

Broken 441

Chapter 441 What's The Plan

DANIEL

An email came in just after midnight. I was still at my desk, jacket off, sleeves rolled up, staring at a screen that had stopped making sense hours ago. Numbers blurred when I looked at them too long. Reports contradicted each other. Every update felt like another door closing. I hadn't gone home. I didn't want to. The house without Amy felt wrong, and I didn't have the energy to sit in that silence. The notification sound was soft, almost easy to miss. I only looked because I was already tense. The sender address wasn't familiar, but the subject line froze me in place. Medical Results – Confidential My first thought was that it was a mistake. The second was that it wasn't. I opened it. The file loaded slowly, like it was taking its time to hurt me. The document was clearly formatted. Hospital header. Lab identifiers. Dates. Patient name. Amy Carter. My chest tightened, and I leaned back in the chair, eyes scanning fast, then slower as the words sank in. Blood analysis. Hormone levels. Ultrasound confirmation. Gestational markers. Pregnant. I already suspected it. I had suspected it for days, ever since the doctor's comments stopped making sense and Amy's symptoms didn't line up with stress alone. Still, seeing it written like that hit differently. It made everything real in a way I wasn't ready for. Then I kept reading. Multiple gestation confirmed. I frowned and scrolled. Triplet pregnancy. I stopped breathing for a moment. Triplets. I read it again to make sure I hadn't misunderstood. I hadn't. The report was clear. Three fetal heartbeats. Early stage, but unmistakable. The attached scan images showed three distinct markers, labeled clinically. I read without emotion. My hands shook as I scrolled further. The note at the end wasn't medical. It was short. Typed plainly. She has been informed of the pregnancy. She has not been informed of the number. I stared at that line for a long time. "She knows she's pregnant," I said out loud, my voice rough in the empty office. "But she doesn't know it's triplets." I pushed back from the desk and stood up, pacing. My wolf stirred under my skin, restless, angry, protective. This wasn't information I was supposed to receive like this. This wasn't how I was supposed to find out. Someone wanted me to know. Someone wanted me unsettled. I went back to the beginning of the email and checked the sender again. No name. Just a string of characters and a secure relay address. Professional. Clean. Hard to trace. I clenched my jaw. "Who are you?" I muttered. I read the full report again, slower this time. Amy's vitals were noted as unstable but improving. The pregnancy was progressing faster than expected. The recommendation was strict monitoring, limited stress, controlled movement. My throat tightened. She was pregnant with three children. She was being held somewhere I couldn't find. Her body was under strain. And someone thought it was acceptable to send me this like a message on a screen. I slammed my hand on the desk. "No," I said sharply. "You don't get to do this." My phone was in my hand before I realized it. I almost called her number out of instinct, then stopped myself. She wouldn't answer. If she could, she would have already. I forced myself to think. Who would have access to this information? A doctor. Someone inside the facility holding her. Someone who wanted leverage. Someone who wanted me off balance.

The same list of suspects circled my mind again and again, and none of them made me feel better. I sat back down and pulled the file up on a larger screen. I memorized every detail. Dates. Signatures. Lab IDs. If this was real—and it felt real—then it meant Amy's body was doing too much, too fast. And she was doing it without me. The anger came then, slow and heavy. Not wild. Focused. They think this will break me," I said quietly. "They think I'll panic." My wolf growled low, not loud, but deep. I closed my eyes and

pictured Amy as she'd looked the last time I saw her. Tired, yes. Guarded. Still standing straight. Still refusing to let anyone see how much she was carrying. 'She doesn't even know,' I whispered. 047 Finisher The loss from before came back hard. The hospital room. The silence after. The way Amy had gone still when the doctor spoke. The way she had shut down for weeks afterward, like feeling anything was too dangerous. And now this. Triplets. anything happened to her- stopped that thought before it . opened a secure channel on my system and flagged the email for trace. Even if it led nowhere, I needed to try. Then I pulled up my internal contacts and started making notes. Doctors I trusted. Pack medics. Anyone who could help me prepare for what Amy would need when I got her back. Not if. When. The door to my office opened quietly. I didn't look up. "Not now," I said. Daniel's voice came from behind me, tense but controlled. "Sir, security flagged unusual data traffic on your terminal." I turned slowly. "I know." He stepped closer, eyes going to the screen. He stiffened when he saw the report. "Is that...?" "Yes." He swallowed. "Is it confirmed?" "As confirmed as anything can be," I said. "And it wasn't meant to comfort me." Daniel nodded once. "This changes things." "It doesn't," I said. "It clarifies them." I straightened and closed the file, locking it behind multiple layers. "Whoever sent this thinks they're in control. They think information equals power." I met Daniel's eyes. "They're wrong." He hesitated. "Do you want me to inform the council?" "No." I said immediately. "Not yet. Amy doesn't even know the full truth. She deserves to hear it from me, not through whispers." Daniel nodded again. "What's the plan?" I exhaled slowly. "We find her. Faster. Cleaner. No public moves. No demands." "And if this is a warning?" he asked. "If they're telling you what they can take?"

Chapter 442 Where The Hell Are You?

DANIEL

My jaw tightened. "Then they've made a mistake by reminding me what I'm protecting." He didn't argue. After he left, I sat alone again, the weight of the knowledge pressing in. Three lives. Amy's life. All balanced on choices being made without her consent. I looked at the dark window, my reflection faint in the glass. "I'm coming for you," I said quietly, not sure who I meant it for. "All of you." I shut down the screen, grabbed my jacket, and finally left the office. I didn't know where Amy was. But now I knew what was at stake. And I wasn't going to let anyone else decide how this ended. I didn't sleep. I went home only to change clothes, then returned to the war room before dawn. The house felt wrong without Amy. Every room reminded me she wasn't there, so I didn't linger. By the time the sun came up, I already had half a dozen screens active and a room full of people who knew better than to ask unnecessary questions. I stood at the head of the table and spoke clearly. "We have confirmation Amy is alive," I said. "She's being medically monitored. That narrows our window." One of the strategists leaned forward. "That means a fixed location?" "Not necessarily," I replied. "But it means structure, Doctors don't travel blind." I pulled up a map of high-rise properties across the region. Skyscrapers, secured compounds, private medical facilities disguised as residential towers. I wasn't guessing wildly anymore. I was eliminating. Daniel sat to my right, eyes sharp. "The email came from a secure relay," he said. "We traced the routing. It bounced through the South, then offshore, then back north. Clean work." "Too clean," I said. "They wanted me to see it. That means the message matters more than the secrecy." "To scare you," someone said. "To distract me," I corrected. "They want me emotional. Rushed." I wasn't giving them that. We worked through the morning, checking flight logs, elevator access permits, private medical supply orders. Anything unusual. Anything rushed. Anything that lined up with a pregnancy that was progressing faster than normal. By midday, frustration set in. "Nothing concrete," Daniel said quietly. "Every lead stops just short." I nodded. "That's on purpose." My wolf

pushed against my control, angry and restless. I kept it contained. Anger didn't find Amy. Patience would. My phone vibrated. An encrypted line. I stepped away from the table and answered it. "Talk." A familiar voice came through, rough but alive. "Sir." I froze. "Cole?" "Yes," he said. His breathing was uneven. "I'm alive." Relief hit hard, but I kept my voice steady. "Where are you?" "Safe enough for now," he replied. "I escaped the East border zone two hours ago. I'm injured, but mobile." "Who did this to you?" I asked. There was a pause. "I don't know for sure." "Start from the beginning," I said. "I followed Clara as ordered," Cole said. "She was careful. No direct meetings that could be flagged. But her movements were off. Timings didn't add up. She doubled back a lot. Changed routes. Used decoys." "Did you see her meet Elias?" I asked. "No," he said. "That's the problem. Every time I got close, the trail went cold. Then I was grabbed. Fast. Professional." "Did Clara set you up?" I asked. "I have no proof," Cole said firmly. "None. I never saw her give an order or make a call. But the timing—" "Timing isn't evidence," I said. "I know," he replied. "That's why I'm telling you straight. I found nothing incriminating. Only suspicious behavior." I closed my eyes briefly.

"Someone wanted you removed," I said. "And wanted it clean." "Yes, sir." "Get to a safe house," I ordered. "Medical team is already on route. You don't contact anyone else. Not even Mark." "Understood," Cole said. The line went dead. I went back into the room and told them only what they needed to know. Cole was alive. Injured. No usable intel. The disappointment was sharp but short-lived. This wasn't over. Later that evening, I called Mark. He answered on the third ring. "Daniel." "I need to ask you something directly," I said. There was a pause. "Go ahead." "Have you noticed anything unusual about Clara lately?" I asked. "Movements. Behavior. Anything at all." He sighed. "She's been... off. Quiet one moment, overly helpful the next. But nothing criminal. Nothing I can point to." Has she been leaving the house at odd hours?" I pressed. "She said she was trying to give space," Mark replied. "I didn't question it." I thanked him and ended the call. It wasn't enough. None of it was enough. That night, I sat alone again, staring at the same map. Somewhere in this city—or another—Amy was carrying three lives and fighting a body that wasn't cooperating. She didn't know I knew. She didn't know how deep this had gone. "They think I'll break," I said quietly. My wolf stirred, steady now. Focused. "I won't." I stood and reached for my jacket. Tomorrow, I would push harder. Not louder. Smarter. They had shown their hand by sending that email. And I was done reacting. I left the war room close to midnight and walked the perimeter alone. The guards straightened when they saw me, but I waved them off. I needed quiet. I needed to think without voices pulling at me. Amy was being kept alive on purpose. That detail mattered. It meant leverage. It meant rules. Whoever was behind this wasn't acting on impulse. They wanted control, not chaos. I stopped near the eastern gate and called Daniel again. "Increase monitoring on private medical supply chains," I said. "Anything prenatal. Anything unusual. Don't flag it openly." "Understood," he replied. "You think they'll move her?" "Yes," I said. "Soon. Pregnancy complicates holding patterns." After the call, I sent a single encrypted message to PAC leadership. Limited circle. Trusted only. I didn't ask for action. I asked for silence and access. Both were granted within minutes. Back inside, I reviewed Amy's medical report again. Triplets. Fast progression. High risk. The words stayed sharp no matter how many times I read them. "I'm coming," I said under my breath. I didn't know where she was yet. But I knew this much with certainty: whoever thought using Amy would force me to choose had miscalculated. I wouldn't choose between my wife and my crown. I would take her back. And then I would dismantle everything that made this possible.

Chapter 443 Blowing Back

CLARA

Mark noticed before I was ready for him to. That was the problem. Not that he was angry, or suspicious, or pacing the living room like he owned the air in it. The problem was that he was finally paying attention, and attention was dangerous. He was standing near the window when I came in, arms crossed, jaw tight. He didn't greet me. He didn't ask where I'd been. That silence told me everything. "You're late," he said finally. "I told you I had errands," I replied, setting my bag down slowly. I kept my tone calm. Normal. Like this was just another evening. "You said you were meeting a friend." His eyes stayed on me now. "You didn't say you'd disappear for hours." I shrugged lightly. "Things took longer than I planned." "That's been happening a lot," he said. "You are taking longer than planned. You step out to take calls. You lock your phone." I turned to face him fully. "I'm allowed privacy, Mark." He let out a short laugh, but there was no humor in it. "Privacy isn't the same as secrecy." I didn't answer right away. Silence can be useful if you let the other person fill it with their own fears. Mark did exactly that. "Are you in trouble?" he asked. "Because if you are, you can tell me." "I'm not in trouble." "Then why do you act like you are?" I walked past him into the kitchen, forcing him to follow if he wanted to keep talking. I needed movement. Stillness made people think too hard. "I've been under pressure," I said. "You know that." "Everyone's under pressure," he snapped. "Amy's missing. Daniel's unraveling. The pack is tense. That doesn't explain you sneaking around like you're hiding something." I opened the fridge, pretending to look for water. My hands were steady. My heart was not. "I'm not hiding anything," I said. Mark leaned against the counter. "Then explain this." He held up his phone. My phone. Or rather, a photo of my phone, taken earlier that day when I'd left it charging in the living room. "You changed your password," he said. "You used to tell me when you did that." I closed the fridge and faced him again. "I didn't know I needed permission." "You didn't," he said. "But it's another change." I exhaled slowly, letting some frustration show. Not too much. Enough to look real. "You're watching me now?" I asked. "Taking pictures of my things?" "I wasn't watching," he said. "I noticed." "That's watching." "No," he said. "Watching is what people do when they expect to find something. I wasn't expecting anything until you gave me reasons." There it was. The word reasons. He thought he was being logical. "I've been trying to help," I said quietly. "I've been trying to hold things together." "How?" he asked. "By lying to me?" "I'm not lying." "Then tell me where you go." I hesitated on purpose. Just a second too long. Enough to trigger his fear, but not enough to confirm it. "I can't," I said. His shoulders stiffened. "You can't, or you won't?" "It's not about you," I said. "It's about timing." "Timing for what?" he demanded. "Because from where I'm standing, it looks like you're involved in things you don't want me to know about." I stepped closer to him. Not invading his space, just enough to soften the moment. "I didn't think you'd turn into this," I said. "This?" he repeated. "Someone who assumes the worst," I said. "I thought you trusted me." "I did," he said. "I do. That's why this feels wrong." I reached out and touched his arm. He didn't pull away, but he didn't relax either. "You know I've been watched since everything that happened," I said. "You know people don't look at me kindly." "That's exactly why I'm worried," he said. "Because if you're mixed up in something, you won't survive another scandal." "I'm not mixed up," I said. "I'm careful." "Careful looks a lot like sneaky," he said. I let my hand fall away and crossed my arms instead, mirroring his posture. "So what is this?" I asked. "An interrogation?"

"No," he said. "It's me asking my partner if she's okay." "I am." "Then why do you keep leaving at odd hours?" "I need space," I said. "This house is suffocating lately." He looked genuinely hurt at that. Good. Hurt was easier to manage than anger. "I thought we were building something," he said. "We are," I said quickly. "But building doesn't mean reporting every step." "Not every step," he said. "Just the ones that look like exits." I met his gaze and softened my voice. "I'm not leaving you." "Then stop acting like you already have." I stepped closer again, lowering my voice. "You're scared because things are unstable," I

said. "You're projecting that onto me." His brow furrowed. "That's not fair." "Neither is accusing me of hiding crimes," I replied. "I didn't say crimes." "You're thinking about it." He looked away. I pressed gently. "If I wanted to hurt you, I wouldn't still be here," I said. "I wouldn't argue with you. I'd just disappear." "That's what scares me," he said quietly. "That you could." I nodded slowly, as if considering his words. "I won't," I said. "But I need you to trust that some things I do are for survival." "Whose?" he asked. "Mine," I said. "And maybe yours." That caught his attention. "What does that mean?" "It means I'm trying to stay ahead of what's coming," I said. "You don't want to be dragged into that." He studied my face, searching for cracks. I gave him none. "You could tell me," he said again, softer now. "Whatever it is." I shook my head. "Not yet." He sighed and ran a hand through his hair. "I don't like this version of us." "I don't either," I said. "But it's temporary." He didn't look convinced, but the fight was draining out of him. That was my opening. "I need you on my side," I said. "Not watching me like I'm the enemy." "I don't think you're the enemy," he said. "I think you're standing too close to one." I forced a small smile. "You always did overthink." "Someone has to," he replied. Silence settled between us, heavy but manageable. Just don't lie to me," he said finally. "I'm not," I said. That was true enough, depending on how you defined lying. He nodded once, tired more than satisfied. "I'm going to bed." "Okay," I said. He paused at the doorway. "If this blows back on us- "It won't," I said. He hesitated, then left. "I stayed in the kitchen long after he was gone, staring at the dark window. Mark was closer than he realized. Too close. But I had handled it. I always did. And as long as he believed my secrecy was about survival and not strategy, he would keep protecting me. That was all I needed—for now.

Chapter 444 Come See Me Now

CLARA

The house was too quiet when I woke up. Mark had already left for work, which gave me the space I needed to think without watching my expressions. I lay there for a while, staring at the ceiling, listening to my own breathing, letting the calm settle before I moved. Calm was important. Calm made people careless. I knew something had shifted overnight. I could feel it in the way my phone stayed silent. No messages from Elias. No updates. No instructions. That silence never meant peace. It meant calculation. I got up and dressed carefully, choosing clothes that made me look harmless. Soft colors. Nothing sharp. I made breakfast even though Mark wasn't there. Old habits helped sell stability. I cleaned the kitchen slowly, giving myself time to think. Daniel would be spiraling by now. I didn't need confirmation to know that. If the report had reached him, then the damage was already underway. Amy being pregnant changed the board. Triplets changed it further. Elias hadn't told me that part, which meant he didn't trust me with everything. I hated that. I also understood it. Elias never gave anyone the full picture. My phone buzzed while I was drying my hands. A message from Elias. Come see me. Now. No address. No explanation. He never needed one. I grabbed my bag and left the house without telling anyone. I didn't bother lying this time. Mark had been tense lately, watching me too closely. If he asked later, I'd say it was work. He wanted to believe me. Wanting made things easier. The drive was longer than usual. Elias picked the meeting point, and he liked distance. The farther he pulled me from the North, the safer he felt. I followed the route without using navigation. By the time I arrived, my jaw was tight from holding in questions. He was already there, leaning against his car, expression hard. He didn't greet me. He didn't need to. "You let things get messy," he said as soon as I stepped closer. I crossed my arms. "You sent the report." He looked at me sharply. "I sent a message." "You sent leverage," I corrected. "And you didn't tell me what was in it." "That wasn't your concern." "It becomes my concern when Daniel starts moving," I said. "You think he won't?" Elias stepped closer. "Daniel is already moving. That's the

point." I searched his face. "You used Amy's pregnancy without telling me." "Yes." "And you still haven't told me your endgame." He smiled faintly. "Because you're not supposed to know it yet." I felt irritation rise, but I kept my voice steady. "I can't protect myself if I don't know what you're doing." "You're not meant to be protected," he replied calmly. There it was. The truth he never bothered to hide. He turned and walked toward the warehouse entrance, expecting me to follow. I did. Inside, the air was cool and quiet. No music today. No crowd. Just concrete and shadows. "You think Daniel will break," I said. "But he won't. He'll adapt." "He'll react," Elias said. "And reaction creates mistakes." "And what about me?" I asked. "Where do I stand when this turns violent?" He stopped walking and faced me. "Where you've always stood. Useful. Replaceable." I stared at him. "You promised—" "I promised opportunity," he cut in. "Not safety." I let out a slow breath. "Cole is alive." His eyes flicked briefly. "Barely." "He didn't find anything on me," I said. "You should be pleased." "I am," Elias said. "But Daniel isn't done asking questions." "He won't find proof." "No," Elias agreed. "But suspicion is enough."

I studied him. "You're letting him circle me." "I'm allowing pressure," he corrected. "Pressure reveals cracks." I lowered my voice. "And if he finds Amy?" Elias's mouth tightened. "He won't. Not yet." Not yet. That phrase made my stomach twist. "You're keeping her alive," I said. "Yes." "For how long?" "As long as she's useful." I hated how calm he sounded saying it. I stepped closer. "You're underestimating Daniel." He looked down at me. "And you're underestimating yourself. You're inside his world. You live with his brother. You touch his systems without leaving prints. That's power." "Until I'm blamed," I said. "If that happens," Elias said flatly, "you walk alone." I met his gaze. "You'd let me fall." "I'd let you burn," he corrected. "If it keeps the rest clean." Silence settled between us. "I need more access," I said finally. Elias raised a brow. "To what?" "To Amy's movements. To Daniel's response teams. To whatever plan you have after this phase." He considered me for a long moment. "You'll get pieces." "I need more than pieces." "You need patience," he replied. I exhaled slowly. "You're enjoying this." "I enjoy control," he said. "And right now, I have it." I didn't argue. There was no point. Instead, I nodded. "Then tell me what you need from me next." He turned back toward the exit. "Stay visible. Stay helpful. And make sure Daniel keeps losing ground without ever knowing where the cuts come from." "And Amy?" I asked. "Let her weaken," Elias said. "Physically. Emotionally. The pack will do the rest." I followed him out into the daylight. Before I got into my car, I stopped him. "If Daniel finds her," I said quietly, "this ends badly." Elias looked at me over his shoulder. "Then make sure he doesn't." The drive back felt longer than the trip out. My thoughts stayed sharp, organized. Elias thought he was using me. That was fine. I'd let him believe it. By the time I pulled into the driveway, I had already adjusted my plan. I didn't need to know his full endgame. I just needed to survive long enough to step out of it. Mark's car was home. I straightened my shoulders before going inside, putting the right expression back on my face. Concerned. Calm. Ordinary. Whatever Elias was planning, it was already in motion. And I had no intention of being the one it crushed.

Chapter 445 They Are Wrong

DANIEL

The house felt wrong the moment I stepped inside. It wasn't quiet. It was hollow. The kind of quiet that carried weight, like something had been removed and the space hadn't adjusted yet. I dropped my keys on the console and stood there longer than I meant to, staring at the staircase as if Amy might suddenly appear at the top, annoyed that I hadn't called out. She didn't. I went straight to my study. Routine mattered now. Routine kept my head from splitting open. I sat down, opened my laptop, and pulled up

the security feed logs again even though I had already reviewed them twice that morning. Nothing new. No gaps I hadn't memorized. No faces I hadn't burned into my mind. My phone buzzed on the desk. A message from my finance director. We lost two more investors this afternoon. They cited reputational risk. I closed my eyes briefly, then typed back a short acknowledgment. I didn't argue anymore. Arguing didn't change outcomes. Action did. Another notification followed. Legal this time. A partner firm had suspended negotiations on a joint venture. No explanation beyond "current instability." "Cowards," I muttered, though the word felt tired. Fear made people predictable. A knock came at the door. Not loud. Controlled. "Come in." I said. Jonah stepped inside, tablet tucked under his arm. He didn't sit until I gestured for him to. "You look like you haven't slept," he said. "I have," I replied. "Just not enough." He hesitated. "Intel came in from the South routes." That got my attention. I leaned forward. "About Amy?" "No," he said carefully. "About movement around Elias's network." I waited. "Clara's name keeps circling," Jonah continued. "Nothing solid. Just proximity, Meetings. Routes that don't line up with her stated schedule." I exhaled slowly. "Still nothing incriminating." "No," he said. "Just patterns." Patterns were dangerous. Patterns turned into stories, and stories turned into conclusions whether they were true or not. "Keep watching," I said. "Quietly." Jonah nodded. "There's something else." I didn't like the way he said that. "Say it."

"The press cycle isn't organic," he said. "Someone is feeding them at specific intervals. The timing matches internal leaks." "From where?" He shook his head. "We're tracing it. Whoever it is knows how to stay just ahead." I leaned back in my chair. "They want me busy. Distracted." "Yes." "They want me looking guilty," I added. Jonah didn't argue. "And they want Amy out of reach," I said. Silence settled between us. "She's alive," Jonah said finally. "I believe that." "So do I," I said. "They would have used her death already if she wasn't." He studied me. "You're sure you can keep this together?" I looked up at him. "I don't have the luxury of falling apart." He stood. "I'll update you when we have more." After he left, I opened the folder with Amy's medical report again. The words didn't blur this time. I read them slowly, line by line. Triplets, Viable. Accelerated progression. Monitoring required.

"She doesn't even know," I said quietly. My wolf stirred, restless. Angry. Not wild, but focused. It didn't want destruction. It wanted retrieval. I stood and paced the room. "They think this will break me," I said aloud. "They think public pressure will make me careless." My phone buzzed again. This time, a blocked number. I answered it. "Talk." "You're getting closer," a distorted voice said. "To what?" I asked. "Truth," it replied. "Then stop hiding," I said. A pause. "You won't like it." "I don't care," I said. The call ended. I stared at the phone for a moment, then set it down. Fear tactics. Nothing more. Still, I logged the call and forwarded it to Jonah. By evening, I was back at the office. The building felt different now. Staff moved carefully, voices lower, eyes following me when they thought I wasn't looking. Respect hadn't vanished, but it had thinned. Respect always did when uncertainty entered the room. In the boardroom, I met with what remained of the senior team. "We stabilize," I said. "No reactive decisions. No panic withdrawals." One of them shifted. "Daniel, the numbers-" "I know the numbers," I cut in. "What I need is discipline." They nodded. Some convinced. Some afraid. After the meeting, I stayed behind with Mara from legal. "They're waiting for you to slip," she said. "I won't," I replied. "They don't need you to," she said. "They just need the perception." "I'll handle the perception," I said. She studied me. "And your wife?" My jaw tightened. "I'll handle that too." Night had fallen by the time I returned home. I stood in the bedroom doorway for a long moment, looking at Amy's side of the bed. Untouched. Too neat. "I'm coming for you," I said quietly. "I don't care who thinks they're smarter." I lay down without changing, staring at the ceiling. My phone stayed on the nightstand, screen lit, waiting.

Whoever started this thought time was on their side. They were wrong. I stayed there for a long time, thinking through every angle. Every meeting, every leak, every subtle shift in behavior I had noticed over the past weeks. Clara's movements, Elias's network, the whispers in the pack -they all pointed to someone who wanted me distracted, vulnerable. But I couldn't let myself be distracted. Not now. Not while Amy's life was on the line. I went through Cole's last reports again, even though I knew he hadn't found concrete evidence against Clara. Her movements were suspicious, yes, but that wasn't proof. I needed more. I needed something solid before I made a move. I grabbed my coat and left the room, heading for the security hub. Every camera feed, every access log, every note from Jonah—I poured over them, trying to find a pattern I could exploit. "Daniel," Jonah said when I entered, "you should rest—" "No time," I interrupted. "Every second I wait, someone else gets the upper hand." He didn't argue. He understood.

Chapter 446 Rapid Growth

AMY

I had learned the shape of the days by their silence. They kept me still, not chained, not bruised, but carefully contained. The room was large and clean, with windows that showed a slice of sky I could never reach. My body felt heavier than it should have, like it was working through something it hadn't agreed to. I wasn't surprised anymore. Anger had burned through shock and settled into something sharper. The doctor came when Mara sent for him. He checked my vitals, listened, asked questions he already knew the answers to. "You need to rest," he said one morning, his voice careful. "Your body is under strain." "I'm resting," I replied. "That's all I do." He didn't smile. "Not just physically." I knew what he meant. My wolf stirred in me, restless but weak, like she was pacing in a narrow room. She wasn't sick in the usual way. She was stretched thin. "How long?" I asked. He hesitated. "The pregnancy is progressing faster than expected." I closed my eyes. Faster. Of course it was. Nothing about my life ever moved at a normal pace. He left after that, and I stayed where I was, sitting on the floor with my back against the wall. I breathed the way I'd been taught years ago, slow and steady, the kind of meditation that keeps panic from breaking loose. It was the only control I had left, so I used it. That was when the Southern Alpha came in. I felt him before I saw him. His presence pressed against the room, heavy and deliberate. I didn't stand. I didn't bow. I stayed where I was, breathing in and out like I had been. "You look stronger today," he said. I opened my eyes. "You didn't come here to check my health." He nodded once, like he appreciated honesty. "No." He moved closer, stopping just short of my space. "Information has reached Daniel" My breath caught, but I didn't let it show. "What information?" He watched me closely. "That you're pregnant." Anger rose so fast it felt like my chest might split. "You had no right." "I didn't send it," he said. "But I knew it would reach him eventually." "That doesn't make it better," I snapped. "He'll be tearing himself apart right now." "He already is," the Alpha said calmly. "That was happening before this." I pushed myself to my feet. My legs trembled, but I stayed upright. "You're doing this to him. You're trying to break him." His expression didn't change. "I'm trying to correct an imbalance." I laughed, sharp and bitter. "You always dress it up nicely." He exhaled slowly. "You attempted an ectopic disruption before." My blood went cold. "You had no right to know that either." "I know more than you think," he said. "And you should know better than to try something like that again. It would kill you." I stepped closer, ignoring the way my body protested. "You don't get to pretend you care about my life." "I care about control," he replied. "And keeping you alive serves. that." "At least you're honest." He met my gaze. "I am not mistreating you, Amy. You're fed. You're monitored. You're safe."

“I’m imprisoned.” “Temporarily.” “For how long?” “For as long as this takes.” “And what exactly is this?” I demanded. “Destroying my husband?” right away. When he did, his voice was quieter. “Reshaping the board” I shook my head. “You won’t win. Daniel won’t break the way you want him to.” His lips curved slightly. “Everyone breaks. The question is what they become after” I felt my wolf stir again, weak but defiant. “I won’t help you “I don’t need your help,” he said. “I need your compliance” “And if I refuse?” He stepped back. “Then things become harder. For everyone.” Silence stretched between us. I thought of Daniel, pacing, searching, blaming himself. I thought of the children growing inside me, moving forward without waiting for permission. “You leaked this to hurt him,” I said. “I allowed it to surface,” he corrected. “There’s a difference.” “There isn’t.” He turned toward the door. “Stay where you are. Let the doctor do his work. Don’t try to outthink your body again.” “And when you’re done?” I asked. He paused. “Then we’ll see what remains.” He left without another word. I sank back down slowly, my hands pressed to my stomach. My breathing came uneven now, anger and fear tangled together. The pregnancy felt like a storm moving too fast to outrun, too big to ignore. I wasn’t surprised. I wasn’t confused. I was furious. He thought keeping me contained would keep me quiet. He was wrong. Daniel would find me. I didn’t know how, or when, but I knew him. And when that happened, everything the Southern Alpha was building would start to crack. Until then, I stayed alive. I stayed aware. I stayed angry. And I waited. I had heard the name long before I ever saw the inside of one of their facilities. Nomara Mara Foundation. It sounded harmless. Charitable. The kind of organization people praised at galas and quoted in speeches. They funded hospitals, sponsored research, and handled cases most institutions didn’t want attached to their names. Publicly, they were about health, recovery, and long-term care. Privately, they controlled far more than people realized. The first time the doctor mentioned them, I was sitting upright in bed, my hands resting on my stomach “We’ll be transferring part of your care under Nomara Mara Foundation oversight,” he said, flipping through his tablet. “They specialize in complicated cases.” I looked at him. “This isn’t a hospital” “No,” he agreed. “But they operate like one. Better funded. Fewer questions” That was when I understood. This wasn’t about kindness. It was about control The Foundation didn’t just treat patients. They managed them. They handled people whose health conditions came with political weight, pack implications, or long-term consequences. Wolves with unstable shifts. Alphas with genetic risks.

Chapter 447 Defeating The Purpose

AMY

Women carrying heirs whose survival mattered to more than one territory. People like me. The next day, two representatives arrived. A man and a woman, both calm, both dressed plainly. They introduced themselves by first name only. No titles. No ranks. “Our role is to ensure your health is protected,” the woman said. “And that nothing compromises the pregnancy.” I noticed she said pregnancy, not pregnancies. I didn’t correct her. They ran tests the doctor hadn’t mentioned before. Blood work. Scans. Monitoring my wolf’s stability. Everything was recorded and stored in systems I didn’t have access to. When I asked where the data went, the man answered easily. “The Foundation maintains all records. We share findings only with authorized parties.” “And who decides that?” I asked. He met my eyes. “The Foundation does.” That was the problem. Nomara Mara Foundation sat above borders. Above packs. Above even corporate oversight. Their influence came from being necessary. Everyone needed them, especially when things went wrong. Later, Mara told me more than she should have. “They’ve been around longer than most people think,” she said quietly while helping me sit more comfortably. “They started as healers for wolves no one wanted to claim.” “And now?” “Now they decide who lives long

enough to matter.” I didn’t miss the tension in her voice. The Foundation took over my treatment fully within days. Meals were adjusted. Medication schedules changed. My movements were limited further, not out of cruelty, but caution. Everything was framed as care. Protection. Responsibility. “The pregnancy is advancing faster than normal,” one of their doctors explained during a review. “Your body is adapting aggressively.” “And if it doesn’t?” I asked. “Then we intervene,” he replied. “That’s what we’re here for.” I realized then that Nomara Mara Foundation wasn’t just reacting to my condition. They had plans in place. Protocols. Outcomes they were prepared to enforce. They weren’t neutral. They were invested. One evening, I overheard a call through the half-open door. The woman from the Foundation was speaking softly, carefully. “Yes,” she said. “The condition is stable. No, he hasn’t been informed beyond what was leaked. We’re managing progression. The Southern Alpha is cooperative.” She paused. “No, we won’t let it reach a critical point.” When she noticed me watching, she didn’t flinch. “You weren’t supposed to hear that,” she said calmly. “You weren’t supposed to say it where I could,” I replied. She nodded, as if I’d made a fair point. “Your health is central to several balances right now. That’s the truth.” “And my choice?” I asked. She hesitated for the first time. “Choice becomes complicated when too many futures depend on one body.” After she left, I sat alone for a long time. Nomara Mara Foundation wasn’t here to save me. They were here to preserve value. Mine. The children’s. The stability that came with all of it. They worked in health, yes—but health as leverage, not mercy. And the worst part? Everyone trusted them.

Which meant if anything went wrong, it would be called an unfortunate complication. A medical reality. Not a decision. I placed my hand on my stomach and breathed slowly. If I was going to survive this, it wouldn’t be because the Foundation allowed it. It would be because I stayed aware. And because I remembered that even institutions built on care could still choose sides. They didn’t wake me with force. That was the first thing that felt wrong that morning. No sharp orders. No rush. No restraints tightening. Mara helped me sit up slowly, her hands steady, her face careful. “You’re being moved for a meeting,” she said. “A meeting with who?” I asked. She hesitated. “With people who need to speak to you.” That answer told me enough. When people stopped naming things, it meant power was involved. They dressed me in simple clothes that weren’t mine. Clean. Soft. Nothing that could be used as an excuse say I was mistreated. noticed that pattern now. Everything was arranged so no one could later claim I’d been abused. Controlled did not mean harmed. It meant managed. The blindfold came back on before we left the room. counted steps. Elevators. Long hallways. I focused on breathing, keeping my wolf calm. She stirred uneasily, still weak but present. I held her down gently, the way I’d learned to do over years of discipline. When the blindfold was removed, I was sitting at a long table. The room was large. Clean. Bright without being warm. Windows stretched across one wall, but the glass was treated. I couldn’t see outside clearly. Just light and height. There were six people seated already. Men and women. Wolves. Humans. I could tell by posture, scent, and the way they watched me. The Southern Alpha sat at the head. “You’re awake,” he said calmly. “I’ve been awake for days,” I replied. He nodded once. “Good. Then we can speak plainly.” Mara stood behind me. The doctor was there too. So was a woman I didn’t recognize, holding a tablet close to her chest. “This is unnecessary,” I said. “Whatever you want to tell me could have been said in my room.” “No,” the Alpha replied. “This requires witnesses.” I felt my stomach tighten. Not fear. Awareness. He gestured, and the woman with the tablet stepped forward. “Your pregnancy has progressed beyond standard timelines,” she said. “Even accounting for wolf biology.”

"I know," I said. "I feel it." She hesitated, then continued. "The children are viable. All of them." I stiffened. "You already knew." "Yes," she said. "We confirmed days ago." The Alpha watched my reaction closely. "You are carrying something rare," he said. "Not just heirs. A convergence." I frowned. "Speak clearly." He leaned forward slightly. "Your bloodline. Daniel's. The timing. The political state of the territories. These children represent leverage." "There it is," I said flatly. Silence followed. Not denial. Not apology. One of the men at the table spoke next. "No one here is interested in harming you. That would defeat the purpose." "And the purpose is?" I asked.

Chapter 448 Layers Of Plan

AMY

"To stabilize the balance," he replied. "Through you." I laughed once, short and bitter. "You kidnapped me for balance." The Alpha's voice stayed even. "We secured you." "You lied to Daniel," I snapped. "You let him think- "I let him think what he needed to," he interrupted. "Just as you're being told what you need to know." My hands clenched on the table. "You think carrying children strips me of agency." "No," he said. "It makes you central." "That's worse." The doctor cleared his throat. "Your health is our priority. Stress must be managed." I looked at him. "Then start by not talking about me like I'm currency." The woman with the tablet shifted uncomfortably. The Alpha raised a hand. "Enough. Amy, you're here because you matter. To the North. To the South. To the future structure of both." "I matter because you can use me," I said. "Yes," he agreed. At least he didn't insult me by pretending otherwise. "You'll remain here until the pregnancy reaches a stable stage," he continued. "After that, discussions may change." "Discussions with who?" I asked. "With Daniel. With the councils. With investors and pack elders who don't yet know how exposed they are." I stared at him. "You're planning to negotiate my body." "I'm planning to prevent war," he said. "By threatening my husband." "By reminding him what's at stake." I stood abruptly, ignoring the dizziness. "You don't get to call this peace." Mara moved instinctively, ready to steady me, but I stayed upright. "You think I don't understand power," I said. "I've lived in it my whole life. What you don't understand is loyalty. Daniel won't bend the way you expect." The Alpha's mouth tightened slightly. "Everyone bends." "Not to people who mistake possession for control," I said. He rose slowly from his seat. The others followed suit, as if on command. "This meeting is over," he said. "You'll be returned to your room." As they filed out, the woman with the tablet lingered. "You should rest," she said quietly. "The next few weeks will be difficult." "They already are," I replied. When I was alone again, back in the room that had become my cage, I sat on the bed and pressed my hands against my stomach. I didn't understand the full scope of what they meant by cause. I understood enough. I was important because I could be traded. Protected because I could be threatened. Cared for because damage would reduce value. They weren't waiting for my consent. They were waiting for timing. And somewhere far away, Daniel was being forced to make choices without knowing the rules of the game. That was what hurt the most. The room stayed quiet for most of the day after the meeting. The kind that meant people were watching without being seen. I felt it in the pauses between footsteps, in the way Mara entered without knocking but never startled me, in how the doctor appeared exactly when my body started to feel off. I sat by the window even though I couldn't see much beyond light and height. The glass didn't open. I already knew that. Still, I pressed my palm against it once, just to confirm the limits again. Mara brought soup and set it on the small table near the bed. "You need to eat," she said. "I know," I replied, but I didn't touch it right away. She hesitated. "You were quiet after the meeting."

"I was thinking," I said. "That can be dangerous in your condition." I looked at her. "Thinking is the only thing they haven't taken yet." She didn't argue. She never did when I said things like that. Instead, she checked my pulse, then stepped back. "Doctor will come later," she said. "He wants to monitor the progression again." "Again," I repeated. "As if I'm not aware something is wrong." She lowered her voice. "It's not wrong. Just fast." "That's not reassuring." She didn't respond. When she left, I finally ate. Slowly. My body needed it, even if my mind didn't want it. My wolf stirred faintly, less agitated than before, but still not steady. She didn't like being confined. Neither did I. The doctor came in the afternoon. He carried a small case and a tablet. "You're holding up better today," he said. "Am I?" I asked. He nodded. "Your vitals are more stable." "And the babies?" I asked, keeping my tone flat. He glanced at the door, then back at me. "They're developing rapidly. Faster than what we usually see, even in wolves." "Say what you mean," I said. He exhaled. "Your body is under strain. Not immediate danger, but it's something we're watching closely." "Watching," I repeated. "That seems to be the theme." He ignored that. "We may need to move you to a more equipped medical wing soon." "Move me where?" "A lower level," he said. "Still within the building." "So I'm not going anywhere that matters." "No," he admitted. After he left, I lay back and closed my eyes. My thoughts drifted, whether I wanted them to or not. Daniel. I wondered what he knew by now. I wondered what lies had reached him. Whether he slept. Whether his wolf was tearing at him the way mine was turning inward. I pressed my hand against my stomach again. The truth settled heavier than fear. They weren't keeping me alive out of mercy. They were keeping me alive because my death would cost them something they wanted. That night, the Southern Alpha came again. This time, he came alone. "You're calmer," he observed. "I don't have the energy to scream," I said. He nodded as if that was reasonable. "Your condition requires stability." You keep saying that word like it's a gift." It can be," he said. "If you cooperate." I met his gaze. "You already know I won't." He studied me for a moment. "You're stronger than I expected." That's not a compliment coming from you." "No," he agreed. "It's an obstacle." I leaned back against the pillows. "You told Daniel about the pregnancy."

"Yes." "You wanted to hurt him." "I wanted to focus him," he corrected. "Distraction leads to mistakes." "And you're counting on him making one." He didn't deny it. "Everyone does, eventually." "Not him," I said quietly. The Alpha smiled faintly. "We'll see."

Chapter 449 Change Of Plans

CLARA

I knew something had shifted the moment the house felt too quiet. Not the calm kind of quiet. The careful kind. The kind that meant information was moving faster than people were willing to admit. Mark was already awake when I came down that morning. He sat at the kitchen island, phone in hand, jaw tight. He didn't look up when I poured myself coffee. "You didn't sleep," I said lightly. He finally glanced at me. "Neither did you." I smiled. "That's hardly new." He watched me longer than necessary, then looked back at his phone. I didn't need to see the screen to know what he was reading. News traveled fast in this circle. Rumors even faster. "She's still missing," he said. I kept my movements steady. "Amy?" "Yes," he replied sharply, like there was any other option. "I know," I said. "Daniel must be losing his mind." Mark's fingers tightened around the phone. "And yet things keep leaking. Business issues. Political pressure. Now this—" He stopped himself. "Now what?" I asked. He hesitated. That told me enough. Something new had surfaced. Something big. "Nothing confirmed," he said. "Just noise." Noise was never just noise. I leaned against the counter. "You think Daniel's enemies would slow down

just because his wife is missing?" Mark didn't answer. He didn't need to. His silence told me he was starting to connect dots he didn't like. I took my coffee and set the cup down carefully. "If you're worried, you should talk to him." He scoffed. "About what? Sympathy?" "About support," I said. "That still matters." He finally met my eyes. "You've been very calm about all this." I shrugged. "Panicking doesn't help." "That's not what I meant." I tilted my head. "Then what did you mean?" Mark stood. He stepped closer, lowering his voice. "You've been... elsewhere lately. Distracted." I forced myself not to react too fast. "I work. I help. I try not to fall apart every time someone brings up Amy." "You barely talk about her," he said. That one almost made me smile. "I talk when there's something useful to say," I replied. He searched my face like he expected a crack. He didn't find one. "Just be careful," he said finally. "People are watching everything right now." "I know," I said. "That's why I'm behaving." After he left, I went to my room and locked the door. My phone buzzed almost immediately. Unknown number. Encrypted line. I didn't need to check who it was. Elias: He knows now. I typed back slowly. Me: Daniel? Elias: About the pregnancy. About pressure points. My pulse picked up, but my thoughts stayed clear, Me: You told me you wouldn't escalate without warning, Elias clenched my jaw. Me: You're destabilizing too fast. He'll notice patterns. Elias: He already has. That's the point. I paced the room, phone tight in my hand. Me: What about me? There was a pause before his reply. Elias: Do your job. Stay clean. If this collapses, I won't be dragged with you. I laughed quietly. Of course he wouldn't. Me

You're confident for someone hiding behind layers. Elias: Confidence comes from leverage. I stopped pacing. Me: And Amy? What's your end with her? Another pause. Longer this time, Elias: She's insurance. Nothing more. I didn't like how easily he said it. Me: You said you needed her alive. Elias I still do. That didn't mean safe. I set the phone down and sat on the edge of the bed. My reflection in the mirror looked the same as always. Calm. Collected. Useful. No one saw the calculation underneath. No one ever did. Amy missing had changed the board faster than I expected. Daniel was being pushed from every angle. Business. Politics. Pack loyalty. And now fear. Fear made leaders reckless. But it also made them dangerous. I stood and straightened my clothes. If Elias thought he was the only one playing long games, he was mistaken. I would let him think he was in control. Just like everyone else had. I stayed in my room longer than usual after that. The house felt watched, even though nothing had changed physically. I checked the locks, the windows, the hallway camera feed. Everything looked normal. That was the problem. When things were normal for too long, it usually meant someone was arranging something quietly. Later that afternoon, Mark knocked once before entering. "You missed lunch," he said. "I wasn't hungry." He leaned against the doorframe. "That's new." I picked up a file from the desk and flipped through it, even though I already knew what it contained. "Stress changes habits." He watched me again. I could feel the weight of his gaze without looking up. "You've been getting messages," he said. "Late at night." I met his eyes then. "So have you." "That's different." "How?" I asked. "I'm not hiding mine." I stood and walked past him toward the window. "I'm not hiding anything." Mark exhaled slowly. "I want to believe that." "You do believe it," I said. "Otherwise you wouldn't still be standing here talking to me. He didn't argue. That told me I was still ahead.. After he left, I checked my phone again. No new messages. Elias was either busy or intentionally silent. Neither option comforted me. I went over everything I had access to. Schedules. Clearance lists. Internal updates that passed through my hands before reaching higher levels. Nothing that pointed directly to me. Everything indirect. Everything deniable. That evening, I overheard two staff members talking in the corridor. "Daniel hasn't left the office in days," one whispered. "He's burning bridges," the other replied. "Deals are falling apart." I stepped into view, letting them notice me. "Careful," I said gently. "Speculation spreads faster than facts." They both apologized quickly. That was good. It meant my

image still worked. Back in my room, my phone buzzed again. Elias Be ready. Things will accelerate. I typed back. Me: You're pushing too hard. Elias: I'm pushing exactly enough. I stared at the screen, then locked the phone, He thought speed meant control. He thought pressure broke people the same way every time.

Chapter 450 The Crest

DANIEL

I had stopped keeping track of time days ago. The office lights stayed on because I needed them on. The screens stayed active because information moved faster than sleep ever could. Amy was still missing, and every hour that passed without answers felt like failure I couldn't explain away. I stood by the main table in my office, palms pressed flat against the surface, eyes fixed on a live map of the Northern territories. Patrol movements. Border activity. Quiet alerts that meant nothing on their own but everything when placed together. The South was watching. I knew that much. They weren't rushing anymore. They were waiting. "Still nothing?" PAC asked from behind me. I didn't turn. "Nothing solid." PAC moved closer, lowering his voice. "Council is restless." "They can be restless somewhere else." "That's not how this works." "I know how it works," I said, finally turning to face him. "I also know Amy isn't gone by accident." PAC studied me carefully. "You think this is leverage." "I know it is." He hesitated. "Then we need to talk about the Crest." I nodded once. We had both been circling that truth. The Northern Crest wasn't just a symbol. It was authority, legacy, and control bound into one object. Whoever held it didn't just speak for the North. They could fracture it. Reframe it. Challenge leadership in ways that couldn't be ignored. And the South wanted it badly enough to play patient. "I already handled it," I said, PAC's eyebrows lifted, "Handled it how?" "I sent Cole." That got his full attention. "Cole is still missing." "He wasn't missing when I gave the order." I walked to my desk and pulled out a secured tablet. I activated it with a scan and turned the screen toward PAC. Coordinates. Routes. A set of instructions only one wolf would understand. "He's moving the Crest off-grid," I said. "No digital trail. No pack escorts. No known safe houses." PAC exhaled slowly. "That's risky." "So is leaving it where it is." He studied the screen. "Does anyone else know?" "No."

"Not even—" "Especially not," I cut in. PAC nodded. "If the South realizes the Crest is gone— "They'll panic," I said. "Or they'll make mistakes." "Or they'll hurt Amy." The words landed hard, even though I had already thought them myself. I straightened. "They already have." PAC didn't argue. He rarely did when my tone shifted like that. Later that night, I met with two senior enforcers in a secured room beneath the office. No windows. No devices. Just stone walls and trust built over years. "You're thinning patrols in the west," one of them said. "I'm redirecting attention," I replied. "And the Crest?" "Is no longer where they think it is," They exchanged looks, "Who moved it?" the other asked. "Someone I trust with my life." "That's not an answer." "It's the only one you're getting." They accepted that. They always did. When they left, I stayed behind and sat alone for a moment, elbows on my knees, head lowered. Trust came easy in strategy. It was harder when it involved people you loved.

My phone buzzed. Unknown number. I answered immediately. "Daniel," a voice said calmly. "You're working very hard." I closed my eyes. "You shouldn't have called." "And miss hearing how tired you sound?" "Where is my wife?" A pause. Not long enough to be accidental. "She's safe," the voice replied. "For now." "That's not an answer." "It's the only one you need." I tightened my grip on the phone. "If you touch her—" "You'll do what?" the voice asked. "Rage? Retaliate? Lose control?" "I'll end you." A

quiet laugh. “That’s why this is interesting. You’re trying not to.” The call ended. I stared at the dark screen, chest tight but mind clear. They wanted reaction. Noise. Public mistakes. They wanted me reckless. I stood and walked back into the main office, calling PAC as I moved. “Lock down all nonessential access,” I said. “Internal and corporate.” “Already halfway done,” “Good. And I want a full review of Clara’s movement logs again.” PAC hesitated. “Cole didn’t find anything incriminating.” “I know,” I said. “But I don’t like coincidences,” “Neither do I.” After the call ended, I went to the private office attached to mine. Amy’s things were still there. Her jacket over the chair. Her tablet untouched. I picked it up, thumb hovering over the screen before setting it back down. “I’m getting you back,” I said quietly to the empty room. “Without giving them what they want.” Hours later, I received a short encrypted message. Crest secured. No trail. I’ll stay dark. I closed my eyes, relief sharp but brief. “Good,” I murmured. “Stay alive.” The Crest was hidden. The South would feel that absence soon. And when they did, they would move. I welcomed that. Because every move they made brought me closer to Amy. I didn’t allow myself to rest after Cole’s message. Relief was a luxury I couldn’t afford yet. I forwarded a single instruction to PAC and shut down my main console. “Prepare the inner circle,” I said when he arrived minutes later. “Quietly.” PAC crossed his arms. “You’re expecting retaliation.” “I’m expecting pressure.” “They’ll connect the Crest’s disappearance to you.” “I want them to.” He studied my face. “That puts Amy at risk.” “She’s already at risk,” I said. “What changes is who controls the pace.” PAC was silent for a moment. “What’s your next move?” “I stop reacting,” I replied. “I make them talk.” Later that night, I met with an old contact off-record. No titles. No ranks. Just truth exchanged carefully. “They’re holding meetings now,” he told me. “Private ones. Your wife is being discussed.” “Important how?” I asked. “She’s central to something they believe will legitimize their position.” I clenched my jaw. “She’s not a symbol.” “They don’t see it that way,” When I returned home, the house felt wrong. Too quiet. I sat on the edge of the bed and rubbed my hands together, steadying myself.