

## Broken 401

### Chapter 401 Northern Supply Arrival

CLARA

I arrived at Carter Holdings just after the early shift had begun. The lobby smelled faintly of coffee and cleaning supplies, normal enough to blend in. My phone buzzed softly in my pocket. A message from Elias: “North supply arrives tomorrow. Be ready.” No explanation, no instructions beyond presence. That was enough. I didn’t need specifics to understand what was coming. This supply wasn’t trivial—it was critical. Northern operations depended on it. And if I timed my moves correctly, I could influence every ripple that supply caused before anyone even noticed. The elevator chimed, and I stepped in. My reflection stared back at me: calm, confident, composed. I smoothed my hair, adjusted my jacket. Mark was already in the office, pretending to be absorbed in reports. His posture was open, but his eyes flicked toward the door, just long enough to catch me. I saw the subtle twitch in his expression—a microsecond of suspicion. He didn’t say anything, and I didn’t react. Instead, I walked as if the office had been mine for years. “Busy morning?” I asked lightly as I settled into my seat. He nodded, keeping his gaze on the papers before him. “Nothing unusual.” I raised an eyebrow. “Routine can change fast.” His lips pressed together. He didn’t answer immediately. Mark never voiced suspicion outright, but the undercurrent was unmistakable. Every shift of his gaze, the barely-there tightening of his jaw, spoke volumes. I had to balance awareness with invisibility. “Have the Northern shipments been checked against the schedule?” I asked casually, knowing the answer would give me a benchmark for tomorrow. Mark’s brow furrowed, though only subtly. “Yes, everything appears in order. No discrepancies noted.” I nodded slowly. “Good. It’s important that the timing is right. Even small delays can cascade.” He glanced at me, measuring my tone. “I’ll make sure the team stays on track.” I smiled lightly, letting the expression appear effortless. My wolf felt the tension in the office, the rhythm of anticipation. Everything about Mark was slightly off, as if he was balancing between trust and suspicion. That balance made him dangerous—but useful. A colleague walked past, and I subtly noted the flow of movement, the time stamps of entry and exit, minor exchanges. Each piece of information added to the framework I was constructing in my mind. Every interaction was a data point, every glance a potential advantage. At lunch, I moved through the cafeteria with the same careful attention. Mark was at his usual table, scrolling through reports, his posture relaxed to any casual observer, but I sensed the edge beneath the surface. When I approached, he looked up, briefly meeting my eyes. “Lunch?” I asked, indicating the empty chair across from him. He gestured for me to sit. “Sure. Just keeping an eye on things here.” I chuckled softly. “I wouldn’t have it any other way.”

The words sounded casual, but my wolf knew otherwise. He was testing me, assessing whether my presence was benign or strategic. I leaned back slightly, appearing relaxed, while internally mapping possibilities. By mid-afternoon, I had already aligned the internal timing with Elias’s instructions. The supply’s arrival tomorrow was no longer just a logistical note—it was a pivot. I could influence who handled the reception, who noticed deviations, and who reported first. Each subtle shift positioned me closer to insight without revealing myself. Another message from Elias arrived: Keep them distracted. Timing is everything. I slipped the phone back into my pocket without looking at Mark. He had no idea. I let a brief, innocent smile pass, allowing my posture to convey calm engagement. My wolf sensed the tension around the Northern operations team. They were unaware of the undercurrents building beneath the surface. Everything was moving according to plan. Later, Mark approached me in the

conference area. “I noticed you asked a lot of questions this morning about supply timing,” he said casually, but his tone carried the weight of curiosity. “Everything okay?” I tilted my head, offering a faint, easy smile. “I just like to understand the full process. Nothing unusual.” His gaze lingered on me. “You’re thorough.” “I prefer being thorough,” I replied smoothly. “It keeps everything predictable.” He nodded slowly, though I could feel his instincts nudging him. He wanted to probe further, to catch a hint of my true intentions, but I carefully closed that avenue. I kept my tone calm, neutral, and entirely believable. Every reaction I offered was measured, and every word carefully chosen. He accepted it—for now. Throughout the afternoon, I moved seamlessly between tasks, attending meetings, adjusting schedules, and observing patterns. Mark remained close enough to notice, but distant enough not to interfere. The wolf inside me sharpened with every observation. Every minor detail mattered. Every timing adjustment, every distracted glance, every small deviation could be exploited. As evening approached, the office emptied except for a few late workers. I stood by a window, pretending to review a report while my mind was already in the North, calculating the supply arrival, the reactions, and the sequence of events that would unfold. Tomorrow, I would be in position. Mark passed by again, lightly touching my shoulder. “Don’t work too late,” he said, voice casual but tinged with concern. I gave a soft smile. “I know. I’ll be careful.” He didn’t push further, but I sensed the lingering doubt. My wolf noted the subtle shift in his scent, the barely-there tension that meant he was keeping an eye, even while pretending otherwise. By the time I left Carter Holdings, the sun had dipped low. The air outside was cool, carrying the faint scent of exhaust and early evening activity. My mind was fully on the North, on the supply, and on ensuring that tomorrow unfolded exactly as it should. Elias’s instructions had been clear and minimal, but they contained everything I needed. I was ready. Mark might be watching, but he didn’t have the full picture, and I intended to keep it that way. Every glance. every question, every observation today has built a foundation

## Chapter 402 Nothing Could Go Wrong

CLARA

I waited until the house was quiet, until Mark’s breathing sounded steady and even, before slipping out. The night air was cool, but my skin felt hot with awareness. Every step I took toward the street was measured, careful. I glanced around casually as I walked, pretending to check my phone, and noticed a shadow a few meters behind me. The movement was too deliberate to be coincidence. Someone was following me. My fingers tightened around my phone. Elias, I typed quickly. I think I’m being followed. No immediate reply. My pulse quickened. I altered my route slightly, ducking down an alley, and then out again, testing the follower. Whoever it was mirrored every shift, every subtle change in pace. Careful, patient, disciplined. Not a random observer. My wolf growled softly in recognition. Finally, my phone buzzed. Keep moving. Don’t confront. I’m watching. I swallowed hard, keeping my expression neutral. Every step toward the meeting point made my instincts sharper. Whoever followed me wasn’t reckless. Whoever it was, they were calculating. I arrived at the safe house and paused at the threshold. The door opened before I even knocked. Inside, I froze. Cole was on the floor, bound at the wrists, but he wasn’t thrashing, only watching. I hesitated. “Cole?” I said, moving closer. “What’s—how—why are you tied?” Elias stepped from the shadows, calm as always, a faint smirk on his face. “Straightforward,” he said. I stared at him. “How did you know it was Cole following me?” “All I had to do was monitor you,” he replied. “I know your rhythm, your patterns. It’s simple.” I blinked, uncertain. “Monitor me? That’s... how?” He shook his head slightly, amused, “You underestimate what careful observation can tell you. I’m not guessing. It’s watching. Timing, hesitation, adjustments—they tell me everything.” I

looked back at Cole, still restrained, still composed. My wolf tensed, sensing the controlled tension in the room. Cole wasn't struggling because he understood this was part of Elias's plan. My human mind raced. Elias orchestrates everything. Every movement. Every reaction. Nothing accidental. "What do I do now?" I asked, voice calm despite the tension in my chest. Elias gestured for me to sit. "Assess. Adapt. Execute. The supply arrives tomorrow. Northbound. Critical. Timing and coordination are essential. You will ensure it reaches the intended hands." I nodded, feeling the weight of responsibility. My wolf vibrated with awareness, every sense alert. The supply wasn't just logistics—it was leverage, control, and influence all tied together. My role was pivotal, and every decision would matter. Elias stepped closer. "Cole is part of this. He's your signal, your reference. Do not be distracted by his presence. Focus on the task." I crouched slightly to meet Cole's eyes. He gave a subtle nod. Not a word, not a motion beyond the smallest flicker of acknowledgment.

My wolf noted it immediately: discipline, restraint, readiness. Everything Elias orchestrated worked through small cues and controlled observation. "What if someone tries to intervene?" I asked. My wolf bristled at the thought, instincts primed to confront, attack, or escape. "Discretion," Elias replied. "Use the environment. Use timing. Use presence. Your wolf is an asset, not a weapon to expose." I exhaled slowly, letting the instruction sink in. My wolf settled slightly, attuned to the rhythm of control. Every step, every action had to be precise. Nothing reckless. Nothing noticeable. I pulled out my phone and sent the coordination texts, confirming the schedule and placement for the supply. Every word was deliberate, every instruction layered to minimize exposure and maximize control. My wolf followed each movement, tracking my heartbeat, adjusting my senses to catch anomalies. Elias watched me, quiet, measuring, letting me operate under observation. "You are ready for this," he said. "But remember—watch patterns, not people. Information flows through action and reaction, not confrontation." I paused, letting the words echo. Observation, timing, subtle influence. My wolf understood instinctively. It was how power moved silently, invisibly, like currents beneath still water. Cole remained silent, bound but calm. The sight reminded me that restraint could be as sharp as aggression, and awareness as dangerous as force. I straightened, feeling the pressure in my chest ease slightly, my focus sharpening. "What next?" I asked. "Prepare for tomorrow. Monitor your surroundings. Use the night to plan your approach. You will meet the supply here, coordinate discreetly, and report directly to me," Elias said. I nodded, committing everything to memory. Every detail mattered—the shadows, the movements, the timing. My wolf hummed with anticipation, aware of potential threats, aware of patterns, ready to react as needed. Finally, Elias stepped aside. "You have what you need. Proceed carefully. Remember, observation is more important than engagement." I exhaled, my pulse still quick, my wolf alert. Cole's restrained presence and Elias's control left no room for error. Every moment from here forward required precision, patience, and discretion. As I walked out into the night again, my senses heightened, I felt the weight of the plan settling over me. Tomorrow, the supply would move, and my role would define its success. My wolf tracked every sound, every shadow, every heartbeat around me. I would be ready. I had to be. The night stretched ahead, silent, expectant. Every step I took was measured, every breath controlled. My mind cataloged possibilities, outcomes, and contingencies. My wolf understood the rhythm, the flow of danger and control. I knew Elias was watching, always. And I knew Cole's silent presence reminded me that observation and restraint were as lethal as any weapon. Tomorrow would test more than my skill—it would test control, timing, and patience. And I would be ready. I moved through the shadows, keeping to the edges of the street, ears straining for any unexpected sound. My wolf's senses scanned constantly, detecting shifts too subtle for my human mind to process. Every stray noise, every flicker of movement, was cataloged. I imagined Cole watching from his restrained position,

silent and precise, an anchor in the operation. Elias's instructions replayed in my mind: observation over engagement, patience over impulse. I adjusted my pace, calculated the angles, visualized the supply's arrival and the steps I'd take. Nothing could go wrong, not tonight.

## Chapter 403 Acting Casual

CLARA

The kitchen was quiet when I woke up. The house still smelled faintly of Mark's cologne, mixed with the lingering scent of the night air. I moved carefully, making sure not to wake him too soon. Breakfast needed to be ready before he came down. I had decided on something simple but filling—eggs, toast, fresh fruit, and coffee. He was predictable in his routines, and I had learned that timing mattered just as much as the meal itself. I worked efficiently, chopping, stirring, arranging the plates with a precision I knew he would notice. Cooking for him wasn't just about feeding him. It was about appearing attentive, reliable, and present. I had to make him think of me as part of his routine, not just someone who existed in the shadows of his day. I heard the shuffle of his steps from upstairs. I didn't need to check. My wolf senses were aware, alert even when I wasn't consciously thinking about it. I turned the coffee on and smiled as I heard the soft thud of his footsteps on the stairs. "Morning," I said when he appeared, voice casual. He blinked at the spread I had arranged. "Morning. You—uh—you didn't have to." "I wanted to," I replied lightly. "It's early, and you deserve something decent before the day starts." He glanced around, noticing the plates, the neatly arranged fruit, and the coffee steaming gently in a mug. He hesitated for a moment, then gave a small, approving nod. "You didn't make too much trouble for yourself?" I shook my head. "Not at all. Easy enough. You sit, and I'll bring it over." I carried the tray to the table, careful not to spill anything, and set it down in front of him. He took a seat and looked at the food, then back at me. "This looks... good," he said finally, his tone more relaxed than usual. "Thanks," I said, sliding into the seat across from him. I watched as he cut into his eggs, sipped his coffee, and began eating. His wolf was relaxed in the way I had noticed before, not tense like he was with meetings or council obligations. That gave me an opportunity. "So," I started casually, "how's your schedule looking today? Anything interesting?" He paused, thinking. "Nothing too urgent. A few calls, the usual. But I'm trying to make time for Amy later. She's been on edge with all the pack business lately, so I want to... check in, I guess." I nodded, keeping my expression neutral. "That sounds responsible." I knew how important it was to appear supportive without questioning his decisions. That was how trust grew. I needed him to see me as an ally, not someone he needed to guard against. He set down his fork for a moment. "You've been... around a lot lately. You seem to fit in more than I expected." I allowed a small, careful smile. "I'm trying. I thought it would help to understand how things work here, and make things easier for everyone." Mark considered that, then nodded slowly. "I see. Well... I appreciate it. Really." He returned to his meal, and I let him eat in silence for a moment. I knew he was thinking about my presence, wondering about intentions, maybe even trusting me more than he should. That hesitation was useful. I poured myself a cup of coffee, matching his casual tone. "Do you want more fruit? Or is that enough for now?"

He shook his head. "No, this is fine. Just... thanks. You didn't have to do all this." "I like doing it," I said lightly. "It's... practical, I guess." I watched him closely. Small reactions gave away a lot. The slight relaxation in his shoulders, the way he paused before answering. Each detail mattered. After breakfast, I cleared the plates while he leaned back in his chair. "So, you're planning to stick around here more?" he asked. I set the tray down in the sink and turned to him. "For now, yes. It's helpful. I want to understand more, make sure things run smoothly. And... I enjoy helping where I can." He looked at me with a mix of

curiosity and caution. “Helpful, huh?” “Yes,” I said, letting the word linger without over explaining. That was enough. I didn’t need to reveal anything. I only needed him to feel comfortable letting me be present. He took another sip of coffee and sighed lightly. “I didn’t expect to have someone like you around. Not this much.” I nodded. “I understand. But... think of it as temporary. For practical reasons.” He studied me for a moment, then gave a small shrug. “Alright. Temporary, sure.” The conversation paused naturally, letting the normal rhythm of the morning settle. I knew these moments were important—quiet, ordinary interactions built more trust than words or explanations ever could. “Mark,” I said after a moment, “I thought maybe we could go over some of your schedules together. Just to make sure nothing conflicts and to help organize things.” He hesitated but finally nodded. “Sure. That could help. I’m not great at keeping track of everything on my own.” I smiled faintly. “Perfect. We’ll start after breakfast. No rush.” He returned to his meal, and I leaned against the counter for a moment, letting my eyes casually follow. Watching him work through minor tasks, seeing how he reacted to small changes—it was all information. Very detail about how he moved, what he focused on, and what he ignored added to my understanding of the environment. Once breakfast was done and the plates cleared, we moved to his office. I sat across from him, notebook in hand, pretending to organize schedules while I observed him closely. “Your morning calls start at nine, ghost?” I asked. “Yes. Mostly investors and some pack leadership. I try to keep them tight,” he said, tapping a pen against his notebook. “Good. And you usually have some quiet time before meetings?” “Yes. That’s important. Helps me think.” I made a note, asking a few more neutral questions about his meetings, his priorities, and his preferences.

#### Chapter 404 Working Plans

Clara

I woke before Mark again, though not unusually this time. My mind had been active in ways I could almost taste. Last night, while he slept, I went over every detail from our interactions—the things he’d let slip, the way he moved through Carter Holdings, who deferred to him and who didn’t. Every small piece of information had a purpose now. I wasn’t here to comfort anyone, I reminded myself. I was here to gather, to observe, to position. Breakfast was quiet. I set plates and poured coffee, smiling at Mark when he finally came out. He commented on the smell of eggs and toast, and I nodded, keeping my tone light, conversational. There was nothing extraordinary about the meal, but I made it appear carefully prepared. Presentation mattered as much as the food itself. Every gesture, every shared glance was an opportunity to reinforce my reliability. Mark didn’t suspect the calculations beneath my hands. After he left for the office, I stayed behind, reviewing notes I had scribbled over the past few weeks. Mark’s schedules, the patterns of movement in the office, the staff I could count on, the ones likely to question. I’d begun to see the weak points, the gaps where perception could be guided. Subtlety would be everything. A misstep here, a suggestion there, and people would start to question what they thought they knew. My first move was small. I corrected an error in a delivery schedule that had been overlooked. I presented it as something I noticed while helping Mark organize reports. No one noticed my intentions, and no one would think of me as responsible for the oversight being highlighted. Amy had approved most of the schedules herself, but the timing gaps were enough to make anyone looking closely question judgment. I let it linger without comment, letting the seed of doubt take root. I spent the next hour walking through the office quietly, making small adjustments to files, reviewing communications, and noting reactions. Staff nodded politely when I offered help, and I made sure Mark saw. His eyes lingered on me with a mix of approval and mild relief. That was the perfect space. I wanted him to think I was indispensable, not just useful. People trust those who appear capable and

unthreatening simultaneously. I made another move mid-morning. During a meeting about the upcoming Northern supply review, I raised a simple question about timing discrepancies. Nothing direct, nothing accusatory, just enough to draw attention. "I noticed that a few of the reports from the northern logistics team don't align with the approved schedule. Could this affect delivery estimates?" I asked evenly. Eyes turned toward Amy. She answered promptly, her tone calm, but I saw the slight pause before she responded. That pause, that hesitation, would be noticed by those paying attention. That pause would matter. Later, I found myself alone with Mark, reviewing internal memos and recent operational notes. I commented on minor inconsistencies I'd noticed. He listened, receptive and trusting, asking my opinion on how to address them. I offered suggestions carefully designed to maintain my helpful image while emphasizing decisions Amy had made. He appreciated my input, and I nodded, keeping my expressions warm and neutral. I could see that he wasn't questioning me. That meant my foundation was solid.

Small observations mattered. I noticed who hesitated when I spoke, who repeated my phrases to reinforce my suggestions, who took notes more diligently. Each reaction was a data point. I cataloged them silently, building a picture of the office hierarchy and vulnerabilities. I could see patterns forming, the sort of subtle influence that didn't require direct action- just the careful placement of perception. By mid-afternoon, I had left gentle reminders of operational oversights in several places: a missing signature here, a timing misalignment there. I framed it as support, making sure any inquiries seemed natural. Amy would see the gaps, and the staff would see me noticing them, helping correct them. No one would suspect that the corrections themselves were part of the plan. During a brief break, I reviewed the interactions with Mark again. His trust was growing. Not blind trust, but comfort in my presence. That comfort meant I could influence his decisions subtly, make him suggest things without realizing he was guiding others along the narrative I wanted. Everything I did had to appear helpful, necessary, almost mundane. That was how the seed of doubt could grow without anyone blaming me. I also noted reactions from junior staff. Some followed my lead naturally, some questioned me quietly, some watched for mistakes. All were useful. Each small adjustment I made was being observed, cataloged, and interpreted in a way that made Amy look overextended without me saying a word. I didn't need to create errors myself. I needed only to frame perception. By late afternoon, I had positioned myself near the main planning area when a staff member asked for clarification on a report. I guided them through the correction, speaking calmly, demonstrating attention to detail. Mark observed. The staff member left with confidence restored. In that moment, Amy would be indirectly questioned for the initial oversight while I appeared diligent, proactive, and indispensable. Walking back to my office space, I considered the small victories of the day. Each interaction, each suggestion, each timing correction had been deliberate. Amy had been responsible for the original schedules and operations. I had highlighted discrepancies without accusation. Others would start to see Amy as hesitant or overextended, not me. The perception had shifted incrementally. As evening approached, Mark stopped by my desk briefly. "You've been really helpful today," he said, almost casually. I smiled, keeping the expression light. "Just trying to keep things running smoothly," I replied evenly. There was no warmth in my words, only practicality. He nodded, reassured, and left. I made a note: emotional momentum maintained, influence intact. Before leaving the office, I reviewed all the points I had planted, all the minor discrepancies I had subtly highlighted, and the reactions I had observed. Everything was working. Staff and Mark were responding exactly as predicted. Amy's decisions were being questioned indirectly, her authority subtly reframed, all without a single word from me that could be traced as blame. By the

time I left, I realized something important. This wasn't about making Amy look incompetent outright. That would draw suspicion and invite retaliation. This was about influence, perception, and control.

## Chapter 405 Someone Ahead

### AMY

What unsettled me was how ordinary the morning felt while something underneath it had already changed. I arrived at Carter Holdings earlier than usual. The building was calm, staff moving through their routines with practiced ease. On the surface, everything looked steady. That alone should have reassured me. Instead, it made me more alert. Stability that comes too easily usually hides effort I wasn't part of. I reviewed the overnight reports first. Nothing alarming. No missing approvals. No breaches. But I noticed more annotations than usual. Clarifications. Notes added in neat, careful language. Corrections already made before anything reached my desk. Someone had been busy. When I stepped into the main planning area, conversations dipped slightly. Not stopped. Just softened. People still greeted me with respect, but there was a new carefulness in their tone. It wasn't fear. It was assessment. 'Good morning,' I said. 'Morning, Luna,' one of the logistics supervisors replied quickly. I nodded and kept moving, pretending not to notice the way two junior staff members glanced at each other before returning to their screens. That kind of reaction didn't come from hostility. It came from uncertainty. Clara was already there. She stood beside one of the project tables, reviewing a file with quiet focus. She looked composed, professional, almost invisible in the way people who know how to blend often are. When she noticed me, she straightened and smiled. "Amy," she said. "I was just helping cross-check the northern delivery timelines. There were a few overlaps I thought we should flag early." Her tone was respectful. Helpful. Exactly right. "Thank you," I replied. "Was anything off?" "Nothing serious," she said quickly. "Just timing alignments. Probably stress on the teams. I've already made notes for review" I held her gaze for a second longer than necessary. She didn't flinch. Didn't rush to justify herself. That calm made it harder to read intent "I'll look through them," I said. She nodded and stepped back, giving me space. Several staff members noticed. I could tell by the way their attention lingered on us before drifting away. As I walked toward my office, I felt it again. That quiet sense of being evaluated. Inside, I closed the door and sat down, opening the annotated files Clara had mentioned. Her notes were precise. Clean. Helpful. And framed in a way that subtly redirected responsibility back to my original approvals. Not accusatory. Just factual. I leaned back in my chair and stared at the screen. This wasn't sabotage. Not yet. It was framing. Daniel knocked lightly before entering. "You're in early." "So are you," I said. He glanced at the open files. "You see it too?" "Yes." "What do you think?" "I think someone is making sure corrections happen before they reach me," I said carefully. "Which sounds helpful. Until you realize it makes it look like I missed them." Daniel exhaled slowly. "Clara?" "I don't know," I said. "That's the problem." There was a pause. Not heavy. Just thoughtful. "She's being careful," he said. "Too careful to catch outright." "And that's why this works," I replied. Later that morning, during a coordination meeting, I felt it more clearly. Questions came in a different order. Clarifications were requested before I explaining. No one challenged me, but they adjusted around me.

One manager spoke up. "Clara mentioned yesterday that the review process might benefit from an extra layer, just to avoid gaps." All eyes turned to me. "That's reasonable," I said evenly. "We can discuss implementation." The meeting moved on, but something stayed with me. Clara hadn't pushed the suggestion herself. She'd let it travel through someone else. That took planning. After the meeting, I

found Mark near the corridor. “Everything alright?” he asked. “Yes,” I said. “Why?” He hesitated. “Just... people seem tense,”

“They are,” I replied. “Pressure hasn’t eased.” He nodded, accepting the answer. I watched him walk away and wondered how much Clara had shared with him already. Not lies. Just emphasis. By midday, the pattern was clear enough that I couldn’t ignore it. Small decisions were being quietly rerouted. Not overturned. Supported. Assisted. And always with Clara positioned nearby, visible, helpful, composed. I watched her interact with staff. She listened more than she spoke. She asked neutral questions. She never contradicted me directly. That restraint made her look cooperative. It also made it difficult to challenge her without appearing defensive. At one point, I caught a brief expression cross her face as she handed a file to compliance. Satisfaction. It was quick. Almost missed. But I saw it. My pulse didn’t spike. I didn’t react. I simply noted it. That afternoon, I called Daniel again. “She’s shaping perception,” I said. “Not openly. But consistently.” “Do you have proof?” he asked. “No,” I said honestly. “Only pattern.” He was quiet for a moment. “Pattern matters. But it isn’t enough. Not yet.” “I know.” The rest of the day passed under that awareness. Every interaction carried weight. Every silence mattered. I adjusted my tone, my timing, my visibility. If Clara wanted to paint me as overextended, I would not give her haste or frustration to use. Still, by the time I left the building, I could feel the cost of restraint. Not exhaustion. Pressure. That night, alone, I reviewed everything again. The timing of Clara’s increased access. Her proximity to Mark. The way staff responded to her presence. None of it crossed a line. All of it nudged perception. I understood then that this wasn’t about taking my place. It was about weakening confidence. And the most dangerous part was this: I had invited her close because I believed I could manage the risk. Now I saw the truth more clearly. Clara didn’t need power. She needed position. As I turned off the lights, I accepted something I hadn’t wanted to before. I was no longer just observing her. I was reacting to her. And that meant the game had already shifted.

## Chapter 406 Compensation

### AMY

The next day didn’t start badly. That almost made it worse. I woke up clear-headed, calm, the kind of calm that usually means I’ve already accepted something unpleasant and decided not to fight it emotionally. Daniel noticed it while we had breakfast. “You’re quiet,” he said. “I’m thinking,” I replied. “About Clara?” “Yes.” He didn’t press. That was one of the reasons I trusted him. He knew when pressure helped and when it only made things louder. At Carter Holdings, the atmosphere had shifted again. Not dramatically. Subtly. Staff still followed protocol. Wolves still bowed their heads in respect. But there was more distance now. Less assumption. People waited for my instructions instead of moving with me. That told me something important. Confidence wasn’t gone. Initiative was. Clara arrived shortly after I did. She greeted me the same way she always did—polite, measured, careful not to appear eager. She carried a folder and paused when she saw me. “Amy,” she said. “I compiled the feedback from yesterday’s adjustments. I thought it might help to see how the teams responded.” “Thank you,” I said. “You didn’t have to do that.” “I wanted to,” she replied simply. There it was again. The perfect answer. Not defensive. Not ingratiating. I took the folder and skimmed through it while she stood there quietly. The feedback was mixed, but framed gently. Concerns were softened. Delays were explained. And again, responsibility flowed upward without accusation. “This is thorough,” I said. She nodded. “People are nervous. They don’t want to be seen as causing problems” “Neither do you,” I said, watching her closely. She met my eyes. “No. I don’t.” That exchange sat between us for a moment

longer than necessary. Then she excused herself and walked away. Later in the morning, I sat in on a compliance briefing. Halfway through, one of the senior analysts hesitated before speaking. "Luna, there was a question raised about last week's routing permissions. Nothing wrong, just clarification." I answered calmly, explaining the reasoning and the safeguards in place. Heads nodded. Notes were taken. But the question shouldn't have needed to be asked at all. After the meeting, Daniel joined me in my office. "They're circling," he said quietly. "They're watching," I corrected. "Circling comes later." He leaned against the desk. "Cole sent an update." "And?" "He says Clara hasn't done anything she shouldn't," Daniel said. "But she's always present when things shift. Always nearby." I gave a small nod. "That fits." "So what's your read?" I didn't answer immediately. I stood and walked to the window, looking down at the grounds below. Wolves moved in pairs, patrols steady, alert but calm. "She's not rushing," I said. "She's letting the system do the work. All she's doing is making sure people notice when I'm involved." Daniel frowned slightly. "That's dangerous." "Yes," I agreed. "Because it means if I react too hard, I prove her point." By midday, I made a deliberate decision. I increased my visibility. I joined two meetings I would normally delegate. I walked the floor. I spoke directly to team leads. Not to correct. To listen. Clara noticed. I saw it in the way her attention sharpened when she realized I was adjusting. She didn't interfere. She observed. During a break, she approached me again. "You don't need to compensate," she said softly,

"For what?" I asked. "For the tension," she replied. "People understand pressure." I looked at her fully then. "This isn't compensation. This is leadership." She smiled faintly. "Of course." The rest of the day passed without incident, but the undercurrent remained. By evening, I was tired in a way that had nothing to do with hours worked. This kind of vigilance drained patience faster than effort ever did. At home, Daniel poured me a drink and waited until we were seated. "She's enjoying this," he said. "Yes," I replied. "But she thinks I don't see it." "And do you?" "I see enough." I set the glass down. "The problem isn't Clara making me look careless. The problem is that people are ready to believe it." Daniel's jaw tightened. "Then we change what they believe." "Carefully," I said. "If we move too fast, she'll slip away clean." There was a pause. "I won't remove her yet," I continued. "Not unless she makes a mistake." "And if she doesn't?" "She will," I said. "People who push this patiently always do." That night, as I lay awake, I replayed every interaction again. Not searching for guilt. Searching for timing. Clara wasn't attacking me directly. She was waiting for the moment when my authority felt heavy instead of steady. I understood something then that settled my thoughts. She believed I was managing her. She didn't yet realize I was studying her limits. And when she crossed one, I would be ready. The following morning confirmed that nothing had slowed down overnight. I arrived early and found two messages waiting for me. One was routine. The other was a request for clarification from a department that normally operated without hesitation. It wasn't a problem. It was a signal. People were starting to double-check anything tied to my name. Clara arrived later than usual. That alone stood out. She apologized briefly and explained she had been asked to assist another unit. She named the unit without looking at me. "Who asked?" I said. She paused just long enough to make it seem natural. "Mark." I nodded. "All right." She didn't smile this time. She thanked me and left. That told me she hadn't expected approval so easily. By midday, I made another choice. I reassigned a small but visible responsibility away from Clara. Not as punishment. As balance. The reaction was immediate. Nothing dramatic, just a shift. People noticed the adjustment and began recalculating their assumptions. In the afternoon, Daniel updated me quietly. Cole had confirmed Clara was asking careful questions again. Not invasive. Strategic. I leaned back in my chair and closed my eyes for a moment. "She's pushing," I said. "Testing how much weight I can carry before something slips." Daniel studied me. "And will it?" "No," I replied. "But she's about to learn

something important.” “What’s that?” “That restraint doesn’t mean weakness,” I said. “It means timing.” I opened my eyes then, steady. And I decided I would let her push a little more.

## Chapter 407 Damage Control

CLARA

I knew the timing mattered more than the act itself. If I moved too early, people would watch too closely. If I waited too long, Amy would tighten her grip again. What I needed was a moment when everyone believed things were stabilizing, when vigilance dropped just enough for trust to do the damage for me. That moment came with the logistics review. It was supposed to be routine. A cross-check between Carter Holdings and Northern supply coordinator Paperwork, approvals, confirmation signatures. Amy was overseeing it personally because of the recent pressure. That alone made it useful. Anything tied to her desk now carried weight. I positioned myself where I always did lately—close enough to be helpful, far enough to look harmless. “Can you sit in on this?” one of the coordinators asked me that morning. “Amy said you’ve been assisting with scheduling.” “I can,” I replied. “Just for notes.” That was true. Just not the full truth. The meeting ran clean. No arguments. No raised voices. Amy was calm, precise, controlled. People responded well to that. I watched how often they looked to her for confirmation, how much they relied on her final word. When it ended, she gathered her files and turned to me. “Send me the compiled report before noon,” she said. “I will,” I answered. She trusted that answer. I could see it in the way she didn’t linger. Back at my desk, I opened the system. My access was still limited, but limited was enough. I didn’t need to create anything new. That would be traceable. I only needed to move something that already existed. There was a supply reroute approval filed weeks ago. Approved properly. Logged correctly. It had been delayed, then rescheduled. I adjusted the timestamp display, not the approval itself. I changed who appeared to have finalized the confirmation window. Amy’s name surfaced naturally. I didn’t add it. I let the system pull it. The change was small. Easy to miss. But once combined with the wrong delivery sequence, it created a gap. A shipment arrived early. Another arrived late. Inventory flagged an inconsistency. By midday, questions started. “Did this come through your office?” someone asked Amy in the hall. She frowned slightly. “It shouldn’t have.” I stayed quiet. Quiet mattered. By afternoon, the issue reached compliance. Not as an emergency. As a concern. A mismatch between approval timing and execution. Nothing illegal. Just sloppy. That word traveled fast. I made sure to look surprised when the alert circulated. “That’s strange,” I said softly to the woman beside me. “Amy’s usually careful.” The woman nodded. “She’s been under pressure.” I didn’t respond. I didn’t need to. The real damage came later. A junior manager approached Amy directly. His tone was respectful but uneasy. “I just need to confirm,” he said. “Did you authorize the adjustment after the cutoff?” Amy looked genuinely confused. “No. That was finalized earlier.” He hesitated. “The system shows—” “Show me,” she said. They went into her office. The door stayed open. People noticed. I watched from my screen as her posture changed. Not panic. Calculation. She was trying to understand how something clean had turned against her. Daniel arrived not long after. “What’s going on?” he asked quietly. Amy answered him in a low voice. “Something doesn’t line up.” That was the moment I stepped closer. “I can help check the logs,” I offered. “I was part of the documentation pass. Amy looked at me for a long second. Then she nodded. “Yes. Please.” I sat at her terminal and pulled the record. I pointed out the discrepancy exactly as compliance would see it. I didn’t explain it away. I didn’t dramatize it.

"I don't think this was intentional," I said. "But it does look like the final confirmation came from your access." Daniel's jaw tightened. "That's not possible," Amy said. "I know," I replied quickly. "That's why it's concerning That sentence did the work. It framed her as careless, not corrupt. It framed me as concerned, next accusing. By evening, the narrative had settled. Amy had missed something. Oversight had slipped. Too much on her plate. Understandable, but worrying. No one blamed her loudly. They didn't need to. In the break room, I heard two staff members speaking in hushed tones. "She's been stretched thin," one said. "Yeah," the other replied. "Mistakes happen." I walked past them and said nothing. Later, as people began leaving, Amy stopped me. "Thank you for helping earlier," she said. "Of course," I replied. "I know how frustrating this must be." Her eyes searched my face. Not for guilt. For alignment. I gave her exactly that. When I returned home that night, Mark was waiting. "You look tired," he said. "It was a long day," I answered. "Everything okay at work?" "Yes," I said smoothly. "Just some confusion. Amy's handling it." He nodded, satisfied. In the quiet of the room, my phone vibrated. A single message. Noted. No name. None was needed. I set the phone down and let out a slow breath. Amy would recover. I knew that. She was strong. Capable. But the mark was there now. A question that hadn't existed before. And the worst part was this: No one would ever trace it back to me. Not because I was invisible. But because I had been helpful. And that made all the difference. I lay awake longer than usual that night, listening to the house settle around us. Mark slept easily beside me, his breathing steady, untroubled. I envied that ease, even as I used it. The next morning, messages were already circulating. Clarifications. Follow-ups. Quiet reassurance from leadership. Amy was doing damage control fast. That told me she felt the weight of it. She wouldn't say it, but she would carry it. At work, people treated her with care. Too much care. That was worse than anger. When she passed my desk, she paused. Just a second too long. "If you notice anything else," she said, "tell me." "I will," I replied without hesitation.

## Chapter 408 Knowing Better

### CLARA

I didn't rush anything and that was the first rule I followed after everything that had already gone wrong. I stayed careful. I stayed visible. I stayed useful. People relax when they think they understand your pattern. By midweek, Amy's office had settled into a new rhythm. Meetings were tighter. Access was narrower. Schedules were shared later than usual and only with people who had reasons attached to their names. That change alone told me she felt exposed. Leaders don't tighten unless they sense pressure. I waited until I was asked. It happened during a routine coordination meeting. Nothing dramatic. Just Amy, two department heads and me sitting in on logistics because Mark had vouched for my reliability. I didn't speak much. I took notes. I asked one harmless question about timing overlap between pack duties and corporate appearances. After the meeting, Amy stopped me outside the conference room. "Can you help my assistant reconcile my calendar for next week?" she asked. "There are conflicts I need flagged early." Her voice was calm. Professional. Controlled. "Of course," I said. "Send me what you have." She did. That was the opening. Back at my desk, I worked exactly the way she expected. I cross-checked appointments. I flagged redundancies. I highlighted travel windows that were too tight. I sent a clean, organized summary back to her assistant with notes copied to Amy. No hidden edits. No changes. Just competence. Then I saved a copy for myself. Amy's weekly schedule wasn't explosive on its own. Meetings. Site visits. Two pack-related engagements. A private dinner with Daniel that had been marked tentative. Nothing illegal. Nothing secret. But timing matters more than content. I studied it for a long time, not as a list but as movement. Where she would be. When she would be

visible. When she would be insulated. When she would be alone with staff instead of wolves. I didn't send anything immediately. Elias never liked haste. He liked control. That night, Mark mentioned Amy over dinner. Casual. Thoughtless. "She's taking on too much again," he said. "You can see it." I nodded while serving him more rice. "She always does when things feel unstable." He didn't argue. He rarely did when I agreed first. Later, when he was distracted with a call, I stepped into the hallway and sent Elias a single message. I have her full schedule for next week. The reply came fast. Send it. I hesitated for exactly one breath. Not because of guilt. Because timing matters. I waited until Mark had gone to bed. Then I sent the file. No commentary. No interpretation. Just the schedule. Three dots appeared almost immediately. Then it disappeared. Then it appeared again. Got it, Elias replied. This helps. 'What are you planning?' I typed. There was a pause this time. Long enough to feel intentional. I'll handle that, he answered. Just stay in position. I stared at the screen longer than I should have. 'You're sure you don't need anything else?' I asked. "Context matters." I know what I need, Clara. That was it. No reassurance. No explanation. Just certainty,

I put my phone away and went back to bed, lying still beside Mark. He shifted in his sleep, closer, his arm heavy across my waist. I didn't move it. I let him think everything was normal. The next day at work, Amy thanked me in passing. 'Good catch on Thursday,' she said. "You probably saved me from another reschedule." 'I'm glad,' I replied. "Just doing my part." Her eyes lingered for a second, unreadable. Then she nodded and moved on. I wondered if she felt it yet. The sense that something had already left her hands. By afternoon, rumors started moving. Not about her. Not yet. About upcoming adjustments. Possible changes to security protocols. Maybe a rescheduled site visit. People always talk before anything actually happens. I didn't feed it. I listened. When my phone buzzed again, it was Elias. Be ready. That was all. I didn't ask how. I didn't ask when. I just replied, I am. On the surface, nothing changed. Amy continued her meetings. Staff followed instructions. Daniel remained steady and visible. The North looked intact. But I knew better now. Schedules are power. Knowing where someone will be gives you options. Even if you don't use them directly, someone else might. That night, Mark asked me why I seemed distracted. "Work," I said honestly. "It's heavier than it looks." He smiled at that. "You'll manage. You always do." I watched him for a moment, wondering how long that confidence would last. Wondering if Elias had already chosen the moment where Amy would stumble and everyone else would watch. I didn't feel proud. I didn't feel afraid. I felt prepared. And that was worse than both. Elias contacted me just before midnight. Come now, he wrote. Same place. No greeting. No explanation. That alone told me this wasn't a routine check-in. I waited ten minutes before responding. Not to be dramatic. To make sure Mark was fully asleep and to give myself time to think through exits. On my way out, I dressed for speed, not appearance. Flats. A jacket I could move in. Phone fully charged. I left the house the same way I always did when I wasn't supposed to leave—quiet, deliberate, no rushed movements. Wolves notice rushed movements. The drive was short. Too short for comfort. The location was one of Elias's favorites: an abandoned logistics hub just outside neutral ground. It used to be a transfer point for pack supplies before newer routes were established. Now it sat empty, guarded by nothing official. That never meant unprotected. I parked where instructed and stepped out slowly, letting my senses adjust. The air was heavy with wolves I didn't recognize. Southern. Disciplined. Waiting. Elias stood near the center of the building, hands clasped behind his back, posture relaxed in a way that meant control. He didn't look surprised to see me. He rarely did. "You came quickly," he said.

Chapter 409 Amy Is Missing

CLARA

"You said come now," I replied. "That usually means something's already moving." His mouth curved slightly. Not a smile. A signal. "It is," he said. "Sit." I didn't argue. I took the chair across from him, keeping my back straight and my hands visible. Power plays are quieter when everyone pretends they're not happening. "What's this about?" I asked. He didn't answer right away. Instead, he nodded toward the far side of the room. That's when I saw the screens. There were four of them, mounted against a concrete wall. Live feeds. Different angles. Different distances. I recognized the first location immediately. Carter estate perimeter. Secondary access road. The third feed made my stomach tighten. Amy's office corridor. I stood before I realized I had moved. "What is this?" I demanded. Elias didn't raise his voice. He didn't need to. "Preparation," he said. "You did your part. The schedule helped confirm windows." "You said exposure," I snapped. "You said erosion. You did not say kidnapping." He looked at me then. Fully. Cold and assessing. "I didn't say kidnapping," he replied. "You said it." My jaw tightened. "You're planning to take her." "We're planning to remove her from control temporarily," he corrected. "Words matter." "No," I said. "They don't, when the result is the same." Elias leaned forward slightly. "You're emotional." "I'm informed," I shot back. "This crosses lines you didn't mention." "Because you didn't need to know them." That landed harder than I expected. "I gave you access," I said. "I gave you timing. I gave you proximity. I did not agree to this." "You agreed to destabilize leadership," he replied. "This does that efficiently." "At what cost?" I asked. "You think the North will collapse quietly if their Luna disappears?" "They won't collapse," Elias said calmly. "They'll look for fault. And they already know where to look. I felt cold then. Not fear. Calculation catching up. 'You're framing her again,' I said. "Only louder this time." "She frames herself," he corrected. "By standing in the wrong place at the wrong time." I stared at the screens. One of the feeds shifted slightly as a guard passed through frame. Northern Unaware. "You didn't tell me this was the endgame," I said. Elias tilted his head. "I didn't say it was." I turned back to him sharply. "What does that mean?" "It means," he said, "this is not the final move." I hated that answer. "What is the second game?" I asked. "No—what's the third? You don't operate in pairs." He stood then, slow and deliberate, and walked toward one of the screens. He pointed at Amy's corridor. "This is the distraction," he said. "This is what everyone will see. What they'll react to." "And the real play?" I pressed. He looked over his shoulder. "You're not cleared for that." Anger flared. Sharp and contained. "I'm not a pawn you move without explanation," I said. "You are exactly that," he replied evenly. "The difference is you're aware of it." I clenched my hands. "Then why keep me in the dark?" "Because if you know everything," he said, "your reactions change. And people around you notice." That answer made sense. That didn't make it acceptable. "You're using me," I said. "Yes," Elias agreed. "And you're benefiting."

"From what?" I asked. "Being disposable?" He studied me for a moment longer than before. "From survival," he said. "You don't last in this world by being clean." I exhaled slowly, forcing myself to stay seated. "If you touch her," I said, choosing my words carefully, "you create variables you cannot control. Daniel will respond." "Daniel will hesitate," Elias corrected. "That's his weakness." "And mine?" I asked. He smiled then. Brief. Unpleasant. "You still think there are lines," he said. I didn't deny it. "When does this happen?" I asked. "Soon," he replied. "Not tonight. Timing is still fluid." "You're asking me to keep playing along," I said. "I'm telling you to," he answered. Silence stretched between us. "I don't like being shut out," I said finally. "I know," Elias replied. "That's why it works." I stood again, this time deliberately. "If this goes wrong," I said, "you will lose more than leverage." He didn't look concerned. "If this goes wrong, you'll be blamed first." That was the truth. Clear and unsoftened. I turned to leave. "Clara," he said behind me. I paused. "You did well," he said. "Don't ruin it by asking for permission." I walked out without replying. The drive back felt longer than before. My thoughts stayed sharp, moving

through consequences instead of guilt. He hadn't told me everything. He never would. And I hated that more than the plan itself. Because ignorance isn't protection. It's insulation. And insulation burns last. By the time I pulled into Mark's driveway, I had already decided one thing. Elias thought he was the only one playing a deeper game. He was wrong. I didn't sleep when I got back. I lay beside Mark and stared at the ceiling, listening to his breathing, steady and unaware. That steadiness used to calm me. That night, it only reminded me how separate my life had become. By morning, I had already replayed Elias's words too many times. Not the threats. The confidence. At breakfast, Mark noticed the circles under my eyes. "You're up early," he said. "Couldn't sleep?" "Too much on my mind," I replied, keeping my voice even. He reached for his coffee. "Work again?" "Yes," I said. It wasn't a lie. Just incomplete. Later that day, I went through Amy's shared calendar again, not to send anything, but to memorize it. I needed to know what Elias was using and what he was leaving out. There were gaps that made no sense. Meetings that ended too cleanly. Travel windows that felt staged. That bothered me. I sent Elias a short message. I asked if anything had changed. He replied an hour later with a single word. No. That answer told me more than he intended. He was already ahead, already moving pieces I couldn't see. I hated that feeling. Not because I wanted control, but because I needed awareness to survive. By evening, I understood one thing clearly. If Amy disappeared, the fallout wouldn't stop with her. And if Elias thought I would just wait to see how his third game played out, he had misjudged me.

#### Chapter 410 Don't Move

#### AMY

I noticed Cole's absence before I admitted it mattered. At first, it was just a gap in routine. Cole was always around—quiet, observant, reliable in a way that didn't demand attention. He had a habit of appearing when things felt tense. When days passed without seeing him, I told myself I was imagining it. Everyone had assignments. Everyone moved. By the fourth day, I stopped pretending. I brought it up to Daniel that evening. We were in his office, doors closed, lights dimmed to the level we both preferred when we needed to talk without interruption. He was reviewing reports on his tablet, jaw set in that familiar way that meant he was thinking several steps ahead. "Have you seen Cole lately?" I asked. Daniel didn't look up right away. "No." "That's what I thought," I said. "He usually checks in. Even briefly." Daniel finally raised his eyes. His expression didn't change, but something tightened behind it. "He went to see his mother." I frowned. "His mother?" "She's unwell," he said smoothly. "He asked for time. I approved it." That explanation should have settled me. It was reasonable. And yet, my discomfort didn't ease. "When?" I asked. "A few days ago," Daniel replied. "He didn't want to make a big deal of it." I leaned back in my chair. "He would've told me." "He didn't want to burden you," Daniel said. "You've had enough on your plate." I studied his face. Daniel rarely lied outright. He didn't need to. If he chose to withhold something, it was because he believed it served a purpose. That didn't mean I liked it, "I don't like not knowing where my people are," I said. "They're still your people," he replied calmly. "And he'll be back." I nodded, but the feeling lingered. Cole disappearing without a word didn't sit right with me. Too many things had shifted recently. Too many quiet changes. I didn't push further. Not because I was satisfied, but because I trusted Daniel enough to let it rest—for The day dragged on after that. Meetings blurred together. Questions circled the same issues, framed in different ways. Everyone was careful around me. Polite. Measured. I could feel it. The scandal had settled, but its weight remained. By evening, I was exhausted. "I'll head out," I told Daniel as I gathered my things. "I'll have someone drive you," he said. "I want to walk to the car myself," I replied. "I need air." Daniel hesitated. "At least take the long route. The lit one." "I will," I promised. The parking area was quieter than usual. Most staff had

already left. The sky was dark, but the compound lights were on, casting long shadows across the pavement. I walked with my phone in hand, checking messages as I went. Nothing urgent. Nothing unusual. I unlocked my car and sat inside for a moment, breathing out slowly. The silence felt heavy. I started the engine and pulled out of the lot. The drive home was familiar. Streets I had taken hundreds of times. I relaxed slightly as I merged onto the main road. Traffic was light. The city moved around me without noticing. Halfway home, I sensed it. At first, it was instinct. The kind that came from years of leading wolves who survived by reading patterns. A car behind me had stayed too close for too long. When I changed lanes, it changed with me. When I slowed, it did too. I told myself not to jump to conclusions. At the next intersection, I turned left instead of continuing straight. The car followed. My grip tightened on the steering wheel. I reached for my phone and dialed Daniel. It rang once. Twice. No answer.

That was when my pulse spiked. I took another turn, sharper this time. The car stayed with me. Then another vehicle appeared ahead, slowing abruptly. Too slow. Too deliberate. My instincts screamed. I hit the brakes and tried to reverse, but the car behind me surged forward, blocking me in. Doors opened before I could react. Figures moved fast. Efficient. No shouting. No wasted motion. The day dragged on after that. Meetings blurred together. Questions circled the same issues, framed in different ways. Everyone was careful around me. Polite. Measured. I could feel it. The scandal had settled. but its weight remained. By evening, I was exhausted. "I'll head out," I told Daniel as I gathered my things. "I'll have someone drive you," he said. "I want to walk to the car myself," I replied. "I need air." Daniel hesitated. "At least take the long route. The lit one." "I will," I promised. The parking area was quieter than usual. Most staff had already left. The sky was dark, but the compound lights were on, casting long shadows across the pavement. I walked with my phone in hand, checking messages as I went. Nothing urgent. Nothing unusual. I unlocked my car and sat inside for a moment, breathing out slowly. The silence felt heavy. I started the engine and pulled out of the lot. The drive home was familiar. Streets I had taken hundreds of times. I relaxed slightly as I merged onto the main road. Traffic was light. The city moved around me without noticing. Halfway home, I sensed it. At first, it was instinct. The kind that came from years of leading wolves who survived by reading patterns. A car behind me had stayed too close for too long. When I changed lanes, it changed with me. When I slowed, it did too. I told myself not to jump to conclusions. At the next intersection, I turned left instead of continuing straight. The car followed. My grip tightened on the steering wheel. I reached for my phone and dialed Daniel. It rang once. Twice. No answer. That was when my pulse spiked. I took another turn, sharper this time. The car stayed with me. Then another vehicle appeared ahead, slowing abruptly. Too slow. Too deliberate. My instincts screamed. I hit the brakes and tried to reverse, but the car behind me surged forward, blocking me in. Doors opened before I could react. Figures moved fast. Efficient. No shouting. No wasted motion. Someone yanked my door open. "Stay calm," a voice said. Male. Controlled. "Don't fight." I reached for the door lock, but hands were already on me. Strong. Precise. I kicked, but another grip caught my legs. A sharp sting hit my neck. The world tilted. My vision blurred as I was pulled from the car. I heard fabric tearing. Felt cold air on my skin. Someone pressed a cloth over my mouth. My strength faded faster than it should have. I tried to shift. Tried to call my wolf. But whatever they used dulled everything. My limbs went heavy. My thoughts slowed. The last thing I saw was the streetlight above us, steady and bright, as if nothing was wrong. Then everything went dark. I came to consciousness slowly, head throbbing, body restrained in ways that made every movement a struggle. My eyes adjusted to dim light, the faint outline of a room around me. I wasn't outside anymore. Whatever sedative or technique they used had dulled my strength, but my mind, sharp as ever, was racing. I tested the bindings. They were tight. Too

tight to slip out on my own. Panic wanted to rise, but I forced it down. Losing control now would be exactly what they wanted. Whoever had taken me had planned this meticulously—no mistakes, no witnesses until the moment they wanted attention. I could hear voices outside, muffled but deliberate. One male, low and controlled, gave instructions I couldn't make out entirely. There was precision in their movements. They weren't amateurs. Whoever was behind this knew exactly who I was and what it would cost them to take me off guard. Daniel. My mind immediately went to him. I had no way to warn him, no way to move, and no idea if anyone knew where I was. My wolf stirred, instinct screaming at me to fight, to escape, to protect. I settled it down, focusing instead on observing. Every shadow, every sound mattered now.