first." I stepped out into the hallway. The club noise hit me again, louder this time. The men laughed. Women kept their eyes down. No one knew who I was. No one cared. That was why this plan would work. I pulled up my hood and left through the back exit. Two days. That was all I needed. And Amy would finally pay. I sat outside the club for almost ten minutes before I finally pulled the burner phone out of my pocket. My hands were shaking, but not from fear. Just adrenaline. The kind that hits after running for your life twice in twenty-four hours. Elias had gone, leaving me alone in the alley behind the underground club, the air thick with smoke from nearby bars. I stared at the phone screen. I had one number memorized. One I never thought I'd use again. Mark. I didn't want to call him. But I didn't have a choice. I needed a place to stay that Daniel's pack wouldn't think to barge in. And Mark—whether he admitted it or not—was predictable. He always took the bait when I asked for help. I dialed the number. It rang once. Twice. Then he picked up. "...Hello?" His voice was older. Rougher. Like he'd swallowed too much smoke and regret over the years. I pressed the phone tighter to my ear. "It's me," I said quietly. There was a long pause. Too long. "Clara?" "Yes." Another pause. "Why are you calling me? You're being hunted." "I know." And you're calling me," he repeated. "You're out of your mind." "I didn't know who else to call." He sighed loudly. "That's not my problem. I left all that mess

behind. I don't want trouble, Clara." "I'm not asking for trouble." "You always do. Even when you don't try." My throat tightened, but I pushed through. "I want to come home." Silence. A big one. I kept going. "I'm tired. I'm hiding everywhere. I'm running. I don't want to run anymore. I'm sorry for everything. I just... I can't keep doing this." He stayed quiet. "Where are you?" My chest loosened a little. "I'm close. Just outside the city." Another sigh. "I'll text you an address. It's not my house. It's temporary. You come straight. No detours. No drama. You hear me?"

Yes." "Good." The address came five minutes later. A run-down residential block on the outskirts of town. Safe enough for a few hours. Maybe a day. I hid the burner deep in my pocket and walked toward the nearest bus line, keeping my hood low. I didn't shift. That would draw attention fast. I stayed human, tired, and quiet. The trip took forty minutes. By the time I reached the street, dawn had started showing at the edge of the sky. The buildings were old and washed out, the kind of place where people minded their business. Perfect. Mark stood outside the building with his arms crossed. He looked older. Exhausted. And thinner than I remembered—like he'd been living on microwave meals and stress. He didn't smile when he saw me. But he didn't turn around either. That counted. I stopped a few steps in front of him. "Mark." He looked me up and down. "You look like hell." "I know." He stepped aside. "Come inside before someone recognizes you." We went up a narrow staircase and into a small apartment that looked barely lived in. A couch, a table, two chairs, and a fridge that hummed louder than the street outside. No pictures. No signs of a job. No life markers. "Whose place is this?" I asked. "Someone I know," he answered. "Doesn't matter." I sat on the couch. He stayed standing, arms folded. "You smell like gasoline," he said. "I had a long night." "I figured." He dragged a chair across the room and sat in front of me. "Start talking." I hesitated. He tilted his head. "Clara. I didn't bring you here to stare at me." "I escaped the North," I said. "Daniel caught me once. Dragged me back. Locked me up." Mark's jaw tightened. "He always had a temper." "This wasn't temper. He wasn't going to let me out again." "And you think coming here is better?" "I needed a place to hide." He shook his head. "You didn't call for shelter. You called because you want something." I stayed quiet. "See?" he said. "That silence tells me everything." "I just..." My voice cracked. "I just want to breathe. That's all." He leaned back. "You think I haven't built a quiet life for a reason? I don't want the packs. I don't want politics. I don't want blood feuds. I don't want Daniel Carter knocking on my door with fifty warriors because you dragged your storm here." "I'm not dragging anything here." "You are." He pointed at me. "You always come with fire following behind you. I'm too old for that." I looked down at my hands. "I know." He sighed, long and tired. "So tell me the truth. Why now?" I lifted my head slowly. "I didn't know where else to go." "That's not an answer." "It's the only one I have." He rubbed his face. "Clara, I don't want drama. I don't want screaming. I don't want running. I don't want strangers pounding my door. I don't want blood on my hands again." His voice dropped. "I'm done being the one who cleans your mess." I swallowed hard. "I'm not asking you to clean anything." "You're asking for shelter." "Yes." "And peace?" "Yes." He stared at me, searching for something in my "You're lying," he said. "I'm not." face. "You are. But not fully. You want shelter. You want rest. But you also want revenge. I can see it in your eyes."

Chapter 273 Don't Make It A Habit

CLARA

Mark's place didn't match him. I expected chaos, bottles everywhere, clothes on the floor, his usual disaster. What I walked into was.. quiet. Too quiet. A small apartment with clean floors, folded blankets, and a cheap sofa that didn't sag. He didn't smile when he opened the door. He just stepped aside. "You

look like hell," he said. "I know." "You smell like gasoline." "I know." He looked at me for a long time. It wasn't concern on his face. It wasn't anger. It was confusion, like he couldn't figure out why the universe kept throwing me into his peaceful bubble. He finally pushed himself off the door and walked past me to the small kitchen counter. "Sit if you want. Don't touch anything." I sat. The chair was cold. "You said you wanted to come home," he said without turning around. "This is not home. This is where I stay. Don't get ideas." "Safe from Daniel?" He laughed once, short and humorless. "You're lucky he hasn't burned the world down. looking for you." "He stopped searching." "Because he thinks you're gone. Dead. Whatever." He waved that off. "Doesn't matter." I shifted in the chair. "I'm not here to cause problems." "You always say that," he said. Then he turned to look at me. "Then problems follow you like flies." I clenched my hands. "I'm trying to fix things." "Oh, fix things? Good. Because my life has been quiet for the first time in years." He walked closer, eyes cold. "I don't want drama. I don't want the police. I don't want packs involved. I don't want your personal wars landing at my door." "You think I came here to drag you into anything?" "I think you came here because you have nowhere else to go." He paused. "And because you need something." I didn't deny it. He wasn't wrong. Mark pulled out a chair opposite mine and sat. He rested his arms on the table, watching me like I was a stray animal he wasn't sure he wanted inside.. "What do you want, Clara?" "I want a place to stay. Just for a while." "How long?" "A few days." "No." "Mark-" "No." He stood and walked away from the table. "A day. One day. That's it." "One day isn't enough." "Too bad." He opened a cupboard and grabbed a glass. "You don't get to set terms here. I'm doing you a favor." I frowned. "If you didn't want to help, why pick up the phone?" He froze for a second, then poured water into the glass. "Because I'm stupid," he said quietly. "Or sentimental. Can't tell." He set the glass in front of me. I drank half of it in one go. He watched me like he was trying to study what I'd become. I knew what he saw: someone thinner, someone paler, someone running out of ways to survive without losing the little pride she had left. "You got anyone on your tail?" he asked. "No." "No one followed you?" "No." "Does anyone know you called me?" "No." He didn't believe my tone, but he didn't push. He sat again. "Tell me what happened." "Long or short?" "Short," "I escaped. Someone helped. We met. Planned. Then I needed somewhere to disappear." I swallowed. "I chose you." Mark rubbed a hand over his face. "You always choose me when you're desperate." I didn't answer. "And the person helping you?" he asked. "What do they want from you?" "Same thing I want." "Which is?" "Daniel and Amy ruined."

His jaw tightened. "There it is." "You asked." "I did." Mark tapped the table with his finger. "Clara, listen. You need to stop. You need to let this thing go." "It's not that simple." "It is." He leaned forward. "You're going to get yourself killed." "I already almost did." "Exactly." "I'm not done." "You should be done." His tone sharpened. "You're not strong enough for whatever you're planning. You look like you can barely stand." "I'll recover." He scoffed. "You always think you can fight an army with a stick."

"I'm not fighting an army." "You're fighting Daniel," he said. "Which is worse." I didn't flinch. "You don't understand." "I understand perfectly." He exhaled. "He won. You lost. And you're still not satisfied." "I can't let Amy walk around like she didn't destroy my life." Mark stared at me. "You destroy your own life, Clara." That hit harder than I expected. I looked away. He stood again, restless. "You're staying one night. Then you disappear. Not to Daniel. Not to me. Somewhere no one knows you." "I can't disappear." "You can." "I won't." He leaned back against the counter, annoyed and tired. Then at least tell me there won't be blood on my floor tomorrow." "There won't," I said. He didn't look convinced. Mark rubbed his forehead. "Where's your bag?" "Lost it." "Of course." He sighed. "The bathroom is down the hall. Don't take long showers. The water heater is dying." "I won't." "And don't open my

bedroom door." "I'm not stupid." "Debatable," he muttered. I ignored that. "Mark," I said. "What." "Thank you." He froze again. That always got him. Praise, gratitude—he never knew how to react to it. "Don't make it a habit," he said, turning his back. "I won't." He stayed quiet for so long I wondered if he was done with the conversation. Then he said, quietly, "I'm serious, Clara. One wrong move and I'm throwing you out." "You won't have to." "We'll see." He stood up. "You sleep on the couch. You shower first. Your clothes stink. Then you rest. No calls. No messages. No sneaking out. No people coming to meet you." I stayed quiet. He narrowed his eyes. "Clara. I mean it." "I know." "You break my rules, you're out before sunrise."

"I won't." He walked away, leaving me alone at the table. I stared at the glass of water, trying to figure out how I ended up here again. Mark. The one person who always let me in even when he shouldn't. I knew he didn't trust me. I didn't blame him. I didn't trust myself either.

Chapter 274 A Love That Never Dies

CLARA

The nonstop vibration of my phone hit me before I even opened my eyes—one long, endless string of notifications. My brain felt heavy, like it was trying to stay underwater while someone shook the surface. I groaned and dragged my hand across the bed, searching for my phone. When I finally found it, the screen lit up so bright it stabbed my half-awake eyes. My vision blurred for a second before it cleared enough for me to see the names. Selene. Elias. Again. Again. And again. Dozens of messages. All caps. Voice notes. Missed calls. My stomach clenched. Either something terrible happened... or something unbelievable. I forced myself to sit up and opened the first message. Elias: >"CLARA, WE'RE FREE! NOT GUILTY! EVERYTHING CLEARED!" I blinked. Another message came in immediately. "THE COURT DROPPED EVERYTHING. THEY SAID THERE WAS NO EVIDENCE LEFT. ZERO." I scrolled. Elias wrote: "They announced it an hour ago. No charges. We're out. Officially." I stared at the screen, confused, stunned, and suddenly wide awake. I had been running for my life, hiding like some unwanted rat, fighting shadows... and now, apparently, I wasn't a fugitive anymore? It made no sense. None. But relief spread through me faster than the confusion could catch up. For once, something went right. Something broke in my favor. I didn't know how, I didn't care. I just let the air leave my chest in a shaky breath. A small, tired smile started to form on my face before three sharp knocks hit the door. I stiffened for a second before remembering where I was. Mark's place. His guest room. His rules. I slid off the bed and opened the door. Mark stood there, one hand braced on the frame, staring at me like he already knew everything. "You read it," he said. It wasn't a question. "Yes," I whispered. He nodded once. "How did you do it?" I frowned. "Do what?" "Clear your charges. Get the council off your back. Someone had to pull strings, Clara." I shook my head. "I didn't do anything." He raised a brow. "Come on." +5 Pearls "I'm serious." I tightened my grip on the phone. "I've been telling you I had nothing to hide. I never lied about that. You just never believed me." Mark watched me quietly, his expression shifting—slowly, but enough for me to notice. The hardness in his eyes faded. The suspicion loosened. His lips gentled, just a little, into something almost... soft. It was the first time since I walked into his apartment that he didn't look tired of me. And that tiny shift, that softness, hit me harder than anything else. For the first time in forever, I felt like there was hope—hope that the old us wasn't entirely dead. Hope that maybe he didn't hate me. Hope that maybe, somewhere under all the mess, he still cared.

Before I could think twice, I acted. I walked off the bed, crossed the little gap between us, and pressed a quick excited peck to his cheek. He froze. I felt the tension ripple through him, but I ignored it.

Something warm surged in my chest, reckless and stupid and so familiar. I leaned in and kissed him properly this time, soft but determined. He kissed me back. That one second felt like light breaking through everything I had been drowning in. His hand came up, almost touching my waist—almost—but then he stopped. He pulled away. The moment was cut short and I understand why. I stared at him, confused and breathless. “Mark...” He backed up a step, lifting a hand like he needed distance to breathe. “Don’t. Not yet.” My chest tightened, but not painfully. Just... real. He ran a hand through his hair and sighed. “I don’t want to rush into anything. A lot has happened. You know that.” “I know,” I said quietly. “I need time,” he continued. “To process things. To understand where we stand. To understand if this”—he gestured vaguely between us—“is something I can handle right now.” I nodded. “That’s fine. I’ll be patient.” He watched me for a moment longer, as if checking whether I meant it. Then his shoulders eased slightly. “There’s breakfast on the table,” he said. “Whenever you’re ready.” A tiny warmth moved through me again. “Thank you.” He gave a small nod and walked away. I stayed there for a moment, holding the doorframe, trying to slow the rush of feelings spinning around inside me. He didn’t push me away completely. He didn’t yell. He didn’t shut down. He paused. He considered. He let himself feel something even if he wasn’t ready to admit it. It wasn’t closure.. It was a new beginning. After a few minutes, I showered, brushed off the exhaustion clinging to my skin, and wrapped myself in the towel Mark had placed on the sink. The simple gesture—him thinking about what I might need—did something to me. When I stepped out of the bathroom and into the small living area, breakfast was waiting. Eggs, toast, coffee. Plain but warm. Made by someone who used to know every single thing I liked. I pulled out my phone and snapped a picture of it. Then I turned the camera quietly toward Mark. He was in the kitchen, shirtless, back turned to me, rinsing a dish in the sink. His muscles were tighter than I remembered, his posture strong but tired. It was a simple moment, a calm one, a piece of life I didn’t think I’d ever get back. I took the photo. Just him, unaware, in the morning light, looking like something I lost and maybe—just maybe—could find again. I opened my tiktok account. My finger hovered for a second before I typed the caption. So a love that never dies. I hit post. And let the world see exactly what I refused to lose again. Though as I posted the video, I really hoped that it would reach Daniel and Amy. I was coming for them, but not in the kind of way they expected.

Chapter 275

AMY

I my morning walk around the estate. The doctor insisted I start moving again if I wanted my strength back, so I pushed myself even when every step still reminded me of everything I lost. The air didn’t feel different. The world didn’t feel different. Only I did. And none of it was in a good way. When I got back inside, I wiped my face with the towel Cole left at the door and reached for my phone from the console table. I unlocked it without thinking, expecting the usual pack updates or maybe a text from Daniel asking if I needed help coming up the stairs. Instead, the first thing that hit my screen was a trending video of Clara, Mark. The caption made my stomach twist. “A love that never dies.” My hand started shaking. I tried to blink it away, tried to take a breath, tried anything that would stop the heat building in my chest. It didn’t work. Before I even understood what I was doing, I threw my phone. It smashed against the floor, the sound sharp enough to snap something inside me. Footsteps pounded down the stairs. “Amy?” Daniel’s voice was tight. He reached me in seconds. “What happened? Talk to me. I couldn’t. Not for a moment. My throat felt locked. My eyes stung. My chest burned. He picked up the broken phone and looked at the screen, still flickering. His jaw clenched. “You saw it.” That was all it took. My anger cracked into grief. My knees weakened, and I dropped onto the nearest chair, covering

my face with both hands. "It's like she's walking around living her life," I whispered, "like she didn't do anything. Like she didn't take my baby from me." Daniel crouched in front of me, his hands steady on my knees. "I know." "She walks free," I choked. "She smiles. She posts videos. And I'm here trying to breathe like a normal person." "Amy," he said quietly, "I'm going to get justice for you. I swear it." "She always gets away with everything," I said, shaking my head. "When I was younger, when we were teenagers, even when she became an adult. She always walked away clean. Every single time. And now... now she's doing it again." Daniel's expression hardened. "The Council already acquitted her. There's nothing official we can do yet. But don't think for a second that means she's free. Not on me," His voice was low. Firm. Controlled. The kind of tone that meant every word was a promise. I wiped my eyes. "I want to go back to work." His head snapped up. "No." "I need to," I said. "I don't want to sit here all day, thinking about what she did. Thinking about how close I came to dying in that hallway. Thinking about how she looked at me like I was disposable." "Amy-" "I can't stay here," I cut in. "If I stay, I'm going to fall apart. I'd rather work." He exhaled sharply, like he wanted to argue, but he stopped himself. "You're not ready." "I'll decide that." We stared at each other for a long moment. His worry was real. I knew that. But the longer he kept me in this house, the more powerless I felt. And I was tired of feeling like a broken thing. Finally, Daniel stood. "If I say no, you'll do it anyway." "That's true." He sighed. "Fine. But you're not going alone. Cole will take you." He walked to the living room doorway. "Cole!" Cole entered quickly. "Yes?" "Get the car." Cole nodded, gave me a worried look, then left the room. I stood up. "I'll go get ready."

Daniel didn't stop me. He only watched me leave, and I could feel the frustration and worry radiating off him. But he stayed quiet. At least this time, he understood I wasn't asking for permission. I showered and dressed fast. Nothing fancy. Nothing soft. Just clothes that made me feel like a person again. When I looked in the mirror, I didn't see the woman lying in a hospital bed anymore. I didn't see the woman crying in a hallway. I didn't see someone who needed saving. I saw someone who survived. I walked downstairs with my head up. Daniel's eyes followed me the whole way. Cole opened the door for me like he was scared I might break, but I didn't. We drove to Carter Holdings in silence. When I stepped out of the car, pack members stared. Some smiled with relief. Some avoided my eyes. None of them said anything. I didn't need them to. I walked into my office and sat behind my desk. The chair felt unfamiliar, like it belonged to someone else. But after a few minutes sorting through files and answering messages, the routine steadied me. I could breathe again. Halfway through the day, something inside me shifted. I stood up. "Cole, I want to go somewhere." He frowned. "Where?" "I'm not telling you." "That's not happening," he said. "I'm under strict orders I ignored him and walked toward the exit. He followed me, arguing the whole way, but I kept walking until we reached the car. We drove for ten minutes before Daniel called. The sound of his name on my screen sent a jolt of guilt through me. I answered. "Where are you?" Daniel asked. His voice was too calm. Too even. That was Daniel's version of panic. "I'm out," I said. "Out where?" "I'll be back soon." "Amy," he said, "don't make me come find you." I didn't reply. Cole sighed next to me like he wanted to disappear. Five minutes later, another car pulled in front of us, cutting off our path. Daniel stepped out. He walked straight to my door, opened it, and stared down at me. "Why did you leave the office without Cole?" he asked. "I needed to talk to Clara," I said. "Face to face." Daniel's jaw flexed. "You're angry. And now you're acting out of anger." "Yes," I said. "And I'm allowed to." His eyes softened for a moment. "No one is saying you can't feel it. But Clara isn't worth this." "That's the problem," I whispered. "She never has been. And she still wins. I just want her to look me in the eye and know I'm not done."

Chapter 276 Womb Mates to Room Mates?

AMY 13 years ago:

surrogate. Today: unexpected housemate! Can they resist... Daniel drove in silence, but it felt like he was giving me room to sort through the noise in my head. The city slipped by the window in streaks of color, but my brain was fixed in one direction only: Mark, Clara, their lies. Everything he thought he was getting away with. When we pulled up in front of Carter Holdings, he put the car in park and let out a quiet huff. "Are you sure you're ready to work?" "I'll survive," I said. "I need something to occupy my mind before I do something reckless." His brows lifted slightly, the way they always did when he was reading between my lines. The man didn't miss much. I pushed open the door, stepping out of the car, letting the calmness of the office building swallow the lingering chaos inside me. It worked better than I expected. Being back at work calmed me. The glass, the marble, the familiar scent of coffee and printer ink... normal stuff. I needed something normal today. Daniel joined me as we walked inside. "You look calmer he said, almost surprised. "I am," I admitted. "Because I've made up my mind about something." He waited, patient. "I want to look into Mark's company," I said. "Everything. Finances, partnerships, operations—whatever's behind the curtain. If there's anything shady, I want to know." He looked at me then. Not as Daniel the CEO, but Daniel my husband who had seen enough messes to recognize when someone was about to make one. "And your intention?" he asked. "I'll let you know when the time comes." "Amy." His voice dropped just a notch, warm but firm. "I don't want you acting out of anger." That annoyed me a little, but only because he wasn't entirely wrong. "I'm more sensible than you think," I said. "I'm not going to go burning buildings." He cracked a smile. "That's not the bar I was setting, but I'm glad we're above arson." I rolled my eyes, and he stepped closer, pulling me into a hug. The kind that didn't ask questions—just anchored. "If you need someone to talk to," he murmured, "I'm here. Always." For a second, the fight inside me softened. Then he pulled back just enough to meet my eyes. "But in the meantime, I'm assigning a discreet lawyer." He continued. "And a PI. Someone good. They'll get you the information you need without you crossing any lines." Today: unexpected housemate! Can they resist... the image "It is," he cut ... of the company—or you." I exhaled. He wasn't being controlling. He was being protective in the most professional way possible. Practical. Always thinking ten moves ahead. "I understand." I said. He seemed relieved at that. A few minutes later, as I was settling in behind my desk, my phone rang. Unknown number, but somehow I knew exactly who it was. "This is Amy," I answered.

Miss—" the man paused, then corrected himself. "Amy. My name is Lawson. I'm the lawyer assigned to your case. Mr. Daniel briefed me. We'll be working alongside the PI he selected." "Great," I said. "I need to find anything—anything at all that Mark is doing wrong. I need evidence." "Well," he said, voice calm but with that confidence lawyers love to wear, "you've got the right man. My job is to stay invisible until we strike. His job is to gather the threads. And yours is to sit tight and let us handle the dirty work." I liked his tone. Direct, efficient. The exact opposite of Mark's slimy charm. We talked for a while—details, expectations, the scope of the investigation. Once the call ended, I leaned back in my chair, tapping my fingers lightly on the wooden surface. This was happening. Finally. But before I went spiraling into revenge mode, I glanced down at my outfit and grimaced. Everything about today felt like a restart, but my wardrobe definitely didn't match that energy. I needed a change—not for anyone else, but for myself. "Cole," I called out. He stepped inside instantly. "Yes, ma'am?" "Take me to the boutique." "Right away." The drive was quick. The boutique smelled of new leather, soft perfume, and quiet luxury. I let my hands glide along fabric, picking out structured dresses, sharper silhouettes—pieces that made me

feel like the version of myself who didn't apologize for breathing. While I browsed, Cole lingered by the entrance like a statue carved from loyalty. I was flipping through a rack of blazers when a voice drifted through the store. A voice I knew. A voice that once made my skin crawl and now made my blood itch. I froze. No. It couldn't be. But the universe liked drama, apparently. I turned. And there she was. Clara. The woman who had slapped me, humiliated me, lied with a straight face, and smiled while doing it—as if cruelty was something she practiced in front of her mirror. Her presence hit me like a spark dropped in dry grass—fast, hot, uncontrollable. A flare of anger shot through me, lighting up every nerve. She hadn't seen me yet, but that didn't matter. My body reacted on instinct before my brain caught up. All the memories, all the insults, all the manipulation—every piece of her I hated—came rushing back. Her face turned. Her eyes met mine. “What is a woman who has lost a child called?” she asked coldly like she was purposely getting on my nerves. That made my blood boil so much that I landed a hard slap on Clara's face. Clara recovered quickly, of course. Women like her always bounce back from embarrassment because their shame receptors died a long time ago. “You hit me?” she hissed, hand still pressed dramatically to her cheek. “Are you insane?” “That's rich coming from you,” I said. My voice didn't shake. It didn't even rise. It came out calm—cold, almost bored. The kind of tone that tells the other person they aren't even worth the adrenaline.

Chapter 277 Pathetic

AMY

Clara stepped closer, chin jutted forward like she wanted round two. “You're completely unhinged. No wonder Mark—” “Don't finish that sentence.” The warning slipped out of me so fast and sharp it sliced her momentum in half. She flinched, just a little. Enough to satisfy me. “You think hitting me makes you tough?” she sneered. “Makes you right? Makes you—” “It makes you quiet,” I cut in. “Which is already a major improvement.” Her mouth snapped shut, then opened again, grasping for words like a fish thrown on land. “You're pathetic,” she finally spat. “You always have been Mark was too good for—” “Again,” I interrupted, holding up a finger. “Don't finish that sentence.” People were watching now, but I wasn't bothered. I wasn't raising my voice, I wasn't throwing things, I wasn't causing a scene. Clara was doing that with her existence alone. She scoffed loudly, tossing her hair over her shoulder. “You're jealous. That's what this is.” I stared at her, almost amused. “Jealous? Of you?” I shook my head. “You're not even a competitor. You're noise.” Her nostrils flared. “You think you're better than me?” “Absolutely.” No hesitation. No apology. “And the best part is, I don't need to prove it. My life already did.” Her face twisted. She wasn't used to me being this version of me. “You can't just slap me and act like you're morally superior,” she snapped. “That's crazy!” I sighed, almost tired. “Clara, trust me. If I wanted to stoop to your level, I'd need a shovel and a medical team on standby.” I took a step closer and lowered my voice. “But I won't. Because you're not worth that kind of effort.” She blinked, furious and speechless all at once. “You must be really shameless to walk around in public after everything you've done,” I added, keeping my tone flat. “But that's your problem to live with. Not mine.” Her mouth opened again, but I was already done. I turned away, cool and controlled, and picked up the blazer I'd been looking at before she showed up. Clara called my name sharply behind me, a desperate mix of outrage and wounded pride. I didn't give her the dignity of a backward glance. She wasn't a threat. She wasn't even competition. She was a footnote in a chapter where I'd already outgrown the entire plot. And as I walked toward the cashier, shoulders relaxed, steps confident, one truth settled over me like armor: I wasn't the woman she used to bully. I wasn't the woman Mark thought he could break. I was the woman they were both going to regret underestimating. The moment I got home, I knew Daniel felt

something was off. He didn't rush to me or bombard me with questions. He just stood at the bottom of the stairs, watching me with that instinctive caution he only used when he sensed my emotions before I even processed them myself. He didn't say my name.

He didn't need to. "What happened?" he asked quietly. That soft tone of his always got to me. It wasn't pity – it was... love. He already knew I had fire simmering under my skin, and he was trying to make sure it didn't burn me along the way. I dropped my bag on the couch and sat on the armrest, crossing my arms. "I saw Clara." His expression tightened just a little, barely noticeable unless you knew him like I did. "Where?" "At the boutique." Daniel exhaled once. "And?" "And I put her in her place. Properly." A slow, proud smirk tugged at the corner of his mouth. "Good." "But," I added before he could get too smug, "you should also know she tried to provoke me. I refused to give her the satisfaction." He nodded. "Better. Much better." "I'm not afraid of her anymore," I said, and I wasn't exaggerating. Something had shifted in me the moment. I decided I wasn't going to be the girl who cowered behind grief anymore. "I'm prepared for whatever she tries next." "You should still be careful," he murmured, walking toward me. "Clara is the kind of person who doesn't know when to stop, especially when she feels cornered. I held his gaze. "I'm ready for her, Daniel." He studied me for a second longer, then nodded. "I know." There was a pause. Then I said what I'd been thinking all day. "I want to see the footage from the day she attacked me Daniel blinked once, not in shock, but in understanding. "You're sure you want to see that?" "Yes. I'm done running from the memory. I need to see the truth myself. I want to know exactly what happened that day. It's still kinda boring." He hesitated only a moment, then gave a firm nod. "Alright. Stay here. I'll check the system." I sat back, letting out a deep breath. My palms felt cold. My chest felt heavy. But beneath all that, there was clarity. For the first time since the attack, I wasn't trembling at the thought of that night – I was analyzing it. Fifteen minutes passed. Twenty. Daniel was quiet upstairs, too quiet. I knew that kind of silence – the kind that hinted at irritation, confusion, something going wrong. By the time he came back down, his jaw was clenched tight. That was when I stood up. "What is it?" He didn't answer immediately. He walked toward me like each step was a calculation. "Amy... the footage isn't there." I frowned. "Meaning?" "Meaning it wasn't just deleted. It was erased. Completely. Wiped in a way only someone with high-level access could manage." For a second, all I felt was disbelief. Then anger settled under my skin. "You're telling me someone broke into your security system just to hide what Clara did?" Daniel shook his head slowly. "No. Clara isn't capable of this. She doesn't have the access, she doesn't have the tech, and she doesn't have the brain for it." "So someone did it for her," I said.

Chapter 278 People Are Talking

AMY

His silence was confirmation. A dull pulse throbbed in my chest. "Daniel," I said, "this wasn't a coincidence." "Believe me," he replied, "I know." We stood there for a moment, just staring at each other. "I will find out who did it," Daniel said, his voice dropping into that dangerous calm tone he used when his patience snapped. "Someone tampered with evidence in my territory. That alone is punishable." "I'm not letting this go either," I said. "Clara, the council, whoever is helping her light." — all of it needs to come to He stepped closer, placing a hand on my shoulder. "Amy... I don't want this consuming you. I barely got you out of a hospital bed." "I'm not fragile anymore." "I didn't say you were." His grip tightened slightly. "I'm saying you're still healing." "I'm healing," I agreed. "But that doesn't mean I'm weak. I'm not letting someone rewrite my trauma like I imagined it. Not again." He

exhaled, frustrated by how stubborn I was but also proud, I could tell. "I'll find whoever erased it." "And I'll be right there when you do." – There was a beat of silence before Daniel finally said, "Sit down. Breathe. You don't have to figure everything out tonight." "I'm not trying to. I just want answers." "You'll get them." He paused. "But we play this smart, not emotional." I looked him dead in the eye. "I've never been clearer." Something in his expression softened. He brushed a hand over my hair, not romantic matter what Clara tries next, she's not touching you again. I won't allow it." grounding. "No "I'm done letting her take anything from me. If she wants a war, she'll get one. But this time, I'm not the one hiding." Daniel's lips twitched, almost a smile. "You sound more like me every day." "Maybe that's a good thing." His phone buzzed in his pocket, but he ignored it. His attention stayed on me. "Are you okay?" he asked. I nodded. "Angry, but okay." "If you need anything –" "I know." I swallowed. "But right now... I need the truth. And I'm not stopping until I get it." Daniel finally stepped back. "Then we start tonight." I let out a slow breath, "Let's expose whoever thinks they're smarter than both of us." He chuckled under his breath. "Now that's the Amy I know." 66% +5 Pearls Daniel kept pacing near the TV console, still irritated about the wiped footage, while I stood there replaying everything in my mind. Nothing made sense. Nothing lined up. Someone had gone to serious lengths to erase proof of what Clara did and they'd done it with confidence. – I rubbed my temple. "I'm going to bed. If I stay awake any longer, I'll start obsessing." Daniel nodded. "Get some rest. We'll talk more in the morning." ***** When I woke up the next morning, the sun was already out. I blinked a few times, forced myself upright, and stretched my neck. I went to the bathroom, washed my face, and stared at my reflection for a moment. I didn't look like the woman crying in frustration last night. I dressed in something simple but professional. When I walked downstairs, Daniel was by the kitchen counter with a mug of coffee. He looked up as soon as he heard my footsteps. "You look better," he said. "I feel better," I replied. "If anything feels off today-" "I'll tell you," I cut in. "I promise."

He let that go and walked me to the door where Cole was waiting. The morning air was crisp when I stepped outside. I got into the car, closed the door, and leaned back. We'd barely made it past the first turn when my phone started ringing. I stared at the screen, annoyed for reasons I didn't even bother trying to hide. I tapped the red icon and hissed, "Absolutely not." Cole glanced at me briefly through the mirror. "Everything alright?" "It will be," I muttered. Mark calling me this early? After everything? He wasn't alling out of concern. He was calling because he wanted something. He always did. The phone buzzed again with a follow-up message, but ignored it completely. Not today. I needed a clear head. I needed to stay focused. By the time we pulled up to my office building, I was fully in work mode. I stepped out of the car and adjusted my bag. My secretary, Bella, stood when she saw me approaching. "Good morning, ma'am." "Morning," I said, not stopping. "Listen carefully Not even for five minutes. I don't care who it is." – no one gets into my office without you telling me first. She blinked quickly. "Of course. I'll make sure of it." "And if someone insists," I added, turning slightly, "call Cole. I don't want surprises." She nodded again, eyes widening a little. "Understood." I walked into my office, closed the door, and let out a slow breath. I sat at my desk and powered on my computer. Before I could even log in fully, my phone buzzed again – another call. Mark. Again. I rejected it without hesitation. I wasn't giving him the opportunity to twist my mood or plant guilt in my head. That version of me- the one who let him trigger her emotions every time was gone. – I opened my emails and forced myself to focus, even though irritation still lingered under my skin. Ten minutes later, Bella knocked softly on the door. "Yes?" I called. She opened the door just a crack. "Your coffee, ma'am." I motioned for her to enter. She placed it gently on my table, then paused like she wanted to say something but wasn't sure if she should. "What is it?" I asked. "That video of Clara and Mark... it's still trending." Her voice lowered

carefully. “People are talking.” My fingers tightened around the cup. “I know,” I said. “Ignore it.” She nodded and stepped out of the room. My phone buzzed again – this time a message. I picked it up reluctantly. Mark “Amy, please pick up. We need to talk.” I dropped the phone facedown on my desk and let out a calm breath.

Chapter 279 A Queen

AMY

I stared at my phone for a long minute after Mark’s last message sat there like a stain on my screen. I didn’t want to talk to him. Everything inside me recoiled at the thought. But revenge had a way of twisting what was necessary. And I needed him—his access, his files, his passwords, his blind spots. He’d always been careless with those, especially when he thought someone still loved him. I swallowed the bitterness and tapped his name. He picked up almost instantly. “Amy?” His voice jumped, hopeful in that annoying way that made my jaw clench. “Yes.” My tone was calm. “Come to the office.” “I... today?” “Yes, today.” He hesitated. “Alright. I’ll be there in twenty minutes.” The line clicked. I exhaled and tucked the phone away. My heart wasn’t beating fast out of fear. It was the rage pulsing under my ribcage the rage of a woman who’d held a child and lost it because people who claimed to love her had joined the side of monsters. I straightened my blouse, checked my expression in the reflection of my office window, and chose neutrality. Not softness. Neutrality. The kind that made people talk more than they should. Twenty-five minutes later, Bella knocked. “He’s here,” she whispered. I nodded. “Send him in.” The door opened, and Mark stepped inside dressed like he wanted to look important – charcoal suit, clean haircut, expensive cologne. It irritated me how much effort he put into appearances that never matched the rot inside him. He closed the door behind him slowly. “Amy...” I didn’t stand. I didn’t soften. I didn’t offer a smile. He sank into the chair across from me. “You look... better than I expected.” “I’m alive.” I kept my face empty. “That’s enough.” He swallowed, hands clasping together like he was rehearsing a prayer. “I heard about the attack. I swear I had no idea Clara was capable-” “Stop.” My voice cut the air clean. “Every single time something happens, you defend her. Do you know how His eyebrows drew together. “I’m not defending her. I’m just saying-” “That you don’t believe she’d hurt me?” I leaned back. “Mark, please. Ever since you dumped me for her, you’ve turned yourself into her spokesperson. It’s pathetic.” He dropped his eyes to the floor like a scolded child. “I didn’t come here to argue.” “Good. Then tell me why you’re here.” He let out a slow breath. “I wanted to check on you. I wanted to see for myself that you’re okay.” “Lie better,” I said flatly. He blinked. “Amy-” “Just say what you really came for.” His voice lowered. “I also... wanted to apologize. For everything you’ve been through because of me. Because of us. I know it doesn’t change anything, but I needed to say it.” It didn’t move me. Not even a fraction. Apologies meant nothing when a grave held your child.

I didn’t speak, so he forced himself to continue. “There’s something else too. But... Now isn’t the right moment. You’re still dealing with everything. I don’t want to overwhelm you.” My wolf rose in my chest, teeth bared, growling to rip him apart for pretending to care. I tightened my fists under the desk to keep myself grounded. “Say whatever you need to say,” I pushed. He shook his head. “No. Another day. When you’re ready.” I forced myself not to snap. If I showed my anger, he’d pull back. And I needed him to lean in. I steadied my breathing. “Fine.” He looked relieved, which made my stomach twist harder. “Amy... I’m glad I came. I’m glad you called. I’ve missed talking to you.” That nearly made me laugh. Not from humor – from disbelief. I forced myself to nod like I was allowing the sentiment to land. “I appreciate the visit.” He smiled faintly, like he took that as an olive branch. “Can I come again? Maybe

we can talk more.” “We’ll see.” His smile widened, stupidly hopeful. After a beat, he rose. “Take care of yourself, okay?” “I always do,” I said. He left the office, closing the door with exaggerated softness, as if that made up for anything. The second the latch clicked, my breath finally released pressed my palms into the desk until my knuckles whitened. Pretending to forgive him tasted like poison. A sharp knock hit my door. It swung open before I answered. Daniel rushed in, eyes dark, jaw locked. “Why was he here?” I stood from my chair. “Relax.” “Relax?” He stepped closer. “Amy, he’s-” “He’s part of my plan.” Daniel frowned. “What plan?” “The one where I destroy Clara.” My voice was cold enough to make him still. “And Elias. And that Southern Alpha who thinks he’s untouchable. And Mark.” Daniel’s expression shifted into concern, not disapproval – it mattered. “Amy...” they “I’m not doing this out of impulse,” I said. “Everything they took from me... everything they cost me... won’t get away with it. I can’t let them. So, if I have to act like I’ve forgiven him, then that’s what I’ll do.” His gaze softened. “You’re scaring me.” “Good,” I muttered. “You should be scared for them.” He let out a slow breath and touched my shoulder gently. “I’m not going to tell you what to do. Not after everything. But be careful. Revenge can swallow a person whole.” “I won’t be the one swallowed,” I said. “They will.” He held my stare for a moment. “Just don’t lose yourself in the process.” “The old me died with my child,” I said quietly. “What’s left is what’s needed.” Daniel didn’t like that answer, but he didn’t argue. “Alright. What now?” “There’s a gala tonight.” I picked up the invitation from my desk and passed it to him. “A charity thing. I’m going.” His brows lifted. “You sure you’re ready for that big of a crowd?” I squared my shoulders. “I’m a queen. What’s the point of ruling the North with you if I hide like a ghost?”

Chapter 280 Counterattack

AMY

A faint smile tugged his lips, but his eyes stayed worried. “Then I’m going with you. I’m not letting you walk into a crowd full of enemies alone.” “That’s why I asked you. I sat back down. “Dress like you’re ready for war.” He huffed a soft, humorless laugh. “Always.” He didn’t leave immediately. He lingered, watching me. “You’re not sleeping enough,” he murmured. “I’ll sleep when they pay.” He didn’t argue. He just walked around the desk and leaned down to press a short kiss to my forehead. It wasn’t romantic. It was grounding. “You’re not alone,” he said. “I know.” He walked to the door, paused, and looked back. “If Mark tries anything—anything—I’ll deal with him myself.” “I want him alive,” I said. “Alive means useful.” Daniel nodded once. “Then I’ll keep him breathing.” He left, finally closing the door behind him. I exhaled heavily and pressed my fingers against my temples. The pieces were moving. Mark was desperate enough to cling to my crumbs of attention. Clara was arrogant enough to be sloppy. Elias was confident enough to think he’d gotten away with everything. The Southern Alpha had no idea I’d get close enough to slit his power base open. They thought I was healing. They thought I was recovering. They thought grief made me weak. Grief didn’t weaken me. It sharpened me. I stood and looked out the window toward the city – the same city that had watched me lose almost everything. Tonight at the gala, I would show them I wasn’t broken. I was building my counterattack. Cole drove me from the office in complete silence, which I appreciated. My head was already noisy enough. I was replaying Mark’s visit, Daniel’s concern, and the dull pulse of anger that never really left my chest anymore. Halfway home, I told Cole to stop at the boutique district. He didn’t question me; he just parked in front of the most expensive store in the row. I stepped out. “Give me thirty minutes.” “Yes, ma’am.” Inside, the sales associates recognized me instantly. Money had a way of making everyone attentive. I told them exactly what I needed: something that screamed confidence without looking desperate, something clean, sharp, expensive.

Nothing dramatic. Nothing glittery. Just a dress that made the room respect me before I opened my mouth. They brought options, but the moment I saw a deep emerald gown with a structured neckline and a smooth, flawless fit, I knew that was the one. It looked like something a woman who had nothing left to lose would wear—a woman ready to rebuild, or burn everything down. “That,” I said. They tailored them quickly. I paid without blinking. Cole loaded it into the car, and we continued home. When we arrived, he carried the dress inside while I made calls. I contacted a makeup artist who was known for making celebrities look effortless and dangerous at the same time. She accepted immediately when she heard my name. She arrived within the hour, set up her kit in my bedroom, and studied my face. “What look are we aiming for?” she asked. “Soft, but not weak,” I said. “Refined. Enough to be noticed. Not enough to look like I’m trying.” She nodded, worked silently, and in forty minutes she was done. She didn’t do too much—just enhanced what was already there. Smooth skin. Defined eyes. A clean lip color. It felt like armor more than makeup. I slipped into the dress. The fabric hugged me exactly the way I wanted. No sparkles. No theatrics. Just quiet power. Daniel arrived downstairs right as I stepped out. His eyes landed on me, and his expression softened. For the first time all day, I felt something other than anger. “You look incredible,” he said. “Good. I need to.” He offered his hand. I took it, letting him lead me out to the car waiting outside. Cole opened the door for us, then took the driver’s seat once we settled in the back. The drive started quietly. City lights passed by the windows in a slow glide. Daniel watched me for a moment, then he reached for my hand, running his thumb gently along the back of it. “I want to say something,” he said, voice low. I turned to him. “Go on.” “I know everything feels heavy right now. You’re angry. You’re still hurting. And you’re fighting battles that should’ve never existed.” He paused. “But I need you to know that you changed my life. You walked in, and everything that was empty in me finally made sense. You complete me.” His voice cracked just slightly. It pulled something sharp at the center of my chest. I breathed out slowly. “You complete me too, Daniel. I didn’t think I could feel anything like this again. Not after everything. Not after losing the baby.” He pulled me closer until my head rested against his shoulder. “I’ve got you. In every way that matters.” “I know.” And I did. That was the one thing keeping me from collapsing under the weight of everything else. We sat like that for a while, letting the silence settle. The tension I carried all day eased just enough for me to breathe normally. As the car approached the gala venue—bright lights, tall pillars, a carpet laid out like the world belonged to the highest bidder—I straightened up and smoothed the front of my dress. Daniel looked at me again. “Are you sure you’re ready for this? It’s a crowd. Cameras. Whispers.” “I’m not hiding,” I said. “I’m a queen of the North. If I can’t show my face in public, then what exactly am I ruling?” A slow smile pulled at his lips. “Then let’s walk in like we own the place.” “We do,” I said. Cole parked. He stepped out first, scanned the area, then opened my door. I took Daniel’s hand as I stepped out into the lights. People were already turning. Some gasped quietly. Others whispered behind their hands. Daniel leaned close, his breath warm against my ear. “You’re going to cause a scene.” “That’s the point,” I murmured. We walked forward together, shoulders aligned, heads high. The gala doors opened. And just like that, the game began.