

Broken 431

Chapter 431 Unfamiliar Women

AMY

I woke to the low hum of machines and the faint sound of footsteps outside the room. The place still smelled sterile, like medicine and cleaning agents layered over expensive wood and glass. I had learned enough by now to know I was still in the same building. Still trapped. Still unseen by the world that mattered. I pushed myself up slowly. My body felt heavier than it had days ago, but the sharp pain was gone. My breathing was steadier. My wolf stirred inside me, not restless like before, just alert. Watching. The door opened quietly. Mara stepped in, holding a tray. She paused when she saw me sitting upright. "You're awake early," she said. "I didn't really sleep," I replied. My voice sounded rough. "How long was I out?" "A few hours," she said, placing the tray on the small table beside the bed. "That's better than yesterday." She poured water into a glass and handed it to me. I took it with both hands and drank slowly. "Any pain?" she asked. "Not like before," I said. "Just... tired." She nodded, like she expected that answer. "That's normal." I watched her carefully. Mara had been kind since the beginning, but kindness didn't erase the fact that she worked for the people holding me here. "Am I still being moved?" I asked. She hesitated. Just a second. But I noticed. "Not today," she said. "The doctor wants to observe you a little longer." "Observe me for what?" I asked. "For stability," she replied. "Both yours and the baby's." My grip tightened on the glass. "So it's confirmed," I said quietly. "I'm pregnant." "Yes," she said. Her voice softened. "You are." I looked down at my hands. I didn't know what I had expected to feel when the word finally settled. Fear was there. So was anger. But beneath all of it was something heavier. A deep sadness that sat in my chest and refused to move. "I almost died the last time," I said. Mara didn't interrupt. "My body nearly shut down," I continued. "My wolf went silent. I lost everything." "I know," she said gently. "Your records mentioned complications." "That's one way to put it," I said. She pulled a chair closer and sat. "This pregnancy is different," she said. "Your body is responding differently." "It's responding too fast," I said, meeting her eyes. "That's what the doctor said." She nodded. "Yes. That's why they're watching you closely." "They," I repeated. "Not you. Them." She didn't deny it. "Who exactly is making these decisions?" I asked. Mara sighed. "I don't have the authority to answer that." "But you know," I pressed. "I know some things," she said carefully. "Not everything." "Do you know why I'm still here?" I asked. Her lips parted, then closed again. "I know why you're important." "That's not the same thing," I said. "No," she agreed. "It's not." Silence stretched between us. Outside, I heard voices. Male. Controlled. Not close enough to make out words. "Has anyone tried to contact me?" I asked. She shook her head. "No calls. No messages." "Do you know if anyone is looking for me?" I asked. Her eyes softened. "I believe so." "That's not an answer," I said. "It's the safest one I can give," she replied. I leaned back against the pillows, My head felt clear, but my chest felt tight. "Do they plan to keep me here until I give birth?" I asked. "I don't know," she said. "That hasn't been decided." "By who?" I asked again. She stood up. "I'll get the doctor. He'll want to see you're awake." She moved toward the door, then paused. "For what it's worth," she said quietly, "you're not being hurt on purpose." I let out a short, humorless laugh. "That doesn't make this okay." "I know," she said, then left. A few minutes later, the doctor came in. He was older, calm, and far too comfortable in this place. "How are we feeling today?" he asked.

"I don't know," I said. "You tell me." He gave a small smile and checked the monitors. "Your temperature is normal. Blood pressure is stable. Your wolf's activity has reduced significantly." "Is that

good?" I asked. "In this case," he said, "yes." "And the pregnancy?" I asked. He turned to face me fully. "It's progressing faster than average. Not dangerously fast yet, but enough to be concerning." "Concerning how?" I asked. "It puts extra strain on your body," he said. "Your previous medical history makes that strain more risky." "So what's the plan?" I asked. "To manage it," he said. "Carefully." "Here?" I asked. "For now," he replied. "For now," I echoed. He studied me for a moment. "You want to know if this will kill you." I didn't answer. I didn't need to. I leaned back against the pillows. My head felt clear, but my chest felt tight. "Do they plan to keep me here until I give birth?" I asked. "I don't know," she said. "That hasn't been decided." "By who?" I asked again. She stood up. "I'll get the doctor. He'll want to see you're awake." She moved toward the door, then paused. "For what it's worth," she said quietly, "you're not being hurt on purpose." I let out a short, humorless laugh. "That doesn't make this okay." "I know," she said, then left. A few minutes later, the doctor came in. He was older, calm, and far too comfortable in this place. "How are we feeling today?" he asked. "I don't know," I said. "You tell me." He gave a small smile and checked the monitors. "Your temperature is normal. Blood pressure is stable. Your wolf's activity has reduced significantly." "Is that good?" I asked. "In this case," he said, "yes." "And the pregnancy?" I asked. He turned to face me fully. "It's progressing faster than average. Not dangerously fast yet, but enough to be concerning." "Concerning how?" I asked. "It puts extra strain on your body," he said. "Your previous medical history makes that strain more risky." "So what's the plan?" I asked. "To manage it," he said. "Carefully." "Here?" I asked. "For now," he replied. "For now," I echoed. He studied me for a moment. "You want to know if this will kill you." I didn't answer. I didn't need to. "There is a risk," he said honestly. "But there's also a chance you'll be fine." "That's not comforting." I said. "I know," he said. "But it's the truth." He checked and stepped back. "You'll need to rest. No stress. No emotional spikes." I looked at him flatly. "I'm a prisoner."

"Yes," he said. "Which is why we're doing everything we can medically." "That doesn't address the rest," I said. "No," he agreed. "It doesn't." After he left, I sat alone again. The room felt too large. Too quiet. I thought about Daniel. About his face the last time I saw him. I wondered if he was tearing the world apart looking for me or if he was being forced to choose between me and something bigger. I pressed a hand to my stomach. I didn't feel anything yet. No movement. No sign that there was a life growing inside me again. "I don't know if I can do this," I whispered. My wolf shifted, not in protest, not in fear. Just present. Later that day, two unfamiliar women came in. They wore plain clothes and moved like guards pretending not to be guards. "You're being relocated within the building," one of them said.

Chapter 432 They Are Not Here For You

AMY

"Why?" I asked. "For comfort," the other replied. I didn't argue. Arguing hadn't helped before. They led me through quiet halls and into a larger room. This one had windows. Tall ones. I could see the city stretched out below, distant and unreachable. "This is temporary," one of them said. "You'll be monitored." "Of course," I said. When they left, I stood by the window and stared out. Somewhere out there, my life was still moving without me. I wondered how long it would take before someone realized I wasn't coming back on my own. I wondered how much time my body had left before it made the decision for me. I stayed by the window until my legs started to ache. The city below moved without pause. Cars slid through the streets. Lights changed. People lived their lives without knowing I was suspended above them, locked away in glass and steel. I stepped back and sat on the edge of the bed. The room was larger than the last one, but that didn't make it feel less like a cage. A soft knock came at

the door. "Come in," I said. Mara entered again, this time with a folded blanket in her arms. "They said you might feel cold up here," she said. "I don't," I replied. "But thank you." She placed the blanket on the chair. "How are you feeling now?" "Tired," I said. "Still breathing. So I guess that counts as progress." She gave a small smile but didn't laugh. "The doctor will check on you again tonight." "I figured," I said. "He checks on me more than I check on myself." She hesitated, then asked, "Do you want to eat?" "What is it?" I asked. "Soup," she said. "And bread." "I'll try," I replied. She helped me to the table near the window. I ate slowly. The food stayed down, which felt like a small victory. "Mara," I said after a moment. "Yes?" "Do you know who keeps watching me?" I asked. Her hand froze for half a second before she continued arranging the tray. "There are cameras," she said carefully. "I don't mean the cameras," I said. "I mean the one who makes the decisions." She sighed and finally looked at me. "I know there are people interested in what happens to you." "Interested how?" I asked. "Strategically," she said. "That's not reassuring," I replied. "I didn't mean it to be," she said. I set the spoon down. "Is the Southern Alpha still involved?" Her eyes widened slightly. "Why would you think that?" "I'm not stupid," I said. "This is too careful. Too controlled. Someone wants me alive but not free." She didn't answer. "That silence tells me enough," I said. She stood straighter. "I can't confirm anything." "But you're not denying it," I said. She lowered her voice. "You should rest." "I rest all the time," I replied. "That hasn't changed anything." Later that evening, the doctor returned. This time, he wasn't alone. A younger man followed him, carrying a case. "We're going to run another test," the doctor said. "Another blood test?" I asked.

"Yes," he replied. "And a scan." I sighed but held out my arm. The needle prick barely registered. As they worked, I asked, "How much faster is this pregnancy moving?" The doctor exchanged a glance with the younger man before answering. "Your hormone levels suggest accelerated progression." "That sounds bad," I said. "It sounds complicated," he corrected. "Not automatically fatal," "But dangerous," I pressed. "Yes," he said. "Potentially." I closed my eyes. "How long do I have before it becomes critical?" He paused. "We don't know yet." "That's your answer to everything," I said. "Because it's honest," he replied. After they left, he stood at the foot of the bed. "You need to avoid stress. Emotional stress affects your wolf, and your wolf affects the pregnancy." Pres bed. rest I laughed softly. "I've been kidnapped. I'm being hidden from my mate. I'm under guard in a skyscraper. Tell me how I'm supposed to avoid stress." He didn't respond. When they left, the room felt heavier. I lay back and stared at the ceiling. I thought about Daniel again. I wondered if he was sleeping. If he was eating. If he blamed himself. "I'm still here," I whispered, like he could hear me. The next morning, I woke with nausea curling low in my stomach. My wolf stirred uneasily. "Mara," I called out. She came quickly. "What is it?" "I feel sick," I said. "Different from before." She helped me sit up. "Slow breaths." "I am," I said. "It's not helping." She pressed a button on the wall. Within minutes, the doctor arrived again. "This is happening more often," Mara said. The doctor checked my vitals. "Your body is adjusting." "To what?" I asked sharply. "To sustaining two lives," he replied. "I didn't ask for this," I said. "I know," he said quietly. After giving me medication, he stayed longer than usual. "There's something you should understand," he said. "Your condition makes you valuable." "Valuable to who?" I asked. "To people who see leverage where others see risk," he replied. "So I'm leverage now," I said. He didn't deny it. After he left, I sat in silence for a long time. My hands rested on my stomach again. "I don't know if I can protect you," I whispered. "I don't even know if I can protect myself." My wolf pressed closer inside me, not strong, but present. That afternoon, two men I hadn't seen before stood outside my door. They didn't come in. They just watched. I asked Mara about them later. "They're not here for you," she said. "That's worse," I replied. That night, I dreamed of running. I woke up gasping. I stood by the window again, looking out at the city.

Somewhere out there, Daniel was still searching. Somewhere out there, people were moving pieces on a board I couldn't see. "I won't disappear quietly," I said under my breath.

Chapter 433

DANIEL

I woke up to the sound of my phone vibrating nonstop on the bedside table. It wasn't one notification. There were many. The kind that didn't stop even when I picked the phone up. My head was heavy. I sat up slowly, rubbing my face, and checked the screen. Messages. Alerts. Missed calls. Mentions. My name was everywhere. I opened the first alert without thinking. The screen loaded, and my stomach dropped. It was a photo of me in bed. Shirtless. A woman beside me. Her face was turned away from the camera, but mine wasn't. The angle was clear enough. Too clear. Anyone could tell it was me. "That's not possible," I said out loud. I swiped to the next alert. Another image. Same room. Same bed. A different angle. Then the captions started showing up. While his wife is missing... The CEO of Carter Holdings disgraces the company. Is this the kind of alpha the North deserves? My jaw tightened. My wolf surged forward, angry and restless, pushing against my control. I dropped my feet to the floor and stood up. My room was exactly how I remembered it. Nothing disturbed. Nothing out of place. "I came home alone," I muttered. "I went straight to bed." I knew that for a fact. My phone buzzed again. This time, it was a call. I answered it without checking the name. "Daniel," a sharp voice said. "You need to see what's happening right now." "I'm already seeing it," I replied. Silence followed for a moment. "This is bad," the voice continued. "Very bad. The council is already talking."

"Let them talk," I said, though my chest was tight. "They're saying you're unfit to lead while Amy is missing," he said. "They're saying you're distracted. Reckless." "I was framed," I snapped. "Then prove it," he said. "Because right now, perception is winning." The call ended. I clenched my phone so hard I thought the screen would crack. My wolf growled low inside me, furious. He wanted blood. He wanted answers. He wanted whoever thought this was a good idea to pay for it. Someone was trying to bring me down. Not just as a husband. As an Alpha. As a king of the north. As the CEO of Carter Holdings. And they were doing it the only way that ever worked—by making me look careless. I scrolled again, forcing myself to breathe. Another message came in. This one wasn't subtle. Focus on ruling, not fooling around, Your Majesty. I let out a sharp laugh that held no humor. "They're bold," I said. "I'll give them that." I went straight to the bathroom and splashed water on my face. The man staring back at me looked tired. Angry. Dangerous. "Amy is missing," I said to my reflection. "And this is what they choose to do." My wolf pressed hard against my chest, urging me to act. To lash out. To roar. But rage without control was exactly what they wanted. I dressed quickly and left the room. Guards straightened the moment they saw me. "Cancel my morning meetings," I said. "All of them." "Yes, Alpha." As I walked down the hall, my phone rang again. This time, it was a familiar number. "Daniel," the council head said. "We need to talk," "I'm listening," I replied, not slowing my steps. "These images—"

"Are fake," I cut in. "I was alone last night." "That's not what the public sees," he said. "I don't care what the public sees," I replied coldly. "I care who planted this." He paused. "You should be careful." "I've been careful," I said. "That's why I'm still standing." I ended the call before he could respond. By the time I reached my office, my desk was already covered in printed reports and tablets. My assistant looked tense. "Sir," she said, "media outlets are requesting statements." "They'll wait," I said. "And the board of Carter Holdings—" "They'll wait too." She hesitated. "They're concerned about your image." I

looked at her sharply. “My wife is missing.” She lowered her gaze. “Yes, sir.” I sat down heavily and finally allowed myself to feel it. The anger. The helplessness. The worry. Amy was still out there. Somewhere. Sick. Scared. And someone was using her absence as a weapon against me. I closed my eyes briefly. “This isn’t the first time,” I said quietly. My wolf agreed. He remembered every attempt. Every betrayal. Every quiet knife aimed at my back. But this time felt different. This time, the timing was too perfect. Someone knew exactly where to hit. I opened the images again and studied them closely. The lighting. The angle. The shadows. “This room isn’t mine,” I said. “The layout is wrong.” I zoomed in further. “And that woman,” I added. “She was placed there on purpose.” Whoever planned this didn’t need it to be real. They only needed it to look convincing. I leaned back in my chair and let out a slow breath. “Discredit the Alpha,” I said. “Shake his authority. Make him look weak while his mate is gone.” My wolf snarled. “They think I’ll crumble,” I said. “They think grief and pressure will make me slip.” I stood up suddenly. “They’ve underestimated me.” I grabbed my jacket and headed for the door. “Prepare a full internal review,” I told my assistant. “Digital records. Security footage. Every access point.” “Yes, sir.” “And one more thing,” I added. “Quietly.” She nodded. “Of course.” As I walked out, my phone buzzed again. Another message. Another insult. I didn’t bother reading it. “They can scream,” I said under my breath. “I’ll answer with results.” But even as I said it, one thought stayed with me. This attack wasn’t random. Someone wanted me distracted. Someone wanted me reacting instead of hunting. And whoever they were, they were counting on me breaking before I found Amy. They were wrong.

Chapter 434 Positive Results

DANIEL

I arrived at the office earlier than usual, though the thought barely comforted me. The city outside the windows was moving as it always did—people going about their days but inside, I felt the world tipping. Days had passed since the first false scandal hit. My phone hadn’t stopped buzzing. Emails, texts, messages -warnings and questions and veiled jabs. I stepped into the office and noticed the tension immediately. My executive team was gathered in the conference room, their faces tight, eyes darting to the door as I entered. I could see it in their posture: fear mixed with frustration. They were as unsettled as I was. “Daniel,” my CFO started, voice cautious, “I’m afraid the Northern investors are pulling back.” I dropped my bag and ran a hand through my hair. “How much?” “Some have withdrawn entirely. Others are hesitant to proceed with ongoing deals. And the Carter Holdings partnership we were counting on—competitor firm swooped in. They moved fast.” I exhaled sharply. “They swooped in?” I repeated, disbelief in my tone. “They didn’t even negotiate?” “They offered better rates upfront, and the assurances were solid,” the CFO said. “Investors are nervous. Your reputation—what’s left of it—is affecting confidence.” My wolf growled low in my chest, angry at how easily perception could topple months of work. “Everything we built,” I said, voice tight, “everything, and this is how it falls apart?” My COO tried to interject, “Daniel, we can salvage—” “Salvage?” I cut him off. “They’re making us appear incompetent. We’re losing money, deals, confidence, and I can’t even track the source.” I ran to the window, gripping the edge of the ledge. The sun reflected off the glass of the buildings opposite, mocking me in a way I couldn’t place. Every call I made, every reassurance I tried to offer investors, was met with polite doubt, questions about whether I could stabilize the company with Amy gone. I spun around. “Call the team handling the Carter deal. I want every detail on how it was lost.” “Yes, sir,” the assistant said. She looked anxious but relieved I was taking control. I slumped into my chair, trying to focus. Every paper on my desk felt like it was burning me. Financial reports, project updates, pending

contracts. Everything I touched had the smell of failure now. Investors were leaving, my competitors smelled blood in the water, and my ability to act decisively was being questioned without end. Then I remembered Amy. Somewhere, she was out there, and I couldn't even reach her. Every hour without her made this chaos more personal. My wolf wanted to lash out, to tear down whoever was behind this, but I had to restrain him. I had to think, strategize, act like a CEO, not like a monster. I called the executive in charge of investor relations. "Set up meetings with the top five Northern investors. I need to know exactly why they left and who we can bring back." "Yes, sir," he replied. "And double-check our communications with other partners," I added. "If there's even a hint that our position was compromised, I want it flagged immediately." I hung up and leaned back. The office felt like a cage. Every direction I looked reminded me of the losses piling up. And yet, I refused to panic. My wolf wanted to rage, to tear apart anyone who challenged me. But Daniel—the Alpha, the CEO, the man Amy believed in—had to remain in control.

Just then, my assistant returned. "Daniel, you have a visitor," she said carefully. I frowned. "Who?" "From the Northern Council," she replied. "They say it's urgent." I motioned for them to send him in. The man entered, tense, clearly uncomfortable. He didn't meet my eyes at first, but I let him speak. "Alpha Daniel," he started, "we've noticed disruptions in several key accounts tied to your leadership. There's... concern. They want assurances." I held his gaze, letting my frustration show, but keeping my voice measured. "Concern? My wife is missing, and you're worried about spreadsheets and margins?" He flinched slightly. "It's not just about the numbers. The investors are asking questions. Your position is being scrutinized." I stood abruptly, fists on the table. "Scrutinized?" I repeated. "Every day I'm scrutinized. Every day I fight to keep things from collapsing while my mate is missing. And yet, here you are, telling me to reassure people who have no idea what's happening?" He swallowed hard. "Alpha, we just want—" "I don't want reassurances," I snapped. "I want results. I want Amy found. I want these deals secured, and I want the people trying to discredit me exposed." Silence followed. Then he nodded, carefully. "Understood. I'll make the arrangements." As he left, I sank back into my chair, closing my eyes. The room was quiet now, but the pressure remained. Every lost investor, every failed contract, every whisper of doubt—it wasn't just business. It was an attack on me, my authority, my ability to lead. I thought about the rival company that swooped in. Every contract we lost, every partnership pulled out—it was calculated. Someone knew the precise time to strike. My wolf snarled, the urge to hunt overwhelming, but I forced myself to think strategically. This wasn't just business sabotage—it was designed to destabilize me. To break me. I picked up the phone and dialed Cole's line. No answer. My chest tightened. He had been missing since before all this began. Every strategy, every move I planned, felt incomplete without him. Then I called my intelligence team. "Full scan. Every transaction, every email, every digital footprint from the past week. I want anomalies flagged. Quietly, I don't need panic spreading among the staff." "Yes, sir," they replied. I ran a hand down my face. "This isn't just chaos," I muttered. "It's war." A notification pinged on my phone. I glanced at it. Another social media post, another subtle dig at me while Amy was missing. My stomach turned. Whoever was orchestrating this didn't care about legality or loyalty—they only cared about the optics.

Chapter 435 Loses

DANIEL

I slammed the phone down. "No," I whispered. "I will not let them control the narrative." I stood and began pacing. Every footstep, every breath, was measured. My wolf's rage was simmering just beneath

the surface. I wanted to confront, to destroy, to make them pay. But Daniel—the Alpha, the leader, the man Amy trusted—had to stay sharp. Hours passed. Calls made, meetings arranged, reports analyzed. Every detail, every lost deal, every disgruntled investor—it had to be cataloged, traced, understood. Every failed partnership was a puzzle piece. Whoever thought I would crumble had underestimated how focused I could be under pressure. By late afternoon, I sat back in my chair, exhaustion pressing down on me, but my mind still sharp. The office was quiet now, the tension hanging in the air like a storm cloud. I leaned forward, looking at the pile of reports and emails. “Every loss, every failure,” I said quietly, “has a trail. Someone is leaving breadcrumbs, and I will follow them.” My wolf growled low, approvingly. “We are not done,” I whispered to him. The sun was setting outside, casting long shadows across the office. The city moved on, indifferent. Investors, competitors, council members—they all thought I was faltering. But the truth was different. I wasn’t broken. Amy was still out there. Somewhere. And those trying to destabilize me would regret underestimating what a determined Alpha could endure—and achieve. I stood, running my fingers along the edge of the desk, feeling the weight of responsibility pressing down on me. Every lost deal, every pulled partnership—it was frustrating, it was chaotic, it was infuriating—but it was also a challenge. And I never backed down from a challenge. I exhaled slowly. “We will find her,” I muttered. “And when we do, every piece of this will be accounted for.” The office felt heavy with the tension of the day, but I refused to sit in despair. The city outside was moving, yes, but I would move faster, sharper, smarter. I would restore control, reclaim what was lost, and ensure that no one would ever mistake my patience for weakness again. This was chaos, yes, but I thrived in it. And I would not let anyone—rival companies, disloyal investors, or faceless manipulators—shake the North or my pack while Amy remained in the balance. I closed my eyes briefly, drawing a deep breath. Then I reached for my phone again. New strategies. New contacts. Every path needed to be explored. Every move had to be precise. There was no room for error. And I would not fail. I didn’t stop pacing. The office had gone quiet, but my mind wouldn’t. Every contract lost, every investor pulling out, every rival move—I could trace the patterns in my head, but the problem wasn’t just the numbers. It was the strategy behind it. Someone had timed this perfectly. Someone knew exactly which pressure points to hit to make me appear weak. I picked up the phone again. Not to call my team, not to call investors. I needed to reach someone outside the normal channels, someone I could trust implicitly. I dialed a number I rarely used, one connected to an old contact in Northern intelligence. “Daniel,” the voice said, cautious. “It’s been a while.”

“Not long enough,” I said sharply. “I need eyes on every transaction, every move related to Carter Holdings, and everything tied to our key investors. Someone is destabilizing me—and I need to know who, and how.” There was a pause. “You think this is targeted?”

“I know it is,” I said. “I don’t have Amy, and someone is taking advantage. I need proof, not speculation.” The line went quiet for a moment. Then, “We’ll start immediately. Expect a full report in twenty-four hours.” I hung up and ran my hands through my hair. Twenty-four hours. That was an eternity in the middle of a collapse. But I had no choice. Patience was part of the game, even if every second felt like it was crushing I turned back to my team. “I want every department to document anomalies, every unexpected decision, every misstep. I don’t care if it’s minor or technical. Everything goes into one file. This isn’t just about money—it’s about my credibility, my leadership. And I will not allow it to crumble.” My COO, usually composed, looked at me with concern. “Daniel... you’ve been pushing non-stop since the first scandal. Maybe you should take a moment—” “Take a moment?” I cut him off. “You think I have that luxury? My mate is missing, deals are collapsing, investors are questioning me, and you’re

suggesting I slow down?" He swallowed. "I just mean..." "No," I interrupted. "No, I don't have time to mean. I have time to act, to respond, to reclaim control. That's all." I grabbed my coat and headed for the door. I had meetings to attend, calls to make, moves to monitor. I needed to see the North in motion, to check which wolves were still loyal, which partners were wavering, and which ones could be brought back. The city outside didn't pause for chaos—it never had. And neither could I. In the car, I ran through every option. Every failure, every deal that slipped through my fingers, every subtle push against my authority—it had to have a source. And that source would pay. I refused to believe this was random. Whoever orchestrated this knew what they were doing. Whoever it was, they underestimated the depth of preparation, patience, and cunning I could muster when cornered. By the time I reached the first meeting, my wolf had settled into a low growl of anticipation. I didn't shout, I didn't panic. I moved through the conference room with a controlled authority, taking every seat, every report, every glance in. The investors' representatives were already present. Their expressions were careful, evaluating me as I entered. I didn't flinch. I wouldn't. "Gentlemen," I began, voice even but firm, "we've had a turbulent week. I understand concerns. Let me assure you: Carter Holdings remains stable, our leadership intact, and our strategy clear." One of them raised an eyebrow. "Alpha Daniel, the losses—"

Chapter 436 An Opening

AMY

As she helped me change, I studied her face. "Do you know who gave the order?" I asked quietly. She paused. Just for a second. "I know who enforces it." "That's not what I asked." Her hands steadied. "Knowing more wouldn't help you." "It already has," I said. She didn't respond. When she , she stepped back. "You'll be moved tonight." Night. That meant secrecy. Fewer eyes. More control. After she left, I lay back and stared at the ceiling. My thoughts drifted to the pack. To the North. To the way wolves sensed instability even when humans pretended not to. Daniel's authority would be under pressure. Clara would be somewhere nearby, watching everything tilt. I closed my eyes and breathed slowly, the way the doctor had shown me. Panic wouldn't help. Anger wouldn't either. If this was a waiting game, then I would wait. But I wouldn't break. And when I was finally put back on the board, whoever thought I was only leverage would learn just how wrong they were. The night they moved me was the night I tried to run. I knew it the moment the guards changed. The rhythm was different. The footsteps outside my door came in pairs instead of threes. One of them dragged his feet slightly, like he wasn't fully alert. Little things like that mattered when you had nothing else to work with. They didn't bind my hands. That alone told me they didn't think I was a threat. They were wrong. Mara returned just after dusk. She didn't say much, only gestured for me to stand. I followed her into the corridor, keeping my steps slow, my breathing even. My wolf was awake now, not calm, not frantic, but sharp. Focused. She pressed against my senses, reminding me of corners, doors, blind spots. We passed two guards at the end of the hall. One of them glanced at me and then away, bored. The other barely looked up from his device. Complacency. I stored that away. The elevator ride was silent. I watched the numbers change, counting floors, memorizing time. When the doors opened, the air felt different. Cooler. Less sterile. This wasn't the same wing I had been kept in before. Good. They led me down another corridor, wider this time, with glass panels along one side. Outside was darkness, broken only by scattered lights in the distance. We weren't underground anymore. That mattered too. A guard stepped ahead to open the next door. That was my opening. I didn't think. Thinking slowed things down. I shoved Mara sideways with everything I had and bolted forward. My body screamed in protest, pain flaring through my side, but adrenaline drowned it out. My wolf surged, lending strength I didn't know I still had. Shouts erupted

behind me. I ran. The corridor split ahead. I took the left without hesitation, boots slipping slightly on the polished floor. Doors lined the walls, most of them locked, but I yanked at handles anyway, hoping for one mistake. One careless oversight.

None came. Footsteps thundered closer. Too many. Too fast. I rounded another corner and skidded to a stop. A solid metal barrier slammed down in front of me, sealing the passage with a mechanical hiss. I barely had time to turn before hands grabbed my arms. I fought. I didn't stop myself this time. I kicked, twisted, clawed at anything I could reach. My wolf snarled, rage burning through me, but my body was still weak. Too weak. A sharp sting hit my neck. I gasped, the world tilting violently. My legs buckled, strength draining out of me like someone had pulled a plug. I was caught before I hit the floor, restrained with practiced efficiency. "Enough," a man's voice said calmly. Not angry. Not rushed. My vision blurred, but I forced my eyes open. The man stepped into view, tall, well-dressed, completely unbothered. "That was reckless," he continued. "Especially in your condition." I tried to speak. My tongue felt heavy. "You shouldn't... underestimate me." A faint smile crossed his face. "We didn't. We accounted for desperation. What you mistake for opportunity was simply allowance." That hurt more than the needle. They carried me back, not to my old room, but somewhere smaller. No windows this time. No glass walls. The restraints were gentler but firmer in purpose. Mara stood by the door, her face unreadable. "I had to try," I said hoarsely. She nodded once. "I know." "Then why stop me?" "Because if you had gotten out," she replied quietly, "they would have stopped caring whether you survived." That settled into my chest like a weight. After they left, I lay there staring at the ceiling, heart still racing, muscles trembling from the aftermath. My wolf slowly retreated, not defeated, but subdued. She wasn't angry with me. She understood the attempt. She also understood the failure. They wanted me alive. Controlled. Useful. That meant time was still on my side, even if it didn't feel like it. I closed my eyes and let my breathing steady. I learned something tonight. About their layout. Their reactions. Their confidence. Next time, if there was a next time, I would need more than instinct. I would need patience. And I had a feeling patience was the one thing they hadn't prepared for. I stayed still long after the door sealed shut, listening to the faint hum of the security system as if it might reveal another weakness. My pulse slowly eased, but my thoughts refused to settle. Every failed step replayed in my head, not as regret, but as data. Where they reacted fast. Where they hesitated. Who looked unsure. My body felt heavy again, the sedation not fully gone, and I hated that vulnerability more than the restraints. I rested a hand over my stomach without thinking, grounding myself. I couldn't afford reckless bravery anymore. Not now. If I was going to leave this place, it wouldn't be through panic or luck. It would be through planning.

Chapter 437 A Trap Or Not

DANIEL

I held up a hand. "I know about the losses. I also know the reasons behind them. We are working on resolving every discrepancy, and I will provide every assurance needed. But let me be clear: my team is competent, my vision is intact, and my commitment is unwavering." The room shifted, whispers barely audible. I could feel the subtle judgment in the eyes, the questioning. My wolf tensed, but I let control guide me. I would not give them the satisfaction of seeing me falter. Not now. Not when Amy was missing. After the meeting, I walked out, checking my phone again. No messages from Cole. No updates from Amy. Just alerts about investors, competitors, and minor crises. Each one a reminder that time was slipping. I couldn't fail—not for myself, not for Amy, and not for the pack that relied on me. Back in my

office, I started compiling a detailed plan. Every lost deal, every investor withdrawal, every rival move—it would be cataloged. Every anomaly traced, every pattern analyzed. Whoever thought I would crumble had underestimated me. I would turn this chaos into a map, and from that map, I would find the one responsible. The day ended with me leaning back in my chair, exhaustion weighing down my body, but my mind still racing. I had a direction now, a focus. Amy was out there, and someone was trying to dismantle everything I had built while she was gone. Whoever it was, they were playing a dangerous game. And I intended to win it. Tomorrow, I reminded myself, would be another day of strategy, investigation, and confrontation. But tonight, I allowed myself a moment to breathe—to remember why I fought, and who I was fighting for. And as I stared out the window at the city lights, I promised silently: I would find Amy. I would expose the people undermining me. And I would not let anyone, anywhere, underestimate me again. This time, the Alpha would not be caught off guard. A message came in just before dawn, sharp and insistent, vibrating against the nightstand until it dragged me out of shallow sleep. I reached for the phone with a hand that already felt tired, even before I read the words. Cole was sighted at the outskirts of the East territory in bad shape. I sat up fully, the room snapping into focus. “That doesn’t make sense,” I muttered to no one. Cole had no reason to be anywhere near the East. Not without telling me. Not without backup. I called the number attached to the intel. It rang twice before a low voice answered. “Confirm,” I said. “Now.”

“He was seen near the old freight route,” the voice replied. “Collapsed once. Got back up. Looks injured and alone.” “Seen by who?” “Independent eyes. People who know better than to lie to you.” I closed my eyes briefly. Cole missing for this long was already bad. Cole was injured and wandering near hostile territory was worse. “Hold position. Do not engage. I’m coming.” I ended the call and stood, pulling on clothes without thinking too hard about it. My wolf stirred, alert, uneasy. It didn’t like unknowns, and this was full of them. By the time I reached the command floor, the building was waking up. Screens flickered on. Guards straightened when they saw me. “Get me Kade, Riven, and Dara,” I said as I walked. “Armed team. Light vehicles. We move in fifteen.” Kade was the first to arrive, jacket half-zipped, eyes sharp. “East?” he asked. “Yes.”

“That’s not his usual range.” “I know.” Riven came in ext, already checking a tablet. “Terrain’s rough out there. Old routes, broken infrastructure. Whoever spotted him might have scared him off.” “Or someone wanted him seen,” Dara said quietly as she entered. “Lures work both ways.” I looked at her. “You think this is a trap?” “I think it could be,” she said evenly. “But Cole wouldn’t fake this. Not like that.” “No,” I agreed. “If he’s hurt, it’s real. And if someone wanted to use him, they’d keep him hidden, not exposed.” Kade nodded. “So we go in careful.” “We go in smart,” I said. “No broadcasts. No pack signals until we confirm.” We rolled out just as the sun began to rise, pale and thin over the horizon. The city gave way to open land faster than I liked. The East always felt different. Less order. More tension in the air. My wolf stayed close to the surface, watching through my eyes. As we drove, I kept replaying the same question. Why was Cole there? “He wouldn’t run east unless he was pushed,” Kade said from the driver’s seat, voicing my thoughts. “Or chasing something,” Riven added. “Or someone,” Dara said. B That possibility sat heavy in my chest. Cole was loyal, but he was also stubborn. If he thought he could fix something alone, he might try. We slowed as we approached the old freight route. Rusted rails cut through the land, half-buried, forgotten. The vehicles stopped a safe distance away. “We move on foot,” I ordered. “Spread out. Visual contact only.” The air smelled wrong. Not rot. Not blood. Just... disturbed. Tracks marked the ground, uneven, dragged in places. Kade crouched and touched the dirt. “He fell here. Hard.” I moved closer. There were signs of blood, not much, but enough. “How long ago?”

“Hours. Maybe more.” My jaw tightened. “He kept moving.” We followed the trail deeper, each step increasing the tension. My wolf pushed forward, impatient. I kept it restrained. Charging in would help no one. Then I heard it. A low sound. Breathing, uneven. I raised a fist. Everyone froze. “There,” Dara whispered. Cole was slumped against a concrete barrier, shirt torn, one arm hanging wrong. His face was pale, eyes half-open. He looked thinner than he should have, like he hadn’t eaten properly in days. “Cole,” I said, keeping my voice steady as I approached.

Chapter 438 Nothing Illegal

DANIEL

His eyes focused slowly. “Daniel,” he rasped. “Took you long enough.” Relief hit me hard, but I kept it contained. “You don’t get to joke,” I said. “Not today.” Kade knelt beside him. “He’s bad. Internal injuries, maybe. We need to move him.” Cole tried to sit up and failed. “Don’t,” he said. “They’re still close.” My head snapped up. “Who?” “Didn’t see faces,” he said. “They knew me. Knew you too.” That confirmed what I already suspected. “You were targeted.”

“Yes,” Cole said. “Dragged east. I thought I could lose them. Didn’t work.” Dara checked his pulse. “You’re lucky you’re conscious.” Cole laughed weakly. “I didn’t feel lucky.” “We’re getting you out,” I said. “You can tell me everything later.” “No,” he said sharply, grabbing my sleeve. His grip was weak, but urgent. “You need to know now. They weren’t trying to kill me.” That made me pause. “Then what?” “They wanted me seen,” he said. “Wanted you to come.” Silence fell over the group. Kade swore under his breath. “It is a trap.” “Maybe,” Cole said. “But not for me. For you.” I straightened slowly. “Why didn’t they stop you from collapsing?” “Because I wasn’t supposed to die,” he said. “I was bait.” My wolf growled, pushing hard against my control. I forced it back. Riven checked the perimeter. “We have movement. Far, but coming” “Numbers?” I asked. “Hard to tell. Scattered.” I made a decision. “Evac now. Defensive formation. If they wanted me, they’ll show themselves.” We lifted Cole carefully, supporting his weight. He hised in pain but didn’t complain further. As we moved, I stayed alert, scanning everything. Nothing attacked us. That worried me more than if they had. Back at the vehicles, we helped Cole in quickly. I took the seat beside him. “You should have called,” I said quietly as the engines started. “I tried,” he replied. “The signal was jammed.” “By them.” “Yes” I clenched my jaw. “You said they knew me.” Cole nodded. “They talked. Didn’t hide it. Said the Alpha Supreme was already bleeding. Business, reputation, allies. This was just pressure.” That lined up too well with everything else going wrong. “Did you recognize anyone?” “No. But I recognized the method,” I looked at him. “Mark” He didn’t answer. He didn’t need to. The drive back was tense but uneventful. No pursuit. No ambush. Just silence that felt planned. At the medical wing, Cole was taken straight in. I stayed long enough to hear the doctor say he’d live, then stepped out. Kade followed me, “What now?” “Now I stop reacting,” I said. “They want me chasing shadows. They want me stretched thin.” “And Cole?” “He’s proof,” I said. “Proof that this isn’t random. That someone is coordinating.” Riven joined us. “You think this ties back to Amy?”

Everything did. “Yes,” I said. “Directly or not.” I looked down the corridor where Cole had been taken. “They think hurting the people around me will break me.” Dara folded her arms. “It won’t.” “No,” I agreed. “It won’t.” But it would make me careful. And careful, right now, mattered more than anger. Finally I stayed at the medical wing longer than I meant to, pacing the corridor while doctors worked on Cole. The relief of finding him alive was already giving way to something heavier. If he had been bait, then whoever set that up was confident. Too confident. When the doctor finally stepped out, he nodded once. “He’ll recover. Broken ribs, dehydration, internal bruising. He needs rest.” “I need five minutes,” I

said. ‘You’ll get three,’ he replied, firm but understanding. Cole looked pale against the sheets, an IV running into his arm. He turned his head when I came in. ‘You look worse than I do,’ he said. ‘You always did have bad timing,’ I replied, pulling a chair closer. ‘Don’t try to sit up.’ ‘I won’t.’ He exhaled slowly. ‘Daniel, before you ask-’ ‘I’m asking anyway,’ I said. ‘Your assignment.’ His eyes sharpened. ‘Clara.’ ‘Yes.’ ‘I followed her,’ he said without hesitation. ‘Every route, every meeting she allowed herself to be seen at. dug where I could without exposing myself.’ ‘And?’ ‘And I found nothing incriminating,’ he said plainly. The words hit harder than I expected. I kept my face neutral. ‘Nothing.’ ‘No illegal transactions. No secret handoffs. No coded messages I could trace back to anything concrete,’ continued. ‘If you were hoping for proof, I don’t have it.’ Silence settled between us. ‘But,’ he added. I leaned forward. ‘Go on.’ ‘Her movements were off,’ he said. ‘Not criminal. Just... controlled. Like she was always two steps ahead of wherever she claimed to be going.’ ‘That’s not enough,’ I said. ‘I know,’ Cole replied. ‘That’s why I didn’t report early. Suspicion without evidence is noise.’ ‘And the East?’ His jaw tightened. ‘I think I got too close. Not to her, but to whoever watches her. I noticed a tail in Then I didn’t.’ ‘Describe them.’ ‘I couldn’t,’ he said. ‘They were careful. No markings. No pack scent I could place I stood. ‘You rest. We’ll talk again when you’re stronger.’ ‘Daniel,’ he said quietly. ‘If Clara’s involved, she’s insulated. If she’s not, someone wants her to look dean’ That stayed with me as I left. Back in my office, I pulled up Cole’s report. It was detailed, precise, frustratingly empty of anything I could use. Locations, times, names that led nowhere. The conclusion was clear: no proof of wrongdoing, Only irregular patterns. I closed the file and rubbed my eyes. Too many people were acting strange. Too many coincidences lining up neatly. There was one call I hadn’t made yet. Mark answered on the third ring. ‘Daniel,’ he said, voice smooth. ‘To what do I owe this?’ ‘I’ll get to the point,’ I said. ‘Do you know anything about Clara’s recent movements?’ A pause. Not long. Just long enough. ‘She’s been... unsettled,’ he said. ‘Restless. But nothing illegal, if that’s what you’re asking.’

Chapter 439 No More Reachable

DANIEL

‘That wasn’t my question.’ He chuckled softly. ‘You always were direct. Look, she’s grieving. Confused. People act odd under pressure.’ ‘Has she left the city?’ ‘No.’ ‘Met anyone unusual?’ ‘Not that I know of,’ he said. ‘And if she had, it wouldn’t be a crime.’ I leaned back in my chair. ‘You’re defending her.’ ‘I’m stating facts,’ Mark replied. ‘If you’re looking for a villain, Clara isn’t a good candidate.’ ‘Funny,’ I said. ‘Cole followed her for weeks and said the same thing. Clean. Almost too clean.’ ‘That sounds like paranoia,’ Mark said lightly. ‘You’ve been under a lot of stress.’ I clenched my jaw. ‘If you hear anything, you call me.’ ‘Of course,’ he said. ‘Daniel, for what it’s worth, I hope you find Amy.’ The call ended. I sat there for a long moment, phone still in my hand. Mark hadn’t lied. I was certain of that. But he hadn’t told me everything either. I stood and walked to the window. The city stretched below, orderly on the surface. Too orderly. Kade knocked once and entered. ‘Cole’s stable,’ he said. ‘As stable as he can be.’ ‘Good.’ ‘We’ve been running cross-checks on Clara’s routes,’ he added. ‘Nothing actionable.’ ‘I know,’ I said. ‘That’s the problem.’ ‘You still think she’s involved?’ ‘I think someone wants me to think she isn’t,’ I replied. He nodded slowly. ‘And Mark?’ ‘Knows just enough to stay clean,’ I said. ‘Or he’s being used too.’ My wolf stirred, restless. It didn’t like uncertainty. Neither did I. ‘Keep eyes on Clara,’ I said. ‘Quietly. No pressure.’ ‘And Mark?’ I considered that. ‘Watch him, but don’t let him know.’ Kade left, and I returned to my desk. I pulled up another screen, this one showing timelines. Amy’s disappearance. Cole’s tail. The smear campaign. The failed deals. Now this. Someone

was tightening a net around me. Carefully. Patiently. I wasn't losing control. Not yet. But I could feel how close everything was to tipping. I picked up my phone again, scrolling through messages I hadn't answered. Allies asking questions. Investors pulling back. Silence where there should have been reassurance. And still, nothing on Amy. I closed my eyes briefly. "Hold on," I muttered. To her. To myself. When I opened them, my resolve was steady. Clara might not be guilty. Mark might not be the mastermind. But someone was orchestrating this, and they'd made one mistake. They'd shown me the pattern. And I was done chasing shadows. I didn't leave the office that night. Sleep felt like a waste of time, and even if I tried, my wolf wouldn't settle. It paced inside me, agitated, alert, as if it knew something I didn't yet have proof of. I spent hours going over reports, replaying conversations, noting what was said and what was carefully avoided. By dawn, one thing was clear. Whoever was behind this was patient. They weren't rushing. They were letting pressure do the work. Kade returned early, coffee in hand. "You look like hell," he said, setting it down. "I feel worse," I replied. "Any updates?"

"Nothing solid," he said. "Clara followed her usual routine yesterday. Work, home, one short stop that checks out. Mark hasn't made any unusual moves either." "Which means they're either clean or very good," I said. He nodded. "Cole asked for you again." I stood immediately. Cole was awake when I entered, his color slightly better than before. He looked frustrated more than weak now. "I remembered something," he said. I pulled the chair closer. "Talk." "While I was tracking Clara, there were moments I felt watched," he said. "Not hunted. Observed. Like someone was making sure I saw only what they wanted me to see." "That lines up." I said. "Did you ever see the same presence twice?" "No," he admitted. "That's what bothered me. Too clean. Too controlled." "Did Clara ever acknowledge you?" I asked. "Never." he said. "And she should have noticed at least once." I leaned back. "Which suggests she either didn't know... or she did and wanted you to stay right where you were." Cole met my eyes. "If she's involved, she's not acting alone." "I know." I said. When I left the medical wing, my phone buzzed. Another notification. Another investor backing out. This time from a partner I'd worked with for over a decade. I called him immediately. "Daniel," he said, tense. "This isn't personal." "It always is," I replied. "Talk to me." "There's too much uncertainty around you right now," he said. "Your wife is missing. The media storm. The rumors." "Rumors don't change contracts," I said. "They do when confidence drops," he replied. "I'm sorry." The line went dead. I slammed the phone onto the desk harder than necessary. My wolf surged, anger sharp and demanding. I forced it down. Losing control was exactly what whoever this was wanted. By midday, I convened a quiet meeting. Just Kade, two senior pack enforcers, and our head of intelligence. "We stop reacting," I said. "From now on, we move first." "On what?" one of them asked. "On patterns," I replied. "Every leak. Every smear. Every financial hit. I want timelines cross-referenced with pack movements, territorial activity, and off-grid operations."

"And Clara?" Kade asked. "We keep watching," I said. "But we don't confront. Not yet." "What about Mark?" the intelligence head asked. "Same," I answered. "If he's involved, pressure will make him slip. If he's not, pushing him only helps the enemy." The meeting ended with clear orders. For the first time in days, I felt something close to direction. Late that evening, I stood alone in my office again, staring at the city lights. Amy should have been here. Complaining that I worked too much. Telling me to eat something. Grounding me without even trying. Instead, she was somewhere I couldn't reach yet. My phone buzzed once more. A short message from an unknown number. You're looking in the wrong places. I stared at it, then typed back. Then point me to the right one. No reply came.

CLARA

I knew Elias was angry before I even saw him. He didn't bother with subtlety this time. The message he sent was short and sharp, telling me where to meet him and how long I had before he would leave. No usual teasing. No layered meaning. Just a location. and a warning wrapped in silence. I left the house carefully, the same way I always did when I didn't want questions. Mark barely noticed. He was distracted, restless in a way that made him easy to work around. I drove myself this time. Elias didn't come for me, and that alone told me how bad things were. The warehouse wasn't the one we had used before. This one sat farther out, closer to unused industrial land. No lights on the outside. No guards where they could be seen. I parked where instructed and walked in without knocking. Elias was already there. He stood near a long table, hands braced against the surface, his head lowered. When he looked up, his eyes were hard. Not amused. Not calculating. Just angry. "Sit," he said. I did, keeping my posture calm. Panic never helped in rooms like this. "You told me Cole was nothing," he said. "You told me he was a routine tail." "He was," I replied. "Until he wasn't." Elias let out a sharp breath. "He was caught." "I know," I said. "Daniel found him." "That wasn't supposed to happen," he snapped. "He wasn't meant to leave the North alive, let alone conscious enough to talk." I held his gaze. "Did he talk?" "Not yet," Elias said. "And that's the only reason you're still sitting there." My fingers tightened in my lap, but I didn't let it show on my face. "He has nothing on me," I said. "No proof. No recordings. No witnesses." "He has patterns," Elias said. "And patterns are enough when someone is desperate." "Daniel is desperate," I said. "That works in our favor." Elias laughed once, sharp and humorless. "You're very confident for someone standing on thin ground."

"I'm careful." I corrected. "That's why Cole didn't find anything." He walked around the table, slow and deliberate, stopping just behind my chair. "Listen to me carefully, Clara," he said. "If Cole opens his mouth and your name comes up, I will not shield you." I turned slightly to look at him. "You think I don't know that?" "I don't think you understand it enough," he replied. "You walk alone if this turns. I won't go down with you. I won't sacrifice my position because you miscalculated." "I didn't miscalculate," I said. "Cole was following shadows. He saw movement, not intent." "And that's still dangerous," Elias said. "Intent can be inferred." I stood up then, meeting him eye to eye. "If you think throwing me aside saves you, you're wrong. Daniel won't stop with me." "That's my problem to manage," he said. "Your problem is keeping your name clean." "It is clean," I said firmly. "And it will stay that way." Elias studied me for a long moment. "You sound sure." "I am." I said. "Because everything I did was visible, harmless, and justified. I didn't leak anything directly. I didn't touch Amy. I didn't give orders. I only gave access that I was allowed to give." "And the schedule?" he asked. I didn't flinch. "You asked for information. I gave it. What you did with it was your choice." His jaw tightened. "Careful." "I am," I said. "And that's why Cole can't implicate me. He doesn't even know what he was looking for."

Elias moved away, pacing. "Daniel is tightening his circle. Mark is being watched. Even the Southern Alpha is nervous. Everything is unstable." "Instability creates opportunity," I said. "That was the plan." "The plan doesn't include loose ends," Elias replied. "Cole is a loose end." "You said he hasn't talked," I reminded him. "Yet," he said. "And I don't like yet." I crossed my arms. "What do you want from me?" "For now?" Elias said. "Distance. No contact. No meetings. If anyone asks, we haven't spoken in weeks." "That's not how this works," I said. "You still need me close to them." "I need you safe," he corrected. "Those are not the same thing." "If I pull back now, it looks strange," I said. "Daniel already suspects everyone." "Daniel suspects patterns," Elias said. "Give him boredom." I considered it, then nodded. "Fine. I slow down." "You don't slow down," he said. "You become invisible." "I can do that," I said. "I

know," he replied. "That's why you're useful." The word didn't offend me. It never had. Elias stopped pacing and looked at me again. "Understand this clearly. If Cole says your name, I deny you. If he hints at you, I disappear. You don't exist in my world if this breaks." "And if it doesn't?" I asked. "Then we continue," he said. "But on my terms." I smiled slightly. "You've always thought they were." His eyes narrowed. "What does that mean?" "It means," I said calmly, "that you wouldn't be this worried if you were truly in control." Silence stretched between us. For a second, I thought he might lash out. Instead, he stepped back. "Leave," he said. "Before I change my mind about how much risk you are." I picked up my bag and walked toward the door. At the threshold, I stopped. "Elias," I said. "What?" "If Cole survives this," I said, "Daniel will still find nothing on me." He didn't answer. I left without waiting for one. As I drove away, my thoughts stayed sharp and focused. Elias was scared. That mattered. Fear made him unpredictable, but it also made him careless. And while he believed he could cut me loose, he was wrong about one thing. I had never planned to go down with him. I had planned to walk away standing. I tightened my grip on the wheel and drove back toward the house, already adjusting my behavior in my mind.