

Alpha's Abandoned Daughter is the Secret Heiress! - Chapter 421[1,331 words]

(Amelia's POV)

The hatred in Lance's eyes was almost physical.

It radiated off him in waves – hot, furious, desperate. If looks could kill, I'd have been ash on the floor.

But he couldn't move.

Zoey had made sure of that. Hit after hit, relentless and shaking and absolutely real. His body had simply given out. He lay crumpled against the wall, arms slack, chest barely rising.

I looked down at him.

"Relax," I said. "You're not going anywhere."

He made a sound in his throat. Not words. Something uglier than words.

"Griffin will find you eventually," I continued, keeping my voice pleasant. "Maybe. If he's good enough." I tilted my head. "But I'd guess he's barely keeping his own head above water right now. So you might be waiting a while."

Lance's jaw worked.

Nothing came out.

I straightened up, rolled my shoulder once, and kicked him cleanly in the ribs.

Not hard enough to break anything. Just hard enough to make a point.

He folded tighter against the wall, a choked grunt escaping through his teeth.

I turned and walked out of the room.

Silas was waiting just outside the door, her posture relaxed but her eyes sharp as always.

"Zoey settled?" I asked.

"She's in the next room. Berry's with her."

I nodded. Good.

“What about Zane Jenkins?” I asked. “Since the story about Zoey and Wayne broke – has he made any moves?”

Silas’s expression didn’t change, but something in her eyes sharpened slightly.

“His people visited Southgate Detention Center earlier tonight,” she said. “We don’t have the specifics yet,

I felt my brow pull together.

Southgate Detention Center.

The name sat in my mind, turning over slowly.

Celine had used a fugitive once, hired someone with nothing to lose to make my life difficult. It wasn’t a complicated playbook, but it had worked once. If Zane was falling back on the same logic-

There was a professional killer in that facility. Someone who’d been connected to operations I’d quietly dismantled months ago. Someone with the right skill set and zero legal protections left.

But even as I thought it, something felt off.

Zane wasn’t sloppy. He wasn’t the type to reach for the obvious move. He was patient. Calculated. The kind of man who let other people make noise while he quietly repositioned.

Which meant whatever he was doing at that detention center, it probably wasn’t what it looked like on the surface.

The real question was what his actual target was.

Starlight Entertainment? Stone Botanicals? Umbra Analytics?

All three were exposed right now in different ways. All three had pressure points.

“Keep watching,” I said. “I want everything – visitors, paperwork requests, any communication that goes in or out of that facility connected to his people.”

Silas nodded once. “Understood.”

“Dig deep,” I added. “Don’t stop at the surface.”

She was already moving before I finished the sentence.

Zoey was quieter on the drive back.

Not the frozen, hollow quiet from before. This was different. Softer. Like something had been released that had been coiled tight for a very long time.

She sat in the passenger seat with her hands folded in her lap, staring at the city lights sliding past the window.

After about ten minutes, she turned her head and looked at me.

“Thank you,” she said.

Her voice was steady. Genuinely steady – not performed, not held together by force.

“I thought about it,” she continued. “While I was in there. I kept thinking – why should I be the one who disappears?” Her jaw set. “The dirty ones were never me. It was always them. The predators. The ones

who took and took and never once thought about what they were destroying.”

I kept my eyes on the road.

“Took you long enough to figure that out,” I said.

She laughed.

It was a real laugh- short and a little rough, but real.

“If I ever need to go back and hit him again,” she said, “will you actually take me?”

“Said I would, didn’t I?”

She was quiet for a moment.

“I want to stay close to you,” she said finally. “I know that probably sounds strange, since we’ve barely known each other –”

“I was going to sign you to Starlight Entertainment anyway,” I said.

She blinked. “What?”

“You’ve got the right instincts. The contract dispute with your current agency – I’ll handle it.” I glanced at her briefly. “You just focus on not falling apart again.”

She stared at me for a long moment.

Then she pressed her lips together and looked back out the window.

“Okay,” she said softly. “Okay.”

I dropped Zoey off with Berry just before ten-thirty.

Berry had already set up a clean room, warm food, the works. She gave me a look over Zoey’s shoulder that said *I’ve got this* without a single word.

I got back in the car and checked my phone.

One message from Caleb.

Four words: *See you on the other side.*

I stared at it for a second.

Then I locked the screen and put the phone face-down on the passenger seat.

His flight had taken off. That chapter was closed.

I had a different problem now – I needed gifts.

Tonight, I was meeting Theodore’s friends. Showing up empty-handed wasn’t an option, but picking gifts for people I barely knew was genuinely one of my least favorite activities. I had no patience for it.

I pulled up Natasha’s contact and called.

She picked up on the third ring.

“Mm?” Her voice was thick with sleep, soft at the edges.

“It’s Amelia. Are you busy?”

A pause. The sound of sheets rustling.

“...No,” she said, sounding more awake already. “What do you need?”

“I need someone to help me pick gifts. Theodore’s friends. I’m meeting them tonight and I have no idea what to get any of them.”

There was a beat of silence.

Then the sleepiness completely vanished from her voice.

“Give me thirty minutes,” she said.

She made it in twenty-five.

Red coat, black skirt, hair done, heels on. She looked like she’d been awake for hours.

She climbed into the car and immediately looked me over.

“You look good,” she said approvingly, scanning my outfit. “Simple but sharp. Very you.”

“You look like you planned this outfit three days ago.”

She grinned. “I always have an emergency going-out look ready.” She buckled her seatbelt. “Okay.

Theodore’s friends. How many, and what do I need to know about them?”

I gave her the basics on the drive over.

By the time we reached the mall, she had already declared, with complete confidence, that she had it handled.

I believed her.

We ate first.

There was a steakhouse on the third floor with good cuts and better soup, and neither of us had eaten properly since afternoon. We got a table, ordered, and settled in.

Natasha talked with her hands. She had opinions about everything – the mall layout, the other diners, the soup temperature – and she delivered all of them with cheerful authority.

At some point she glanced at my plate.

Then she looked at hers.

Then back at mine.

“You finished everything,” she said.

“I don’t like wasting food.”

She paused.

Something shifted in her expression – not pity, not surprise exactly. Just a quiet, genuine kind of recognition.

She didn't say anything else about it.

But I noticed her finish her own plate more carefully after that.

After dinner, Natasha shifted into what I could only describe as full mission mode.

She moved through the mall with purpose, pulling me from one shop to the next, asking sharp questions and dismissing options with decisive efficiency. She knew what worked, what was too showy, what hit the right note between thoughtful and unpretentious.

An hour and a half later, every gift was chosen, wrapped, and bagged.

I was genuinely impressed.

"You're good at this," I said.

She looked pleased in a way she was trying not to show. "I've had a lot of practice. Big family."

We headed toward the exit, bags in hand, the late-night crowd thinning out around us.

I was already thinking about the drive back, running through logistics in my head, when something in my peripheral vision snagged my attention.

A figure. Moving through the crowd near the far end of the corridor.

Something about the posture. The way she held her shoulders.

I stopped walking.

Natasha stopped a half-step later, following my gaze.

She squinted.

Then her expression shifted – first confused, then genuinely startled.

She leaned close and dropped her voice.

"Is that Celine?" she said. "What is she doing at a baby store?"

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(Amelia's POV)

I stopped walking.

My eyes tracked the figure moving through the crowd near the far end of the corridor.

That posture. Those shoulders. The way she moved like she owned every room she walked into – even when she clearly didn't.

Celine.

Natasha's voice was low beside me. "What is she doing at a baby store?"

I watched Celine linger near the entrance of the shop, a small bag clutched in one hand.

What indeed.

My mind started turning it over quietly. Celine at a baby store wasn't something that happened by accident. She didn't browse. She didn't wander. Everything she did was calculated.

Natasha leaned closer, dropping her voice even further. "Okay, so – one of my girls mentioned recently that Celine's been tangled up with Lucas Lloyd. You don't think she's actually..."

She didn't finish the sentence.

She didn't need to.

I thought about it for a moment.

Celine had always considered herself above everyone else. She'd spent years cultivating that image – polished, refined, too good for ordinary people. Lucas Lloyd was many things, but he wasn't the kind of man Celine would ever genuinely want.

If there had been anything between them, it was a transaction. A convenience. Celine using him for something.

She would never willingly carry Lucas Lloyd's child.

"It's not Lucas," I said quietly.

Natasha blinked. “Then who-”

“Griffin.”

A beat of silence.

Natasha’s expression shifted slowly from confusion to something closer to disbelief.

Before she could respond, the baby store’s door swung open.

Celine stepped out.

She was looking down at her bag, adjusting the handles and then she looked up.

Her eyes found mine instantly.

Her entire body went still.

For just a second – barely half a breath her free hand moved. It pressed flat against her stomach, instinctive and unthinking.

Then she caught herself and dropped it immediately, like she could pretend it hadn’t happened.

But we’d both seen it.

Natasha sucked in a sharp breath beside me.

Celine’s expression had gone from still to carefully controlled, but her eyes gave her away. There was

something frantic moving behind them.

Natasha didn’t waste any time.

“Is it Lucas’s?” she asked, her voice carrying clearly across the corridor. “Because he’s already fled the

country, you know. Very heroic of him, leaving you to handle things alone.”

Celine didn’t even look at her.

Her gaze was fixed entirely on me. Hard and burning and full of something that had been building for a long time.

Natasha wasn’t deterred.

“You know,” she continued, almost conversationally, “I always thought part of your problem was that you never actually made it into the Crimson family’s circle. Not really. You were always on the outside looking in.” She tilted her head. “That kind of thing twists a person.”

The words landed.

I watched Celine’s jaw tighten.

She’d spent years believing she was exceptional. Talented, beautiful, destined for something greater than what she’d been given. And yet the Crimson family had never once looked at her the way she wanted them to. Not with respect. Not with recognition.

That wound had never closed.

Natasha had just pressed directly on it.

I let the silence stretch for a moment before I spoke.

“Celine.” I kept my tone light, almost friendly. “When did you start working for Griffin Drake?”

Her eyes sharpened.

“And where’s Adrian?” I added. “I haven’t seen much of him lately.”

Something flickered across her face at the mention of Adrian. Her expression darkened further.

“Did you plan what happened at Night City?” she asked. Her voice was controlled, but only barely.

“No,” I said simply.

She stared at me.

“Those guests were poisoned by the drug Griffin gave you,” I continued, keeping my voice calm. “The one that was meant for me. Somewhere along the way, it ended up in the wrong place.” I paused. “That’s not my doing. That’s yours.”

I watched her process that.

She still couldn’t figure out how it had happened. I could see it in her face – the frustration, the confusion, the desperate attempt to find the angle she’d missed.

“The Drake family has other assets,” she said finally, pulling herself upright. “You haven’t won anything.”

“I know,” I agreed pleasantly. “That’s why I’ll keep going.” I met her eyes. “One by one. Including that club you’re managing.” I let a beat pass. “I know what’s being kept there, Celine.”

The color drained from her face.

Her eyes went wide for just a fraction of a second – raw, unguarded fear – before she forced her expression back under control.

She didn’t know how much I knew.

That uncertainty was its own kind of weapon.

I let my gaze drop, briefly, to her stomach.

“You were drugged that night,” I said. “And now you’re buying things at a baby store.” I looked back up at her face. “Griffin’s child. And you’re planning to use it to secure your place beside him.”

The silence that followed was absolute.

Natasha made a small, stunned sound beside me.

Celine stared at me for a long moment.

Then something in her expression shifted. The pretense fell away. She stopped trying to hide it.

“Yes,” she said. Her voice was flat and cold and certain. “And when I’m standing next to Griffin, I will make your life absolutely miserable.”

I looked at her.

“Celine,” I said, and I let a trace of genuine contempt color my voice, “the only reason you haven’t been dealt with yet is that I haven’t had the time.”

I paused.

“But I want you to know you’re starting to genuinely disgust me.”

The words hit exactly where I intended.

I watched her face crumple for just a moment – not into sadness, but into a fury so sharp it was almost desperate. Her hands tightened around the bag handle.

Then she turned and walked away.

Her heels struck the floor hard with each step, and she didn't look back.

Natasha watched her go.

"She actually confirmed it," she said, sounding slightly dazed. "Griffin's child. She's actually carrying Griffin

Drake's child."

"Mm."

"That man is genuinely revolting." Natasha shook her head slowly. "No wonder Jade ran the moment she had the chance. How anyone could willingly-" She stopped herself, grimacing. "Actually, I don't want to finish that thought."

"Don't," I agreed.

We stood there for another moment, watching the corridor where Celine had disappeared.

Then Natasha exhaled, squared her shoulders, and looked at me.

"Right," she said. "I think that's enough for tonight."

I couldn't argue with that.

I dropped Natasha off just past midnight.

She climbed out of the car, then turned back and gave me a look that was equal parts exasperated and fond.

"Get some sleep," she said. "You have actual plans tomorrow."

"I know."

"I mean it. You look like you've been awake for thirty hours."

"Twenty-six."

She pointed at me sternly, then closed the door.

I watched her disappear inside before pulling away.

Back at the Pack House, I slept.

Properly, deeply, without interruption. When I woke, the light coming through the curtains had the particular quality of mid-morning warm and unhurried.

I lay still for a moment, staring at the ceiling.

Then I got up, washed my face, and picked up the bags of gifts sitting neatly by the door.

The restaurant Theodore had chosen was quiet from the outside.

Private, discreet. The kind of place where the staff recognized certain faces and knew better than to ask questions.

I stood outside the private room for a moment.

Through the door, I could hear the low rumble of conversation, the occasional burst of laughter.

I took a breath.

It was a strange feeling. I had faced down Griffin Drake, walked into hostile rooms, navigated situations that could have gone catastrophic in a dozen different directions. None of those things had made me feel quite like this.

First time formally meeting your mate's closest friends, apparently, was its own category of nerve-wracking.

I almost laughed at myself.

Even for someone who had faced far worse than this.

I pushed the door open.

The conversation stopped instantly.

Every head in the room turned toward me.

I stood in the doorway with the bags in my hands and met the collective weight of their attention.

None of it was hostile. If anything, the eyes looking back at me were curious, warm, openly interested.

Someone near the back grinned. Someone else straightened in their seat.

“Amelia-”

“Future Luna!”

“There she is our Alpha’s mate!”

The voices overlapped, cheerful and overloud, and the room filled back up with noise almost immediately.

I was still processing the welcome when I felt a hand close around mine.

Theodore.

He’d crossed the room without me noticing. He stood beside me now, his grip steady and warm, and he bent his head slightly toward my ear.

“Stop standing in the doorway,” he said quietly, and I could hear the smile in it. “Come sit down.”

I let him pull me forward.

The person nearest the door reached back and swung it shut behind us.

Theodore waited until I was settled, then rested his hand on my shoulder – easy, natural, certain – and looked out at the room.

“My fiancée,” he said. “Amelia Stone – I believe you’ve all been introduced.”

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(Amelia’s POV)

The room erupted the moment Theodore finished speaking.

Chris the youngest-looking one, with an easy grin that made him seem like he’d never taken anything too seriously in his life leaned forward first.

“Are you kidding? Everyone knows who she is.” He laughed, shaking his head. “Amelia Stone? You’re basically famous at this point.”

“Famous is an understatement,” Luke said from across the table, raising his glass in a small salute. “Honestly, Theodore, she’s too impressive for you.”

Theodore gave him a flat look.

Luke grinned and didn't take it back.

Theodore turned to me then, and went around the table from left to right, unhurried.
"Chris. Lewis. Simon.

Luke."

Each of them nodded as their name was called.

I looked at them in turn and made sure I had them fixed in my memory. Chris, youngest, already calling me Amy before Theodore had even finished the introductions. Lewis, steady-eyed, the kind of person who chose his words carefully. Simon, who was watching me with a quiet, assessing interest. And Luke, already relaxed back in his chair like he'd decided we were going to get along just fine.

"Theodore's girl," Chris announced cheerfully, pointing at me. "That's what we're going with."

"Agreed," said Luke.

I set the bags on the table and smiled.

"I brought a few little things," I said. "Just a small way of saying I'm glad to finally meet you all."

That got their attention immediately.

All four of them sat up straighter, and Chris was already reaching for the nearest box before I'd finished speaking.

I watched them open the gifts.

Chris pulled out the U-drive first – shaped like a printed ECG strip, the kind that ran off a heart monitor. He turned it over in his hands, brow furrowed, then broke into a delighted grin.

"This is genuinely the coolest thing I've ever received. What is this? Where did you even find this?"

Lewis unwrapped his next. He held up the book a special edition of "Gray's Anatomy", leather-bound, with annotated illustrations.

Luke took one look at it and snorted. "Lewis, Buddy. She's telling you to study."

Lewis turned the book over in his hands with the expression of a man who was taking the gift very seriously. "I appreciate this more than you know."

Simon had gone quiet.

He was staring at the large printed poster in his hands a detailed human muscular anatomy chart, but with a small cartoon version of his own face drawn at the top. He looked at it for a long moment without speaking.

Chris took one look at his expression and lost it completely.

“Simon,” he wheezed, “she knows. She knows*. Looks like someone needs to learn where everything is before it gives out on him.”

Simon folded the poster with great dignity and set it aside. “I’m choosing to take this as a compliment.”

Luke, meanwhile, had pulled out the last gift and was holding it up with a deeply uncertain expression. A pair of compression socks – anti-varicose, high-grade.

He looked at them.

He looked at me.

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“Is this,” he said carefully, “a hint?”

“It’s practical,” I said.

Theodore, beside me, said mildly, “She sends practical gifts. It’s just how she is.”

Chris pointed at him. “I like her. She fits.”

Once the gifts had been admired and set aside, the conversation found its natural rhythm.

“So,” I said, genuinely curious, “how did you all end up knowing Theodore?”

Simon went first.

He folded his hands on the table and told it plainly – high school, years of coming in second to Theodore no matter how hard he studied, until finally, in their last year, he’d swallowed his pride and asked Theodore to tutor him.

“My grades went up significantly,” Simon said. “I was still seven points below Theodore on the final-year exams.” He paused. “Still ended up second in the entire year.”

“Second in the year is impressive,” I offered.

She turned to Theodore and kept her voice low.

“Thank you. For tonight.” She hesitated. “You should go home and rest. There’s no telling how long this will take.”

Theodore shook his head.

“I’m staying.”

His tone was gentle. It was also completely immovable.

“If I left you here alone at a moment like this,” he added, “I’d be a fairly useless fiancé.”

Amelia looked at him for a moment.

She didn’t argue. She just gave a small nod.

Jaxon’s assistant had been waiting quietly nearby. He stepped forward now.

“Since the team is back on track, why don’t the two of you wait in Mr. Stone’s office? It’ll be more comfortable. The moment we have results, I’ll come find you personally.”

“Thank you,” Amelia said. “You’ve been carrying this all day. I appreciate it.”

The assistant shook his head quickly, looking almost flustered by the acknowledgment, and moved off to rejoin the engineers.

Far outside the city, past the last ring of Northgate’s lights, a mountain estate sat behind high walls and dense trees.

Inside, the main sitting room was lit low.

Griffin stood near the doorway, his posture careful, his expression arranged into something that looked like remorse.

“How are your injuries, sir?”

Zane Jenkins was reclined against the sofa cushions, his face pale, one hand resting against his ribs. He waved the question off.

“A few days of rest. Nothing serious.”

The man standing behind Zane’s shoulder did not share his employer’s restraint.

“Nothing serious?” His voice was flat and cold. “The explosion happened three meters from you. You were standing right there.” He fixed his eyes on Griffin. “You were responsible for that venue. You were responsible for his safety. You let this happen.”

His lip curled.

“You’re not even worth the rank you hold.”

He was watching me with that slight, private expression he wore when he was paying attention and didn’t want to make it obvious.

“You’re considerably more impressive than I’d imagined,” I said.

He laughed low, quiet. He reached over and took my hand.

“And you’re only realizing this now?”

The table erupted.

“Oh, *please*–” Chris covered his eyes dramatically with both hands. “Some of us are trying to keep our lunch down.”

“It’s been thirty seconds,” Luke said mournfully. “Thirty seconds of peace.”

I smiled and let the noise wash over me.

Under the table, where no one could see, I let my fingertip trace a small circle against Theodore’s palm.

He caught my hand immediately. His thumb moved slowly across the inside of my wrist, and the mate bond hummed warmly beneath my skin wherever he touched – a soft, deep pull that traveled from my fingertips all the way to somewhere quieter and harder to name.

I didn’t pull away.

The door opened, and a server stepped in with a polite smile.

“Are you ready to order?”

“Go ahead,” Theodore said.

I leaned back slightly. “Order whatever you like. I’m easy.”

The four of them exchanged looks, then bent over the menus with the focused energy of people who took food seriously. Chris and Luke immediately started arguing about

something. Lewis asked a quiet question about the daily specials. Simon was already decided and had set his menu down.

It was easy. Warm. The kind of room I hadn't expected to feel comfortable in so quickly.

My phone lit up on the table.

I glanced at the screen.

Mom – Seraphina.

I picked it up and answered.

“Amelia.” Her voice came through immediately, and it was all wrong – too high, too fast, fraying at the edges. “I know you’re out with Theodore right now, I didn’t want to bother you, but I don’t know what to do.

“Mom.” I kept my voice steady. “Slow down. What happened?”

“Jaxon’s assistant just called me.” Her voice cracked. “He said – Amelia, your father was taken away by the police. From Stone Botanicals. Just now.”

My chest went tight.

I breathed through it.

“Mom,” I said quietly. “Don’t panic. I’m going to Stone Botanicals right now to find out what’s happening. You stay home and wait for my call. Okay?”

A shaky exhale on the other end. “Okay. Okay, I’ll wait.”

I lowered the phone.

Across the table, all four of them had looked up from their menus at once. Eight eyes on me, still and attentive.

Beside me, Theodore had already gone quiet. His expression had shifted – the warmth of a moment ago replaced by something sharper, more watchful.

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1,158 words]

(Amelia’s POV)

“Mom.” I kept my voice low and steady. “Don’t worry too much. Trust me – stay home and wait. Once I find out what’s going on, I’ll call you right away.”

I could hear Seraphina pulling in a slow breath on the other end.

“Okay,” she said, quieter now. “Amelia, I’ll wait at home for your call.”

“One more thing,” I said. “Send me the number for Father’s assistant.”

“I’ll send it right now.”

I ended the call. A moment later, the number came through.

I saved it and slipped my phone into my pocket.

Theodore was already watching me when I looked up.

The warmth that had filled the room a few minutes ago had gone quiet. All four of them were still, waiting.

I kept it brief.

–

“Jaxon my father – was taken away by the police. From Stone Botanicals. I need to go find out what’s happening.”

Chris straightened immediately. “Go. Don’t worry about us for a second.”

“Seriously,” Luke added. “If you read anything – anything at all – just say the word.”

I nodded. “Thank you.”

Theodore was already pushing back from the table.

“I’m coming with you,” he said. It wasn’t a question.

I didn’t argue. “Okay.”

He turned to the others and said, with the ease of someone who had already made up his mind, “Stay and eat. Everything goes on my task. Chris opened his mouth.

Theodore didn’t wait. He was already moving.

We took my car.

The city was fully lit by the time we pulled out of the restaurant's parking lot – streetlamps and shop signs and the slow crawl of headlights stretching ahead of us. Inside the car, it was quiet.

Theodore didn't speak.

He didn't try to fill the silence with reassurances or questions. He just sat beside me, steady and still, and let me have the space to think.

I was grateful for that.

By the time we reached Stone Botanicals, I had gone through every possibility I could think of. I still didn't have enough information to know which one was right.

I stopped the car outside the main gate and sat there for a moment.

Then I took a breath and dialed Jaxon's assistant.

He picked up on the first ring.

"Miss Stone?"

"I'm outside," I said. "Come meet us."

He appeared within two minutes – a man in his early forties, rumpled jacket, the kind of exhaustion in his face that came from a night and a day of running on nothing but tension.

He saw Theodore beside me and something in his posture eased, just slightly.

"Mr. Stone asked me to wait," he said. "He said – if you came, I should tell you everything. He said he trusted you to figure out what to do next."

Something tightened in my chest.

I kept my expression even. "Then let's go inside."

He led us up to Jaxon's office.

The desk was buried under paper – printed reports, flagged documents, handwritten notes in the margins.

The assistant gathered the top stack and set it in front of me.

"It started with the Cardio Trace Monitor," he said. "The latest batch we supplied to hospitals. Three hospitals have already reported that the devices are giving false readings. Patients were misdiagnosed based on the data."

I picked up the first report and started reading.

I remembered Seraphina mentioning, almost in passing, that Jaxon had been up late the night before dealing with something urgent. At the time I hadn't thought much of it.

A device malfunction alone wouldn't bring the police in. That part didn't add up.

\$I thought about Zane Jenkins. About the exposure. About how quickly things like that tended to come back around.

If someone wanted to retaliate – if the target was never Jaxon at all, but me – then Stone Botanicals was exactly the kind of pressure point they would go for.

“There's more,” the assistant said.

I looked up.

His expression hadn't changed, but his voice had dropped.

“This morning, a patient died. A medical accident – directly linked to the device failure.”

The room went very quiet.

“Has the root cause been identified?” I asked.

He shook his head. “Mr. Stone had the engineering team working through the night. They hadn't found it yet when he was arrested. After that-” He paused. “Morale collapsed. The team stopped. No one knew who was in charge or what they were supposed to do.”

I set the report down.

“Contact the engineering director,” I said. “I want every technical staff member in the conference room in one hour. Tonight.”

The assistant blinked. “Tonight?”

“Tonight,” I said.

Theodore said nothing during the walk to the conference room.

But when I glanced at him once, briefly, he gave me a look that said he was paying attention to everything and had already formed his own read of the situation.

I didn't ask him what it was yet. I needed to see the room first.

An hour later, the engineering team filed in.

There were about a dozen of them – tired, tense, moving with the careful energy of people who had been under pressure for too long and weren't sure what was coming next.

The Engineering Director came in last.

He was a broad-shouldered man in his fifties, the kind who had spent decades on factory floors and trusted nothing he hadn't verified himself. He looked at me the way people sometimes did when they had already decided the answer before the question was asked.

He didn't sit down immediately.

"Has Mr. Stone been released?" he asked. His voice carried across the room.

"Not yet," I said.

His jaw tightened. "Then who is running this?"

"I am. For now."

He looked at me for a long moment. Then, in a tone that made no effort to soften itself, he said, "With respect, Miss Stone – you have no background in this field. You don't know how this company operates.

What's happening right now is not a situation that can be handled by someone with good intentions and no experience. We need someone who actually knows what they're doing."

A few people around the table shifted in their seats.

No one contradicted him.

I let the silence sit for exactly two seconds.

Then I stood up.

"I understand you have doubts about me," I said. My voice came out clear and even. "I'm not going to stand here and make promises I can't keep. I'll say one thing: if we can identify the root cause of the device failure and clear Stone Botanicals' name, everyone in the engineering department will receive a

bonus equal to double their annual bonus. No conditions, no fine print."

The shift in the room was immediate.

It wasn't loud. It was the kind of change that happened in the eyes – a flicker, a recalibration, a few people sitting up slightly straighter without quite realizing they'd done it.

I looked around the table slowly.

“Stone Botanicals is currently managed by my father Jaxon,” I continued. “But the controlling interest in this company rests with me. My grandfather Alaric has transferred his entire shareholding in Stone Botanicals to me. That means, legally, I am the majority shareholder of this company. My word carries weight in this room.”

The Engineering Director’s expression didn’t soften.

But something in it shifted.

He turned his head – slowly, deliberately – and looked at Jaxon’s assistant.

Alpha’s Abandoned Daughter is the Secret Heiress! - Chapter 425[1,236 words]

(Author’s POV)

Jaxon’s assistant stepped forward.

His voice was calm and clear, carrying to every corner of the room.

“Miss Stone is correct. As of last month, Alpha Alaric transferred his entire shareholding in Stone

Botanicals to her. She is now the company’s largest controlling shareholder. If anyone has doubts, you’re welcome to check the company’s official registry right now.”

He paused for a single beat.

“And one more thing. The gentleman seated beside Miss Stone is Theodore Crimson of the Crimson Moon Pack.”

The room went still.

Not the restless, uncertain stillness from before. This was different – the kind that settled over people when a name landed with real weight.

The Engineering Director’s eyes moved to Theodore.

Theodore sat with the easy, unhurried posture of someone who had never needed to prove anything to anyone in a room. He didn’t speak. He didn’t have to.

The Engineering Director had spent thirty years in this industry. He knew exactly who Theodore Crimson was. Everyone in Northgate City’s business world did – the young heir

who had built commercial empires before most men his age had learned to manage a quarterly report.

He had not expected to find him here tonight, in this office, at this hour.

He swallowed once.

His gaze moved back to Amelia. Something in his expression shifted – the hard skepticism softening into something more careful, more considered.

He turned to face his team.

“You heard Miss Stone,” he said, his voice dropping back into its natural command. “Get back to work.

Follow her instructions. I want the fault isolated before morning.”

Chairs scraped. Keyboards clicked. The low hum of focused work filled the room again.

Amelia watched the team settle back into motion.

The tight knot in her chest loosened, just slightly.

“It would have been,” Simon said, “if Theodore hadn’t been first.”

Luke went next, leaning back with the ease of someone who’d told this story before.

“First year at university. I made some bad decisions, ended up with a group of people who took it personally.” He shrugged. “They cornered me on my way back one evening. Theodore happened to be walking past.”

“He helped you get away?” I asked.

“He didn’t even take off his jacket,” Luke said. “Five minutes. Every single one of them on the ground. Then he called the police and walked away like nothing had happened.”

I turned to look at Theodore.

“I’d practiced a bit,” he said simply.

“A bit,” Luke repeated, in a tone that made it clear he found this description inadequate.

Chris didn’t wait to be asked. He launched straight in, practically vibrating with the energy of someone who

had been waiting to tell this particular story.

“Right after I took over the family business – I was twenty-three, I had no idea what I was doing – I nearly signed a contract that would have destroyed us. I’m talking clauses buried so deep you’d need a legal team a month just to find them.” He shook his head. “I met Theodore at a commercial summit. He looked at the contract for maybe ten minutes, pointed out every single problem, and then helped me redraft the whole thing.”

“He didn’t know you at that point?” I asked.

“Never met me before in my life.” Chris grinned. “That was the day I decided he was my idol.”

Theodore looked like he wanted to change the subject.

Lewis spoke last, his voice measured and even.

“There was a cross-border acquisition. The other side had set a financial trap – the kind that looks clean until it’s too late. Everyone on our team was stuck. We couldn’t find a way through it.” He paused. “Theodore reversed the entire approach. Not only did we avoid the loss – we came out with three times the expected return.”

He looked at Theodore with something quiet and genuine in his expression.

“That was the moment I understood that Theodore operates on a completely different level from the rest of us.”

The table was quiet for a beat after that.

I looked at Theodore.

Griffin said nothing.

Because there was nothing to say. The man was right. The explosion had happened on his watch. That failure belonged to him.

Zane raised his hand, a slow, deliberate gesture that silenced his subordinate.

He wasn’t ready to burn this bridge. Not yet. Griffin was still useful.

Griffin took the opening immediately.

“I’ve already moved against her. Jaxon Stone has been taken in by the police. Amelia has her hands full

right now – she won’t have time to keep digging.”

Zane’s expression didn’t warm.

“The posts she put out online,” he said. “The wording was very deliberate. She’s pointing in my direction.”

“She won’t be able to do any real damage,” Griffin said. “I made sure of that. After I was released from the station, I activated everything I’d been holding in reserve at Stone Botanicals. Months ago, I paid off the leadership at a competing medical company. The plan was always to use them – damage Stone Botanicals’ reputation, create chaos, then move in and acquire at a low price. That plan is running now.”

Zane studied him in silence.

When he spoke again, his voice was quiet and very even.

“This is your last chance, Griffin. If you fail again – if she keeps moving and I am exposed – I will not come out to protect the Drake family. Not again.”

Griffin held his gaze and nodded.

He left the estate not long after.

The car moved through the dark mountain road, and Griffin stared out the window without seeing anything.

Wade was in the hospital. His most capable man, out of commission. The person sitting in the driver’s seat now was someone new – younger, less steady, unfamiliar with how Griffin operated.

“What’s the latest on Lance Drake?” Griffin asked.

The new assistant’s hands tightened on the wheel.

“We – we haven’t been able to locate him, sir. There’s no information at all.”

Griffin’s jaw set.

“Useless,” he said, his voice low and sharp.

The assistant flinched. His hands fumbled on the steering wheel, overcorrecting, and the car lurched sideways before he caught it.

Griffin’s hand shot out and gripped the door handle.

He said nothing.

He forced the anger down, pressed it flat, and stared back out at the road.

Lance could wait.

Right now, there was only one thing that mattered.

Amelia Stone.

After Griffin's car disappeared down the mountain road, Zane's subordinate returned to the sitting room

He stood at a respectful distance and spoke carefully.

"Sir. If she keeps pulling on this thread, it will eventually lead back to you. Do we need to consider... a more permanent solution?"

Zane was quiet for a long moment.

Then he shook his head,

"Not yet."

He couldn't cut Griffin loose. Not now. The Drake family knew too much. If they went down, they wouldn't go quietly – they would take everything they knew with them on the way out.

The smarter move was to find a way to make Amelia stop.

"What's the status of the other matter?" he asked.

"The candidates have been selected," his subordinate said. "We plan to bribe several convicted criminals – arrange for their release, have them placed near Ashveil Village. Close to the Meadow Brook Pack territory."

"Before the end of the year," Zane said. "I want it done before the end of the year."

He turned his gaze toward the window.

Outside, the night was complete – no lights, no movement, just the dark bulk of the mountains.

The chaos Griffin had manufactured at Stone Botanicals was already spreading across the news cycle. It would pull attention outward, away from him, away from the Meadow Brook Pack.

That was the purpose of a distraction.

While everyone watched the city burn, no one would notice what was being quietly arranged in the

Alpha's Abandoned Daughter is the Secret Heiress! - Chapter 426[1,250 words]

(Author's POV)

Amelia shot up from the sofa the moment the assistant's words landed.

Across the room, Theodore opened his eyes slowly, straightening in his wheelchair with quiet alertness.

"What was the cause?" Amelia asked.

Her gaze was sharp and clear. There was no trace of sleep in her eyes – because she hadn't truly slept at all. Her mind had been turning all night, circling the same problem over and over: Jaxon, the police, the timing of it all.

The assistant crossed the room quickly and pressed the report into her hands.

"The technical team disassembled the faulty devices returned from the hospital," he said, his voice tight with urgency. "They found that the sealant on the core sensor modules had been manually replaced with substandard material. After eight continuous hours of use, the blood oxygen probes start producing errors

of plus or minus twenty percent."

Amelia's eyes moved fast across the pages.

"Are these sensors Stone Botanicals' own products?"

The assistant shook his head.

–

"No. They came from one of our long-term suppliers – Apex Medical."

Something loosened in Amelia's chest. Not relief, exactly. But the shape of a path forward.

She looked up and nodded.

"Good work. Everyone worked hard tonight." Her voice was steady. "I'll personally follow up on the sensor replacement. In the meantime, I need you to hold things together here for Jaxon – keep the staff working normally, don't let operations fall apart."

She paused.

“And every single medical device in this facility needs to go through strict review before it leaves. Not one batch gets cleared without inspection. Not one.”

“Understood,” the assistant said immediately.

He turned to go.

Theodore spoke before he reached the door.

“Wait.”

His tone was calm but carried weight. The assistant stopped.

Theodore looked at Amelia first. His expression was serious, unhurried.

“Let me handle the investigation into Apex Medical.”

It wasn’t a question. It was an offer direct and deliberate.

“I’ve dealt with this kind of commercial sabotage before,” he said. “I know where to look and what to look for. You’ll have answers in half the time.”

Amelia didn’t hesitate.

She trusted his judgment completely. She nodded.

Theodore turned back to the assistant.

“Has there been anything unusual in Stone Botanicals’ recent purchasing activity with Apex Medical? Anything at all – irregular orders, payment methods, timing?”

The assistant pulled out his phone immediately and dialed the procurement manager.

The call was brief.

When he lowered the phone, his expression had shifted.

“The procurement manager says Apex Medical’s sales representative has been pushing for rush orders at the end of every month for the past several months.” He paused. “And they’ve insisted on cash payment every time.”

Theodore’s eyes sharpened.

“Cash only,” he repeated quietly.

He let the silence sit for exactly one second.

“That’s not a sales strategy. That’s a cover.” His voice was even and precise. “Bypassing standard procedures. Refusing transfer records. Pushing to get product into the supply chain fast and quietly. That’s how you move Compromised goods without a paper trail. Classic bribery method – or laundering.”

The assistant nodded slowly.

“Then Apex Medical almost certainly accepted a bribe,” he said. “And deliberately used it to sabotage Stone Botanicals.”

“That’s what the evidence points to,” Theodore said.

Amelia stood quietly for a moment, watching the pieces fall into place.

All night, the situation had felt like a locked room. Now she could see the door.

If they could prove Apex Medical had acted deliberately – that the faulty components were planted, not accidental – then Jaxon’s name would be cleared. There was no negligence on Stone Botanicals’ part.

There was a crime committed against it.

“Go home,” Theodore said, looking at her. “Tell Seraphina what we’ve found. She’s been up worrying.” Amelia glanced at the window. The sky outside had shifted from black to a pale, washed-out grey.

Nearly six in the morning.

She thought of Seraphina – alone in that house, no news, no sleep, running through worst-case scenarios in the dark.

“All right,” she said quietly.

They walked out together through the front entrance of Stone Botanicals.

The air outside was cold and still. The parking lot was nearly empty, lit by a few pale overhead lights.

Amelia stopped at the edge of the steps.

“Don’t push yourself too hard,” she said.

Theodore looked at her.

There was something in his expression that was difficult to name – not quite a smile, but close to one.

“I’ll have results for you before noon,” he said.

Amelia held his gaze for a moment.

Then she turned and walked toward the waiting car.

Theodore watched until the taillights disappeared around the corner.

He turned back toward Marcus, who had been standing a few paces behind them in silence.

“Apex Medical,” Theodore said. “Full background check. Financial records, supplier contracts, personnel – everything. I want it done now.”

Marcus didn’t blink.

“On it,” he said, and moved.

On the other side of the city, Seraphina had not slept.

She lay in bed staring at the ceiling, but the image behind her eyes was always the same – Jaxon’s face as they led him away, the sound of the door closing, the absence of him in the house.

She sat up.

She didn’t know what she was hoping to find when she picked up her phone, but she opened it anyway.

The news had already spread everywhere.

Every major social media platform was running with it. Stone Botanicals equipment failure. Patients harmed. Jaxon Stone detained for questioning.

The comments were worse than the headlines.

A family business this old and they’re putting out defective medical equipment. Shameful.

Hasn’t this all been happening since Amelia came back? First the scandal, now this. That girl is a curse on the Stone family.

If Adrian was still running Stone Botanicals, none of this would have happened. She took over and look what she brought with her.

Jaxon's the one arrested, but everyone knows who he's covering for.

Seraphina's jaw tightened.

There were people defending Amelia too – pointing to Starlight Entertainment's climbing stock price, pointing to everything she had built since returning. But those voices were being drowned out, buried under the noise of the louder, angrier ones.

She set the phone face-down on the mattress.

Then she heard it.

A sound from downstairs. The soft click of the front door.

She was out of the bedroom before she'd made a conscious decision to move.

"Amelia."

Seraphina came down the stairs quickly, her eyes scanning her daughter's face the moment she came into view.

"What happened? What did they find?"

Amelia looked up at her.

Seraphina's hair was slightly disheveled, her eyes shadowed from a sleepless night. She was still in her house clothes. She looked like someone who had been holding herself together through sheer will for the past several hours.

"We're still investigating," Amelia said quickly. "Mom, don't worry too much. I came back specifically because I didn't want you sitting here alone without any news."

Seraphina let out a breath.

Then she gave a small, tired smile and shook her head.

"Amelia. You don't need to worry about me." Her voice was quiet but firm. "I've been married to Jaxon for a long time. I know who he is. If this truly isn't his fault if it isn't Stone Botanicals' fault – then the truth will come out. And if there really was an error somewhere in the company, then someone needs to answer for what happened to those patients. Either way, I can accept it."

Amelia was quiet for a moment.

“Theodore stayed behind to help with the investigation,” she said softly. “He said we should have answers before noon.”

Seraphina nodded.

“Then that’s good.” She paused. Something shifted in her expression. “There’s something else. This has already spread all over the internet. There are people on social media saying that all of this is your fault- that everything went wrong because you came back.”

She looked at Amelia steadily.

“Don’t put those words in your heart.”

Alpha’s Abandoned Daughter is the Secret Heiress! - Chapter 427[1,178 words]

(Amelia’s POV)

“I won’t carry blame that isn’t mine.”

I kept my voice steady, meeting Seraphina’s tired eyes.

“Whoever made this mess should be the one to clean it up. Once Theodore’s investigation results come through, the truth will come to light.”

Seraphina let out a slow breath.

Something in her expression softened – not quite relief, but close to it.

“You’ve always been like that,” she said quietly. “Since you were small. I’ve never had to worry about you crumbling.”

I looked at her.

“Theodore is handling Apex Medical. But I still need to figure out for myself whether this incident has any connection to the Drake family.”

Seraphina nodded without hesitation.

“Then I’ll stay here and wait. I won’t get in the way.” Her voice was firm. “That’s the best thing I can do for you right now.”

I studied her face. The shadows beneath her eyes were deep and dark – the kind that came from a full night of staring at nothing.

“Go back to bed,” I said. “Get a few hours. I’m here now.”

She started to protest.

“Mom.”

One word. She stopped.

A small, tired smile crossed her face. She nodded once, then turned and climbed the stairs.

I watched until she disappeared around the landing.

I pulled out my phone to call Silas.

Before I could dial, it buzzed in my hand.

Ethan.

I stared at his name for a moment, then answered.

“Amelia.” His voice was quieter than I remembered. The sharp edge he used to carry was gone. “I’m sorry about Stone Botanicals. This is almost certainly something Caleb left behind during his time managing things. Hidden problems he never bothered to fix.”

“Go on,” I said.

“Caleb’s already left the territory.” He paused. “I was planning to go to Meadow Brook Pack Territory tomorrow. To be with Alaric. However much time he has left – I don’t want to spend it holding onto old grudges.”

I didn’t say anything for a moment.

“The uncles and aunts may not want you there,” I said flatly.

“I know.” He didn’t flinch from it. “I’m not going for them. I just want to do what a younger family member should do. Nothing more.”

A beat of silence.

Then he said, “I want to help with the Stone Botanicals situation. I can step forward and take the fall for Jaxon. Publicly. Whatever it takes.”

I almost laughed.

“I’m not Griffin,” I said, my voice cool. “I don’t need someone else to fix what I’ve broken. And I didn’t break this.”

He was quiet.

“If you’re going to Meadow Brook,” I continued, “then follow through. Don’t turn back halfway.” I kept my tone flat. “This will mark the end of whatever remained between us. You understand that.”

“I understand,” he said.

Another pause.

“Before I go – can I come to the East House? Just to see you both. Even for an hour.”

I thought about Seraphina upstairs. The shadows under her eyes. The way she’d been holding herself together through sheer will all night.

Having Ethan there might give her something else to focus on.

“Come,” I said. “But behave yourself.”

I hung up, and the thought that had been pressing at the back of my mind came forward all at once.

Alaric was in Meadow Brook.

The moment Ethan said it, something cold had moved through my chest.

Zane Jenkins was still out there. Still watching. If he wanted leverage against me, Meadow Brook was an obvious target – Alaric, the villagers, people who had nothing to do with any of this.

I dialed Silas before the thought had fully finished forming.

She picked up on the first ring.

“Two things,” I said. “First – I need eyes on Griffin. Everything he does, everywhere he goes, starting now.”

“Understood,” Silas said.

“Second – Alaric has gone to Meadow Brook Pack Territory. I need people on the ground there immediately. Covert. No one should know they’re there.” I kept my voice even. “If there is any sign – any sign at all that Zane Jenkins is moving against the villagers or Alaric, I want to know the moment it happens.”

“I’ll have people in position within two hours,” Silas said.

“Good.”

I ended the call.

The tightness in my chest eased slightly – not gone, but manageable.

I found the butler near the kitchen and told him to let Ethan straight in when he arrived.

Then I went to the sitting room, settled onto the sofa, and closed my eyes.

About an hour later, I heard footsteps in the hallway.

I opened my eyes.

Ethan stepped into the room.

He looked worse than I expected.

Several days of stubble covered his jaw. His eyes were dull, the sharp focus he used to carry completely absent. The man standing in front of me was a shadow of the person who had once run Starlight

Entertainment with an authority that made people step aside in hallways.

The bone structure was still the same. Everything else had been worn down.

He saw me and something shifted in his expression – a loosening, like a weight had quietly lifted. As if just

seeing me here, upright and steady, was enough to confirm that things hadn’t completely fallen apart.

“Seraphina,” he said immediately. “How is she?”

“Sleeping,” I said. “When she wakes up, sit with her. Talk to her. Give her something else to think about besides Jaxon.”

He nodded. Serious. Deliberate.

“I will,” he said. “You go. Focus on getting Jaxon out. I’ll stay with her.”

He drew in a breath, and I could see him preparing to say something else an apology, probably. The kind that would unravel everything he was holding together.

I cut him off.

“Don’t.” My voice wasn’t harsh, but it left no room. “Not here. Not in front of her.” I held his gaze. “If you say those things, she’ll spend the whole time comforting you instead of resting. That’s not what she needs right now.”

He closed his mouth.

Nodded once.

“All right,” he said quietly.

I didn’t look at him again.

I picked up my bag, walked past him, and left the Pack House.

The morning air outside was sharp and cold. The sky had shifted to a pale, flat grey – the kind of light that came before the sun fully committed to rising.

Theodore was handling Apex Medical. That part I trusted completely.

But there were things I needed to find out for myself.

The patients who had been harmed. Their family members. The networks connecting them – who they knew, who might have pointed someone toward Stone Botanicals as a target, who stood to benefit from the chaos this had caused.

I knew what was happening.

Griffin was out there, watching from the shadows, waiting for me to stumble.

Zane Jenkins was watching too – waiting for a mistake, a crack, anything he could use.

They would be waiting a long time.

I thought of Stone Botanicals – the smell of the facility, the rows of equipment, the staff who had worked

through the night without complaint.

I thought of Starlight Entertainment, the numbers climbing, the ground we had taken.

I thought of the Stone River Pack – what it could become, what I intended to make it.

Starlight Entertainment will keep growing stronger.

Stone Botanicals will reclaim its standing.

*And the Stone River Pack will become a place no one dares to shake.

As for Griffin and Zane Jenkins-

Their reckoning was coming.

I would be there to watch them fall. It was only a matter of time.

Alpha's Abandoned Daughter is the Secret Heiress! - Chapter 428[1,085 words]

(Author's POV)

The morning light was barely through the curtains when Vivian's eyes snapped open.

She reached for her phone out of habit, and the first headline she saw made her sit bolt upright.

Stone Botanicals Medical Scandal: Multiple Patients Harmed. Jaxon Stone Taken In for Questioning.

She was off the bed and down the stairs before she'd even fully processed the words.

"Victor!"

She burst into the living room, nearly tripping over the last step.

Victor was already on the sofa, phone in hand, scrolling through the same news feed.

"Victor, did you see it?" She rushed toward him, voice pitched high with excitement.
"Stone Botanicals!"

This is exactly what they deserved!"

Victor looked up from the screen. A slow, cold smile spread across his face.

"Of course." He lifted his phone, showing her the latest update. "Jaxon Stone has already been taken away by the authorities."

His eyes dropped back to the screen. He kept scrolling, tracking every new development as it came in.

Vivian dropped onto the sofa beside him, barely able to contain herself.

“This is all Amelia’s fault,” she said, her voice dripping with satisfaction. “She walked back into the Stone

River Pack and threw the whole family into chaos. The internet is already tearing her apart.”

She pulled up the comment sections herself, reading them aloud with relish.

“*A curse upon the pack. The moment she showed up, everything started falling apart.*” She laughed.

“They’re not wrong.”

Victor’s smile sharpened.

“Her reputation is in ruins,” he said. “I want to see how she handles this one.”

Vivian waved a dismissive hand.

“She can’t handle it. Without Theodore propping her up, she’s nothing. Just a healer from the countryside who talks big.” She leaned back against the cushions. “All bark and no bite.”

Victor’s expression shifted. Something calculating moved behind his eyes.

“Speaking of Theodore,” he said, lowering his voice. “He didn’t come back to the Pack House last night.”

Vivian turned to stare at him.

“What?”

“He stayed at Stone Botanicals. The whole night.” Victor’s tone was measured, deliberate. “With her.”

Vivian stared at him for a moment, then let out a sharp laugh.

“He’s an idiot.” She shook her head. “The family meeting is coming. His position as heir is on the line. And he’s spending the night babysitting a woman’s failing company?”

“That,” Victor said quietly, “is exactly why this is our moment.”

He set his phone face-down on the cushion.

“His attention is divided. His focus is on Stone Botanicals.” His voice dropped lower. “So I’m moving forward.”

Vivian straightened.

“Moving forward how?”

Victor glanced toward the hallway, checking that no one else was nearby.

Then he leaned in.

“Garrett has forged a document,” he said. “Evidence – or what will look like evidence that Alpha King Gideon tampered with Theodore’s mother’s vehicle. Years ago.”

Vivian went very still.

“That’s-”

“Explosive. Yes.” Victor’s voice was calm, almost bored. “The problem right now is getting Mason to find it naturally. It can’t look planted. It has to look like he stumbled onto it himself.”

Vivian’s fingers curled around the edge of the sofa cushion.

“And once he finds it?”

“Once he finds it,” Victor said, “Mason will act. He won’t be able to help himself. The conflict escalates.

Things move faster.”

Vivian was quiet for a moment, processing.

Then something shifted in her expression – a flicker of real anxiety beneath the excitement.

“If this works,” she said carefully, “I won’t be sent away?”

Victor looked at her.

“If this works,” he said, “there will be nothing left to send you away from.”

Vivian held his gaze for a moment. Then she nodded, slow and deliberate, the nervous anticipation settling into something that looked almost like resolve.

Across the city, at the East House, the morning had passed quietly.

Seraphina came downstairs just after nine, still pulling her cardigan closed at the collar.

She stopped at the bottom of the stairs.

Ethan Stone was sitting alone on the sofa in the living room, both hands wrapped around a cup of tea that had long gone cold.

He heard her footsteps and stood up immediately, the movement slightly awkward, like a boy caught somewhere he wasn't sure he was allowed to be.

"Aunt Seraphina."

Seraphina looked at him for a moment.

"Ethan." Her voice was careful. "What are you doing here?"

"Amelia said I could come." He shifted his weight. "She knew you'd be alone. I'm not here to cause trouble.

I just -" He stopped. "I wanted to keep you company. That's all."

Seraphina understood immediately.

Jaxon was gone. Amelia was out. And her daughter, even in the middle of everything, had thought to make sure she wouldn't be sitting alone in an empty house.

She looked at Ethan properly for the first time.

He looked terrible. The sharp, polished version of him that she remembered from years ago had been replaced by something worn down and quieter. But there was something different in his eyes too – something that hadn't been there before. A steadiness. Like a man who had finally stopped fighting himself.

"Sit down," she said gently. "Keep me company, then."

He sat. She settled into the armchair across from him.`

For a while, neither of them spoke.

Then Ethan said, "I've made peace with it. Whatever Amelia decides. Whether she forgives me or not." He looked down at the cold cup in his hands. "As long as she's all right going forward. That's enough."

Seraphina didn't answer right away.

She thought of the boy who used to run through this house as a child, trailing after Jaxon and asking endless questions. So much had changed. And yet here they were, in the same rooms, at the same table.

“You’re going to Meadow Brook,” she said.

Ethan turned to look at Amelia.

He waited.

Amelia glanced at him sideways. Her expression gave nothing away.

“Do what you want,” she said, her voice flat. “You’re leaving tomorrow anyway.”

Something lit up in Ethan’s eyes – brief and quiet, like a match struck in a dark room.

He pulled out his chair and sat back down.

Molly brought the dishes out one by one, setting them on the table in careful order. Seraphina reached over and placed a piece of braised venison into Amelia’s bowl without saying a word.

Amelia ate without looking up. Quick, efficient, like someone refueling rather than dining.

Ethan sat across from her.

He watched her for a moment the bend of her head, the set of her jaw, the way she moved with the same quiet self-possession she’d always had – and felt something settle in his chest.

The words he’d been carrying all day rose up and then dissolved.

There was nothing left to say.

He picked up his chopsticks and quietly finished what was in his bowl.

This was already more than he deserved.

Before he left, he had been able to sit at the same table as Amelia, and share one last meal together.

Alpha’s Abandoned Daughter is the Secret Heiress! - Chapter 429[
1,293 words]

(Author’s POV)

Ethan set down his fork and turned to Seraphina first.

“Thank you for dinner,” he said. “For everything today.”

Seraphina gave him a small nod, her expression warm but measured.

Then Ethan turned to Amelia.

“I’m leaving,” he said simply.

“Don’t need to be walked out,” Amelia said, not looking up from the table.

“I know.”

He paused for just a moment. Then he stepped around the table, lowered himself onto one knee in front of her, and looked up directly into her eyes.

Amelia finally looked at him.

“Amelia.” His voice was steady, but something beneath it was raw. “Thank you for saving my mother. I mean it. Thank you.”

He held her gaze for one breath. Two.

Then he stood, gave Seraphina a quiet nod, and walked out of the East House.

The door clicked shut behind him.

He didn’t look back.

He understood the rules of this. The only way to leave without adding to her burden was to go before she had to ask him to.

Today had already been more than he had any right to expect.

Seraphina stood at the window and watched the headlights of Ethan’s car disappear down the lane.

She let out a slow breath.

“I hope he and Caleb can find some peace after all this,” she said softly. “Both of them. Whatever comes next.”

She turned back toward the table where Amelia was still sitting.

“Get some rest tonight.” Her voice was gentle. “I know you’ll find a way to handle Jaxon’s situation. I believe that.”

Amelia looked up at her.

“I will,” she said.

It wasn’t a reassurance. It was a statement of fact.

She pushed back her chair and slipped out through the back of the house, into the small herb garden tucked behind the East House wall.

The moon was up. The air smelled of damp earth and green things.

Amelia moved slowly between the rows, checking each plant by touch and by eye. The new seedlings were holding. The soil was good.

She crouched beside the Ironwort.

It had absorbed a full dose of toxic powder three weeks ago. Most plants would have died. This one had not. Its stems were thick and slightly discolored at the base, but the upper growth was clean and strong.

She stayed there for a moment, looking at it.

Stone Botanicals was going to need serious capital to rebuild public trust after this. Not just a statement,

not just an apology. She needed to demonstrate zero tolerance – publicly, visibly, and at a cost that made people believe it.

She had the funds. That wasn’t the problem.

The problem was timing. And she intended to get it right.

She stood, brushed the soil from her hands, and went back inside.

Her phone rang the moment she stepped into her room.

Unknown number.

She picked up.

“Miss Stone.” The voice on the other end was smooth and unhurried, carrying the particular arrogance of someone who had never been told no. “I think you know who this is.”

She did.

Griffin Drake.

“I’ll keep this brief,” he said. “Hand over Lance. Stop whatever you’re doing against my family. Do it now, and I’ll consider letting this go.”

Amelia let out a short, quiet laugh.

“The Drake family,” she said, “doesn’t have a territory left worth protecting. You’re running out of ground to stand on, Griffin. Why would I be afraid of a pack of strays?”

His tone sharpened.

“Careful, Miss Stone. Your uncle Jaxon is currently sitting in a police station. That’s not nothing.”

“No,” she agreed. “It isn’t nothing. But Jaxon hasn’t done anything wrong.” Her voice dropped, losing its lightness entirely. “An innocent man doesn’t need to fear an investigation.”

Silence on the other end.

“As for you,” she continued, “I don’t care who’s standing behind you. It doesn’t matter.” She let the words land slowly. “Three months. That’s all the time your family has left. When it’s over, there won’t be anything left to salvage.”

She paused.

“If you want to know where Lance is, call the police. They’ll tell you.”

She ended the call.

Griffin stared at the screen.

The call had lasted less than two minutes.

He set the phone down on the desk. Picked it up again. Set it down.

–

The anger moved through him in a slow, controlled burn – the kind that didn’t explode, but calcified into something harder and more deliberate.

He reached for his phone again and dialed.

“Find them,” he said, when the call connected. His voice was flat and cold. “Every family that lost someone because of a Stone Botanicals device failure. Every single one.”

He leaned back in his chair.

“Set up a shell account. Transfer one million dollars to each family before they go in. Another million after, once it’s done. Make them sign NDAs.” He paused. “I want them at the company gates. All of them. And I want it loud.”

Monday morning, the markets opened.

Stone Botanicals’ stock dropped before the first hour was out.

Amelia arrived at the company before eight. The lobby was tense. Staff moved quickly and spoke in low voices.

Her assistant met her at the elevator, clipboard in hand, face pale.

“There are over thirty media outlets outside,” he said, keeping his voice down. “And families. They have signs with photos.”

Amelia said nothing.

“The families” He swallowed. “They’re crying. Some of them are livestreaming. One of the women is being held up by her husband. She can barely stand.”

He thrust the clipboard toward her, showing her the trending hashtag.

#StoneBotanicalskills.

It was climbing fast.

“Call the police,” Amelia said.

He nodded quickly. “I did. They came. But they said they can’t forcibly remove civilians who aren’t committing a crime. The crowd isn’t moving.”

Amelia looked at the feed on her phone. The comments were pouring in.

Their greed killed our loved ones.

Even with powerful backers, they can’t bury this one.

How many more have to die?

She scrolled without expression.

By evening, the crowd outside had not thinned.

If anything, it had grown.

Her assistant found her in the conference room, still watching the numbers.

“It’s completely out of control,” he said, his voice tight. “The whole internet is calling for the company to be shut down. If this keeps going-”

“I know what happens if this keeps going,” Amelia said.

She set her phone face-down on the table.

“Go down to the storage floor,” she said. “Bring up one of the faulty devices. One of the ones we pulled from the recall batch.”

Her assistant stared at her.

“Miss Stone – the crowd out there is –”

“I know what’s out there.”

“If you go out in person, they could –”

“That,” Amelia said, standing up and reaching for her jacket, “is exactly what Griffin Drake is counting on.”

She looked at him directly.

“He wants chaos. He wants me to stay locked in here while the story writes itself outside.” She pulled her jacket on. “If he wants to make this big, I’ll make it bigger. On my terms.”

Her assistant opened his mouth.

Closed it again.

“Those people out there,” she added, “aren’t going to hurt me. They’re grieving. They’re being used. That’s not the same thing.”

He had nothing left to say.

He went to get the device.

The crowd outside Stone Botanicals stretched across the full width of the entrance plaza.

At the front stood a broad-shouldered man in his forties, both hands gripping a sign. His wife’s face looked out from it – a woman who had died on a table when a faulty monitoring device failed to alert the surgical team in time.

Beside him, an elderly couple leaned against each other. The old man's hand shook as he pointed toward the building. His daughter-in-law had died. His grandchild had never been born.

They had been standing here since morning.

The cameras had been here since morning too.

When the front doors of Stone Botanicals swung open, the crowd surged forward like a wave finding its direction.

"She's out! Amelia Stone is out!"

The reporters moved fast, microphones extended, cameras swinging toward the entrance.

"Miss Stone!" A reporter pushed to the front of the line, voice sharp and carrying. "Regarding the Stone Botanicals medical device failure – what do you have to say to the public?"

Alpha's Abandoned Daughter is the Secret Heiress! - Chapter 430[1,213 words]

(Amelia's POV)

I stood inside the iron gate of Stone

Botanicals headquarters.

I didn't step out.

The crowd beyond the gate was loud and pressing forward, but I stayed exactly where I was.

At the front of the crowd, the middle-aged man who had been holding the framed photograph all day suddenly lurched to his feet.

His eyes locked onto mine.

"You're the one in charge here!" he bellowed, voice cracking with rage. "You killed my wife and my son! Someone has to pay for this!"

Behind him, the elderly couple grabbed each other's arms and tore their voices open.

"We want justice!" the old woman screamed, her whole body shaking. "You can't just let them die for nothing!"

The cameras swung toward them. The microphones stretched closer.

The noise crashed against the gate like a wave.

I watched it all without moving.

I let the shouting run its course for a few seconds.

Then I raised my voice, clear and sharp enough to cut through the noise.

“I came out here because I have something to say,” I said. “Not to stand here and be accused of things that aren’t true.”

The crowd didn’t quiet entirely, but enough heads turned that I kept going.

“Yes, that batch of medical devices had a problem.” I kept my voice level. “But the problem didn’t come from this company cutting corners. Someone deliberately swapped inferior components into those devices before they left the supply chain.”

I paused.

“This was sabotage. A targeted attack against

Stone Botanicals.”

The middle-aged man didn’t even let me finish the sentence.

“Excuses!” He lunged forward toward the gate, face twisted. “You’re just trying to pin this on someone else to save your own skin!”

His boot slammed into the iron gate.

The impact rang out like a gunshot.

My assistant flinched and grabbed my arm, pulling me half a step back.

I didn’t move.

I looked at the man steadily through the bars.

“The police are right here,” I said, gesturing toward the officers standing along the perimeter. “I have no reason to fabricate anything. None.”

I turned away from him and faced the full row of cameras and reporters directly.

“Since everyone wants answers,” I said, “I’ll give them in real time. I’m starting a live broadcast right now. I’m not going anywhere until the truth is out in the open. Every camera, every screen – I’ll be right here.”

The reporters blinked.

For exactly two seconds, nobody moved.

Then the chaos started – but a different kind of chaos.

Reporters grabbed their phones, calling editors and producers, voices low and urgent.

Live broadcasts required immediate authorization. But if they waited for approval and Amelia was already on air, they’d lose the story entirely.

One by one, the cameras locked into position.

Tripods snapped open. Earpieces went in.

Producers gave the go-ahead through crackling feeds.

Within four minutes, every major outlet had their live stream running.

Every single lens was pointed at me.

I turned and nodded to my assistant.

He and two technicians wheeled the faulty device forward – one of the units pulled from the recall batch, sitting on a flat cart, its casing intact.

“I’m going to disassemble this device right here,” I said to the cameras. “In front of everyone. And I’m going to show you exactly where the data anomaly originated and why.”

The middle-aged man shoved forward again, rattling the gate with both hands.

“My wife is dead! My son is dead!” His voice broke. “You think taking apart a machine fixes that? I want answers, not a science lesson!”

I looked at him.

“Then let’s find out who actually killed them,” I said quietly. “Because right now, you’re screaming at the wrong person.”

I held his gaze.

“If you want justice, you need to know who the real killer is. Before the truth is on the table, shouting into cameras doesn’t do anything for your family. It just makes noise.”

He didn’t stop.

“You think you can hide behind that gate forever?” he snarled. “You’re abusing your power! You’re faking evidence! You’re protecting yourselves at the expense of victims!”

I tilted my head slightly and looked at him.

“Let me ask you something,” I said. My voice was calm. Each word landed separately, clearly. “Are you actually here for justice?”

I paused

“Or did someone pay you to stand here and use your dead wife as a prop?”

The gate rattled once more.

But this time, the man’s eyes did something different.

Just for a fraction of a second – a flicker. A dart sideways.

He covered it fast with another explosion of shouting.

“How dare you! How dare you say that to me!

You have no conscience! You’re slandering a grieving family!”

The two elderly people behind him erupted as well, waving their fists, voices shredding at the edges.

“She has no shame! She’s calling victims liars!”

The live chat on every stream detonated

Comments flooded in faster than anyone could read them.

She’s heartless. Shameless. How can she say that to a grieving father?

Wait – did anyone else catch that? His eyes moved when she asked about the money. He looked away.

I’m not picking a side yet. Let’s see what she pulls out of that machine.

Something's off. He keeps saying "wife and son." He's never once said "child." Just "son." Why is he so specific about the gender?

Why would he know the baby was a son if it never survived the delivery?

That last comment started getting shared.

The numbers next to it climbed fast.

I already knew everything about this case.

I had known before I walked out here today.

During the investigation into our competitors, I had traced this particular death all the way back to the beginning.

The victim was a thirty-eight-year-old woman. This had been her third pregnancy.

The first two hadn't survived, for different reasons. This time, the family had pushed to continue because the fetus was male. During delivery, the device failure delayed emergency response. She didn't make it.

That was the tragedy.

What came after was something else entirely.

The family had already gone to the hospital after her death. They had made noise, they had filed complaints, and they had received a settlement. A real one. Documented.

And now here they were again – same faces, same photographs, same screaming – but this time outside our gates.

I had people watching them for the past week.

I knew exactly when Griffin Drake's money hit their account.

I knew the amount.

I knew which shell company it came from.

I stood here today with one purpose.

Not to defend Stone Botanicals.

Not to manage the PR fallout.

I was here to close every exit Griffin had left himself.

He thought he could use grieving people as weapons and stay invisible behind them.

He was wrong.

There were eyes in this crowd that reported back to him. I knew that too.

Good.

Let him watch.

(Griffin's POV)

The message came in from the operative embedded in the crowd.

She opened a live stream. All media on site are broadcasting in real time.

Griffin set his phone down.

"Bring me a laptop," he said.

Someone placed it in front of him within thirty seconds.

He pulled up one of the broadcast feeds and watched.

The screen showed Amelia standing inside the iron gate of Stone Botanicals.

Dozens of cameras pointed at her.

The crowd was loud. The gate was shaking.

Someone was screaming directly into her face.

She stood there like none of it touched her at all.

Her expression was composed. Her posture was straight. Her eyes were steady.

The hatred moved through him slowly- not hot, not explosive, but cold and dense, settling into his chest like something permanent.

Go ahead, he thought.

Make all the noise you want.

I want to see how you clean up this mess.

Alpha's Abandoned Daughter is the Secret Heiress! - Chapter 431[1,232 words]

(Amelia's POV)

I held the sensor module up in front of the cameras.

It was small. Barely the size of my palm.

"This is the core component," I said. "Look at the sealant around the edge."

I turned it slowly so every lens could catch it.

"The original factory specification requires a medical-grade compound. What's in here is a low-cost industrial substitute. Someone swapped it out before these units left the supply chain."

I set the module down on the cart beside the disassembled casing.

"This substitution causes the blood oxygen sensor to drift. After eight continuous hours of operation, the margin of error reaches twenty percent."

A reporter near the front raised her hand immediately.

"Ms. Stone – are you saying that twenty percent error is what caused the misread during delivery? That the victim's heart rate was incorrectly assessed because of this component?"

"That's correct," I said. "The device reported stable readings when the patient's condition had already deteriorated. The medical team responded to the data they were given."

The middle-aged man shoved forward against the gate again.

"Excuses!" His voice cracked. "You're just finding someone to blame so you can walk away clean! The

machine was faulty – that's on your company!"

I looked at him directly.

"The police will investigate this fully," I said. "Every component, every supply chain record, every transaction log. The truth will not be buried."

I held his gaze for one more second.

Then I turned back to the cameras.

(Griffin's POV)

Griffin watched the screen without blinking.

She was still standing there.

Still calm.

Still talking.

He let out a slow breath through his nose and allowed himself a thin smile.

The police.

She was putting her faith in the police.

The chief of the Northgate City department had been in Griffin's pocket for three years. Every major investigation that came through that office got filtered before it went anywhere meaningful.

Amelia could talk about truth and transparency all she wanted.

Nothing was going to surface that he didn't want surfaced.

He leaned back in his chair.

On screen, Amelia turned slightly and said something to her assistant. Her voice was too low for the broadcast to catch clearly.

The assistant looked startled for a moment.

Then he turned and went back inside the building.

Griffin frowned.

What is she doing now?

(Amelia's POV)

I kept my voice low when I spoke to my assistant.

"Bring out the space heater and an extension cord," I said. "And find something we can use as a windbreak. Poles, tarp, anything."

He stared at me.

“We’re staying out here?”

“The temperature’s dropping,” I said. “The broadcast continues. We need to be comfortable.”

He blinked once more, then turned and went inside without another word.

I looked back at the cameras.

The reporters were already pulling their coats tighter.

The “family members” across the gate were shifting their weight, rubbing their hands together.

Good.

Let them feel it.

I wasn’t going anywhere.

My assistant came back out with the heater, a coil of extension cord, and two of the maintenance crew carrying metal poles and a folded tarp.

—

Within fifteen minutes, we had a basic shelter up three walls, a roof, the heater running underneath.

I stood back and looked at it.

Functional. Adequate.

I nodded.

“One more thing,” I said. “Bring out the cast iron pot and the portable burner.”

My assistant opened his mouth.

Closed it.

Opened it again.

“The the cooking pot?”

—

“And order delivery,” I said. “Enough for the crew.”

He stared at me for exactly three seconds.

Then he pulled out his phone and started placing the order.

The sky went fully dark within the hour.

The temperature dropped hard and fast.

The reporters who had been on their feet since morning were visibly exhausted, stamping their boots against the cold pavement, breath fogging in the air.

The three “family members” were in worse shape. They hadn’t planned for a night shift.

The older woman finally snapped.

“You shameless creature!” she screamed across the gate. “You killed someone’s daughter-in-law and you

stand there without a single shred of guilt!”

Her husband joined in immediately.

“You have no conscience! No heart!”

The middle-aged man watched my assistant carry out the cast iron pot and set it on the portable burner.

His face went dark red.

“You’re going to cook?” he bellowed. “People are dead because of you and you’re going to stand there and eat?!”

I looked at him calmly.

“I have to eat,” I said. “I need the energy. The broadcast isn’t ending tonight.”

I paused.

“If you want to keep standing out there in the cold, that’s your choice.”

He sputtered. His mouth opened and closed.

I turned back to the burner and lit it.

“Eating well,” I said to the nearest camera, “is how you stay sharp enough to get to the truth.”

(Amelia’s POV)

The delivery rider arrived twenty minutes later.

He wove through the crowd on his bike, utterly bewildered by the cameras and the shouting, and handed the bags through the gate without a word.

The crowd went completely silent for about four seconds.

Then the live chat erupted.

I could see it reflected on my assistant’s phone screen as he scrolled – the comments were shifting.

She’s been standing there for hours. She hasn’t run. She hasn’t hidden.

Real criminals don’t set up a hotpot station outside the crime scene and invite the cameras to watch.

Did anyone else notice the guy’s eyes earlier? When she asked if someone paid him? He looked away.

I went back and watched the clip. He definitely flinched.

Also – why does he keep saying “son”? If the baby didn’t survive, how does he know the gender?

That last thread was spreading fast.

Somewhere in another part of the city, I knew Damien was watching.

I didn’t know why I was so certain of it.

I just was.

He had told me he would stop reaching out. I believed him.

But watching – that was different.

I didn’t think about it for long.

(Amelia's POV)

About ten minutes after the food arrived, the broth in the pot came to a full rolling boil.

I dropped in the meatballs and the rolled meat slices all at once.

The steam rose immediately, thick and fragrant, drifting sideways through the gaps in the tarp and out toward the gate.

I heard someone on the other side swallow audibly.

I didn't look up.

I was watching the surface of the broth, waiting for the right moment to reduce the heat.

Then I heard it – tires on pavement, slow and deliberate.

A black SUV. Understated. Expensive without advertising itself.

It pulled to a stop about thirty meters away.

The driver's door opened first.

Marcus stepped out.

He walked around to the rear passenger side and opened the door.

I looked up from the pot.

Theodore put one hand on the door frame.

Then the other on the edge of the seat.

He pushed himself upright.

Both feet on the ground.

Standing.

The live broadcast caught every second of it.

The chat detonated – comments flooding in so fast the screen became a blur of text.

He's standing-

Is that Theodore Crimson?

He stood up. He actually stood up.

Theodore held it for a moment.

His jaw was set. His shoulders were straight.

Then, slowly, he lowered himself back into the wheelchair.

Marcus stepped behind him without a word.

The crowd parted.

Nobody said anything.

The reporters who had been shouting questions all day stepped back without being asked.

Theodore's presence moved through that crowd like a current – not loud, not aggressive, just undeniable.

He rolled to a stop just outside the iron gate.

He looked through the bars.

His golden eyes found me immediately, sitting under the shelter with the steam from the pot curling up

around me, the ladle still in my hand.

Something in his expression shifted.

The hard line of his mouth softened, just slightly.

His eyes were warm in a way I almost never saw in public.

He leaned forward in the wheelchair, his voice low and quiet beneath all the noise.

“Amelia,” he said. “I’m here.”

Alpha's Abandoned Daughter is the Secret Heiress! - Chapter 432[
1,340 words]

(Amelia's POV)

Theodore's voice wasn't loud.

But it carried a steadiness that settled something in my chest.

“Amelia. I’m here.”

I swallowed the last of the bread roll I’d been chewing and mumbled back, “Finally. I was starting to think you’d forgotten about me.”

I set down my bowl and turned to the security guard standing by the gate.

“Open it.”

He hesitated. His eyes flicked to the crowd of agitated family members still shouting on the other side of the iron bars.

“Ms. Stone – are you sure? They look like they’re ready to push through the moment we-”

“Open it,” I said again. “If any of them so much as raises a hand, the police have grounds to take them in for inciting a disturbance. Let them make that choice.”

He held my gaze for one more second.

Then he pushed the heavy iron gate open.

Theodore’s wheelchair rolled through first, Marcus guiding it from behind with practiced efficiency.

The crowd surged immediately.

Three of them tried to rush the gap – the older woman, her husband, and the middle-aged man with the photograph.

The police line held. Two officers stepped forward with arms out, blocking the push.

“You’re protecting them!” the older woman shrieked. “You’re all on their side! We just want justice for our daughter-in-law! For our grandson!”

I turned and looked at her.

My voice came out flat and quiet.

“Justice,” I said. “It’s coming. Right now.”

(Amelia’s POV)

The moment Theodore was inside the compound, he nodded to Marcus.

Marcus reached into the leather document case he'd been carrying and pulled out a thick manila envelope.

He handed it to me without a word.

I took it.

Then I leaned down, and pressed a brief, light kiss to Theodore's cheek.

"Thank you," I said quietly. "I know what this took."

The cameras caught all of it.

The live chat exploded within seconds.

I could see my assistant's phone screen from the corner of my eye – comments stacking so fast the text became a blur.

Is this a drama? Did I accidentally switch channels?

She just kissed him in front of the dead woman's family. That's disgusting.

Wait, no – she's been standing here for hours fighting for the truth and he drove across the city to bring her evidence. That's literally the most romantic thing I've seen all year.

I ignored all of it.

I handed the envelope to my assistant.

"Get the lawyer on the phone. Tell him to come now."

Then I turned to Theodore.

"Have you eaten?"

He looked at me.

"No."

I reached over and picked up a clean set of chopsticks from the supply box.

"Then sit down." I nodded toward the shelter. "My assistant set up a grill twenty minutes ago. The coals are ready."

Theodore glanced at the portable charcoal grill my assistant had assembled inside the tarp shelter – the sliced meat arranged neatly on a plate beside it, vegetables lined up in rows, the heat already shimmering off the grate.

The corner of his mouth moved.

“You planned this,” he said.

“I planned for a long night,” I said, “Same thing.”

From the other side of the gate, the dead woman’s husband had gone a deep, furious red.

“You killed someone!” he bellowed. “You killed my daughter-in-law and my grandchild and you’re standing there setting up a barbecue?! What kind of monster are you?!”

I didn’t look at him.

I turned to Theodore instead.

“Does the atmosphere bother you?”

Theodore settled back in his wheelchair. His golden eyes were calm.

“Not at all,” he said.

So we sat down under the tarp shelter, in the glow of the charcoal grill, while thirty-odd media cameras watched us, and we ate.

(Penelope’s POV)

Penelope had been watching the livestream for the past two hours.

She told herself it was just professional curiosity – she liked to know how powerful people handled a crisis.

But the truth was, she couldn’t look away.

She watched Amelia set up the shelter. She watched her order food. She watched her light the grill with the same unhurried focus most people reserved for board meetings.

And now she was watching Amelia and Theodore eat grilled meat while a furious crowd screamed at them from behind an iron gate.

Penelope finally let out a short, involuntary laugh.

She pressed her hand over her mouth, but it was too late.

She genuinely could not have done that.

–

She understood now – truly understood why Theodore had chosen her.

It wasn't just the intelligence or the composure. It was the specific kind of nerve that let a person sit completely still in the center of a storm and eat dinner.

Penelope respected very few people.

She was starting to respect this one.

A sound from behind her broke the thought.

She turned.

Damien was sitting on the couch, his tablet propped against his knee, the livestream still playing on the screen.

His eyes were red.

Tears were sliding silently down his face.

He didn't seem to notice she was watching.

"Every time," he said, his voice barely above a whisper. "Every time something happens to her – every time she needs someone – it's never me."

He swallowed hard.

"I don't have a chance anymore. I never will."

Penelope looked at him for a long moment.

Then she walked over and closed the tablet.

She sat down beside him and put one hand on his shoulder.

"Time heals all wounds, Damien," she said quietly. "Some things aren't meant to be forced. You made your choice – now you live with it."

He didn't answer.

She didn't say anything else.

(Penelope's POV)

The lawyer arrived just as the last of the grilled meat was finished.

Amelia wiped her mouth with a paper napkin, stood up, and waved the media cameras closer with a single gesture.

They moved without hesitation. Every lens trained on the documents she was now spreading open across the folding table.

The lawyer – a sharp-faced man in a dark coat who had clearly been pulled away from something else – took the papers and began reading.

The silence stretched.

Then he looked up.

“The equipment supplier – Antech Group,” he said, his voice carrying clearly into the microphones, “Six months ago, they quietly changed their registered legal representative. The new registration address is located directly adjacent to Stone Botanicals’ primary competitor – Apex Medical Solutions.”

He paused.

“The evidence strongly suggests that Antech has been operating as a front company under Apex Medical’s control.”

A ripple moved through the crowd of reporters.

“Furthermore,” the lawyer continued, “our technical team identified deliberate forgery on the faulty module.

The serial numbers were altered to mimic the original manufacturer’s codes. This was not a production error. Someone modified these components before they entered the supply chain.”

He set the papers down.

“To summarize: this was a calculated operation. Apex Medical used a controlled subsidiary to introduce tampered components into the legitimate supply chain. The dual objective was to damage Stone Botanicals’ reputation and to gain access to proprietary patent technology.”

The live chat had gone almost quiet.

Then it erupted again – but differently this time.

Not outrage. Not accusation.

Realization.

The flaw was planted six months ago. Before the current management even took over.

This has nothing to do with Jaxon Stone. He inherited a sabotaged supply chain.

This was corporate warfare dressed up as a product failure.

They used a real family's tragedy as a weapon.

(Amelia's POV)

I let the silence sit for exactly three seconds after the lawyer finished.

Then I stepped forward.

"You all heard that," I said to the cameras.

My voice was steady. I wasn't performing calm – I felt it, clean and cold and certain.

"This was not an accident. This was not negligence. This was a deliberate commercial conspiracy targeting Stone Botanicals."

I held the documents up briefly, then set them back down.

"Effective immediately, I will be filing a formal criminal complaint on grounds of commercial fraud. I am applying for the full freezing of Antech's accounts pending investigation. And I am filing a simultaneous patent infringement lawsuit against Apex Medical Solutions."

I turned.

I looked directly at the middle-aged man still clutching the framed photograph behind the gate.

His face had gone still. "As for you," I said. My voice didn't rise. It didn't need to. "You came here tonight paid and organized, with a script and a role to play. You used a real family's grief- or perhaps invented it entirely – to manufacture pressure against this company."

I held his gaze without blinking.

"I will not let this go. I will hold every single one of you legally accountable."

Alpha's Abandoned Daughter is the Secret Heiress! - Chapter 433[1,329 words]

(Author's POV)

"As for all of you – paid to come here tonight and deliberately cause a scene at Stone Botanicals – I will absolutely not let this go. I will hold every single one of you legally accountable."

Amelia's voice was ice-cold and unwavering.

The middle-aged man's face went pale. His wife's hand trembled visibly against his arm. Even the husband's legs began to shake, his knees knocking together beneath his trousers.

But the old woman was made of sterner stuff.

She steadied herself, drew a sharp breath, and fixed Amelia with a glare that could have cracked stone.

"You little bitch!" she shrieked, jabbing a finger through the iron bars. "Don't stand there and make up lies about us! Don't you dare try to pin this on us!"

Her voice cracked on the last word – not from grief, but from fury.

Amelia didn't flinch.

She simply looked at the old woman the way you look at something you've already decided how to handle.

Before either side could say another word, a voice rang out from somewhere in the crowd of reporters.

"I've got it! Their names are all over the internet right now!"

Heads turned.

A young man in a grey hoodie was holding up his phone, reading from the screen in a loud, clear voice.

"This family has a history. Multiple reports online – they forced their daughter-in-law to abort pregnancies

at least three times. Three times. Because the children showed no signs of shifting."

A murmur rippled through the crowd.

“In their eyes,” the young man continued, his voice hardening, “a child without wolf abilities wasn’t worthy of carrying on the family line.”

More voices joined in, confirming it, adding details.

“She was an orphan. She had no one to fight for her.”

“They already received a full settlement from the hospital. This isn’t grief- this is a second payday.”

The live chat erupted.

They killed three babies because they couldn’t shift? And now they’re crying about justice?

The hospital already paid them. They came here for MORE?

Those poor little girls. Those poor, poor children.

The two daughters.

That detail landed hardest.

The dead woman’s daughters still alive, still in this family’s care and nobody had asked how they were doing.

The middle-aged man’s face had gone from pale to grey. His mother’s righteous fury was visibly faltering, her eyes darting left and right as the crowd’s mood shifted around her like a tide turning.

The three of them exchanged a single look.

Then, as one, they began edging sideways – trying to slip quietly toward the outer edge of the crowd.

They made it exactly two steps before Theodore’s bodyguards materialized on either side of them.

Solid. Immovable. Silent.

Amelia watched them freeze.

“Going somewhere?” she said.

Her tone was almost pleasant.

The old woman spun around, her composure finally cracking wide open.

“You can’t hold us here!” she screamed. “We haven’t done anything wrong! And if you drag us away – who takes care of the children? Who feeds them? Who puts them to bed? You?” She swept her arm out toward the crowd, her voice rising to a wail. “Is anyone here going to take responsibility for two little girls?”

She was good at this, Amelia noted. Pivoting to the children the moment everything else failed.

A calculated move.

But not fast enough.

Because at that exact moment, a figure stepped out from the side of the shelter.

Natasha.

She was holding the hands of two small girls – thin, hollow-cheeked, wearing clothes that were slightly too large for their bony frames.

She walked forward steadily and stopped just inside the gate, facing the cameras directly.

“These children,” Natasha said, her voice clear and firm, “will be taken care of.”

She looked down at the two girls beside her, then back up at the lenses pointed at her face.

“My name is Natasha Crimson. I am Theodore Crimson’s cousin.”

She paused just long enough to let that register.

“Inspired by Amelia Stone – Theodore’s fiancée – I will be partnering with her to establish a welfare school.

A place specifically for children in situations like theirs. Children who have been failed by the people who were supposed to protect them.”

The live chat went completely silent for one beat.

Then it detonated.

Natasha Crimson just walked out with those children. She actually came prepared.

A welfare school. She’s announcing a welfare school. Right now. On a livestream.

Amelia didn't just fight back – she built something while she was fighting.

This woman is terrifying. I mean that as the highest compliment.

The cameras swung between Natasha's steady face and the two small girls pressed against her sides.

Then they swung to the middle-aged man – soft, well-fed, expensive watch glinting on his wrist.

Then back to the girls.

The contrast was brutal and wordless and absolutely damning.

The girls flinched when their grandfather's eyes found them. They pressed further behind Natasha, their

small hands gripping her jacket.

That single movement said everything.

The crowd had already made up its mind.

Amelia turned to the nearest officer.

"I have evidence," she said simply. "Video evidence documenting this family's meeting with a third party, and the exchange of funds. I am formally requesting their arrest on charges of organized harassment and commercial defamation. Stone Botanicals will be filing for full damages."

The middle-aged man broke first.

"No – no, please, we didn't – we were just – someone told us to come, we didn't know it was–"

His wife grabbed his arm. "Shut up–"

"We didn't know what we were getting into, I swear–"

The old woman let out a sound between a scream and a sob, throwing herself against the nearest bodyguard's arm, wailing about innocence and injustice and the cruelty of the powerful preying on ordinary people.

Nobody moved to comfort her.

Amelia raised her tablet.

She pressed play.

The video was clear. Steady footage shot from a fixed angle, probably a parked car across the street. The timestamp was visible in the corner.

The three of them. A man in a dark coat. An envelope changing hands.

The old woman's voice, unmistakable even through the phone speaker: **"How much if we stay until midnight?"**

Silence fell over the entire crowd.

Not the uneasy silence of uncertainty.

The absolute silence of a verdict already reached.

The middle-aged man's legs gave out. He crumpled to his knees on the pavement. His wife stood rigid, staring at the screen, her face completely blank.

The old woman stopped wailing.

The officer in charge stepped away briefly, spoke quietly into his radio, then returned.

"We'll be taking all three of you in for questioning."

No one protested this time.

–

The three of them were guided – the man still half-collapsed, needing support – toward the waiting police vehicle.

The crowd parted for them without a word.

In a building across the city, Griffin Drake stared at his screen.

His jaw was tight.

He watched the police vehicle doors close.

Then he turned to the man standing behind him – the one who had arranged the payment, who had found the family, who had set up the meeting in the dark coat.

"Wade isn't here," Griffin said, his voice completely flat. *"So you're the one who handled this."*

The man swallowed. “Sir, I-”

“Someone was filming the entire exchange. Standing right there. And you didn’t notice.”

“I can explain-”

Griffin raised one hand.

Just one hand, barely a gesture.

“Take him out to the coast,” he said to the two guards flanking the door. “Make him disappear.”

The man’s face collapsed.

“Please – please, I have a family, I have children, I-”

The guards moved forward.

His voice rose to a scream, then faded as they walked him down the corridor, the sound growing smaller and smaller until there was nothing left but silence.

Griffin turned back to the screen.

Amelia was still standing in front of the cameras.

She was looking directly into the lens.

Then she raised her hand.

And extended her middle finger.

“Griffin,” she said, her voice carrying through the speakers with perfect, unhurried clarity. “I know it was you who paid that family. Still think you have the upper hand?”

She let that sit for exactly one second.

“As for the deliberate sabotage of Stone Botanicals – I strongly suggest it wasn’t you behind it. Because this time, there’s no one left to take the fall for you. Your grandmother’s already behind bars – I’d hate for her to see her own flesh and blood dragged in right beside her.”

Alpha's Abandoned Daughter is the Secret Heiress! - Chapter 434[1,209 words]

(Author's POV)

Amelia lowered her hand slowly.

The middle finger had done its job.

She turned away from the gate and faced the cluster of officers still standing nearby, her expression shifting from cold amusement to something far more serious.

"Now that this matter has drawn such widespread public attention," she said, her voice steady and clear, "I

want to formally request a thorough investigation."

She looked directly at the officer in charge.

"The accusations against Stone Botanicals – equipment failure, medical negligence – these claims have

affected real employees and real patients. They deserve a proper answer."

She held his gaze.

"I want Stone Botanicals cleared through official channels. Not just through a livestream. Through the law."

The officer gave a firm nod.

"We'll begin the formal inquiry immediately, Ms. Stone."

Across the city, Griffin Drake stood motionless in front of his screen.

His hands were at his sides.

His jaw was locked so tight the muscle in his cheek twitched.

On the screen, Amelia stood in front of the cameras – unhurried, unruffled, completely in control.

Something inside Griffin's chest snapped.

He drove his foot into the coffee table.

The crash was enormous.

The laptop skidded off the edge. Papers, a glass, two phones – everything hit the floor in a single chaotic wave.

A low sound tore out of his throat. Not quite a shout. Something darker than that.

He stood in the wreckage and breathed.

Then he looked around the room.

And that was when it hit him.

There was no one there.

Jade was gone. Wade was gone. Carlos was gone. His grandmother Matriarch Octavia was behind bars.

Lance had been exiled. Even the butler had been arrested.

The room was completely silent.

He was alone.

*She did this. The thought settled in his mind like a stone dropping into still water.

*Every single one of

them she took them all.*

–

One of the phones on the floor began to ring.

Griffin stared at it.

He let it ring once.

Twice.

On the third ring, he bent down and picked it up without looking at the screen.

“What.”

“Griffin?” The voice on the other end was soft, slightly breathless. “I saw the livestream. Are you – are you all right?”

He blinked.

He looked at the screen for the first time.

Celine Stone.

He almost hung up.

His thumb hovered over the button.

But the silence in the room pressed in around him, and her voice was the only sound in it.

“I’m fine,” he said flatly.

“You don’t sound fine.” A pause. “I’m worried about you.”

Something in Griffin’s chest shifted – barely, almost imperceptibly. Like a hairline crack forming in stone.

He exhaled slowly.

“Come to the Drake house,” he said.

The sharp intake of breath on the other end was immediate.

“Really?” She couldn’t keep the excitement out of her voice. “I’ll be right there.”

Griffin ended the call without responding.

He set the phone down on the table and looked back at the dark screen.

Back at Stone Botanicals, the crowd had thinned to nothing.

The media vans were pulling away. Assistants moved efficiently through the space, folding up the shelter canopies and stacking the catering equipment into waiting vehicles.

What remained was a quiet stretch of pavement, a closed gate, and five people.

Amelia. Theodore. Marcus. Natasha. And two small girls.

The older one she couldn’t have been more than nine – was staring at the ground. Her younger sister stood pressed against her side, one fist curled in the fabric of her sister’s sleeve.

After a moment, the older girl looked up.

“Is it true?” she asked quietly. “That we’ll really get to go to school?”

Her voice was careful. Like she’d learned not to expect too much.

Natasha dropped into a crouch in front of them immediately.

“Yes,” she said. “I promise you. School, meals, a safe place to sleep, and more kids your age than you’ll know what to do with.”

The younger girl blinked. Her lower lip trembled.

The older one turned to Amelia.

She stepped forward – and then both girls rushed toward her at once, grabbing her hands, tears spilling down their faces before they could even get the words out.

“Thank you – thank you so much-”

Amelia looked at them.

“I’m sending your family to prison,” she said simply. “You don’t need to thank me for that.”

The older girl shook her head hard.

“We do,” she said. Her voice was steadier than it had any right to be. “Because if they hadn’t decided to raise us – to sell us off to other Packs when we were old enough, for alliances – they would have left us in the wild the day we were born.”

The words landed like a slap.

Natasha stood up slowly. Her expression had gone rigid.

“Those people,” she said, her voice dropping to something barely controlled, “are worse than animals.”

She turned to the girls, and when she spoke again, her voice was gentle but fierce.

“I’m getting you settled somewhere safe tonight. And the welfare school – I’m accelerating the timeline. It’s happening.”

Amelia looked at the two girls for a long moment.

“Education is power,” she said quietly. “Learn all you can. And no one will ever be able to take your freedom away again.”

The younger girl wiped her face with her sleeve. The older one nodded – once, seriously, like she was making a promise.

Natasha led the girls toward a waiting car.

The moment they were out of earshot, Amelia turned to Theodore.

“I thought this livestream was going to run all day and all night,” she said, the corner of her mouth lifting. “You got here faster than I expected.”

Theodore’s expression softened.

“I wasn’t going to leave you standing in the cold any longer than necessary.”

“Very considerate.”

“I try.”

He held her gaze for a moment, then his tone shifted – still quiet, but more serious.

“The evidence we have right now is enough to clear Stone Botanicals. Enough to get your father released.”

Amelia nodded slowly.

“But bringing the Drake family down completely-” He paused. “We’re not there yet. What we have isn’t sufficient.”

“I know.” She exhaled. “As long as my father is safe, I can work with that.”

A beat of silence passed between them.

Then Amelia leaned in.

She tilted her head slightly and lowered her voice until it was barely above a murmur – close enough that only he could hear.

What she said was quiet, and unhurried, and entirely too suggestive for a public street.

She made a very specific reference to the evening ahead.

And to what she expected from it.

Theodore went very still.

His jaw tightened.

His leg had been recovering steadily – he'd been standing for most of the last hour and her words did not help his concentration in the slightest.

Behind them, Marcus turned his head sharply to the left and studied the middle distance with great intensity.

Theodore looked down at Amelia.

“Keep talking like that,” he said, his voice low and deliberate, “and you will deal with the consequences yourself.”

Amelia raised her chin.

The smile that crossed her face didn't reach her eyes – it was all challenge and zero apology.

The tension dissolved slowly into something easier.

After a moment, Amelia glanced at him.

“Are you heading back tonight? You must have things piling up.”

Theodore's mouth curved.

“Actually,” he said, “I was planning to stay at your place tonight.”

Amelia raised an eyebrow.

“My place?”

“There are a few rats in my den at the moment,” he said, his voice perfectly even. “I thought I'd give them some room. Let them make their move. See exactly what they're planning.”

Amelia was quiet for a second.

Then she understood.

“Mason?” she asked.

Theodore gave a single nod.

“Yes.”

Amelia didn't hesitate.

“All right,” she said. “Then you’re staying at mine tonight.”

Alpha’s Abandoned Daughter is the Secret Heiress! - Chapter 435[1,177 words]

(Author’s POV)

Amelia pushed Theodore’s wheelchair through the front door of the eastern estate and called out toward the hallway.

“Mom! We’re back!

Footsteps came quickly from the inner hall. Seraphina appeared around the corner, her eyes already glistening before she’d even reached them.

“Your father’s home,” she said, her voice catching slightly. “He just got back from the station. He’s in the shower now.”

Amelia exhaled.

The tension she’d been carrying in her shoulders for hours finally released. A real smile crossed her face- not the controlled, public kind, but something genuine and quiet.

Seraphina wiped the corner of her eye and only then seemed to register the figure behind Amelia.

Theodore offered her a warm, easy smile from the wheelchair.

“I hope it’s not too much trouble,” he said. “I’ll need to stay the night again.”

Seraphina waved her hand immediately.

“You’re always welcome here, Theodore. Stay as long as you need.”

She started to ask whether the two of them had eaten, then stopped herself, clearly remembering something.

“I caught the barbecue segment during the livestream,” she said, with a small, knowing look. “Never mind. Go rest. Both of you.”

Amelia confirmed that her father was safe, then turned the wheelchair down the hall toward her own bedroom.

Theodore made no move toward the guest room.

He simply followed her in.

The moment the door swung open, Green, Black, and White came bounding out from their respective corners in a flurry of movement – circling Amelia’s feet, climbing over each other, demanding attention all at once.

Amelia went to the cabinet and pulled out a small canister of freeze-dried treats.

She held it out to Theodore.

“Feed them while I shower?”

Theodore took the canister without complaint.

Black ate immediately and enthusiastically, practically inhaling each treat the moment it left Theodore’s fingers.

White accepted each piece with quiet, almost polite precision – taking it gently, chewing thoroughly, waiting for the next.

Green turned his head to one side and looked at Theodore’s outstretched hand as though it were mildly offensive.

The standoff lasted an unreasonable amount of time.

Theodore held his position. Green held his.

Eventually, the smell of the treat proved impossible to ignore. Green’s head dipped – the smallest, most reluctant motion, as though he were granting a royal concession to a lesser being.

Theodore brought the treat forward. Green snatched it and retreated to his corner without a single backward glance.

Theodore shook his head slowly.

Even after giving in, the snake had somehow managed to look completely unbothered – as if he’d done

Theodore the favor.

With all three fed, Theodore’s gaze drifted.

Almost without his permission, it moved to the frosted glass of the bathroom door.

Amelia's silhouette moved softly behind it, half-obscured by steam. The sound of running water filled the quiet room. He could see the outline of her- the curve of her shoulder, the tilt of her head.

He felt his throat tighten.

Something warm and unhurried stirred in his chest, and he didn't try to push it away.

About ten minutes later, the bathroom door pushed open.

Amelia stepped out with her cheeks flushed a soft pink from the heat, her hair loose and damp, something

warm and unhurried about the way she moved.

She had barely taken two steps.

Theodore reached out and drew her into his arms.

His hand came up to the back of her neck, and he tilted his head down to meet her lips – the kiss deep and slow, full of everything he hadn't said out loud all evening.

In their respective corners, Green, Black, and White quietly retreated further into their beds.

Apparently, this was none of their business.

They stayed like that until neither of them could breathe properly.

Only then did they pull apart.

Amelia lifted her hand and rested her palm lightly against the side of his face. The teasing note in her voice was unmistakable.

"Were you holding that in all evening?"

Theodore caught her hand and held it.

When he spoke, his voice was low and a little rough.

"Yes," he said. "I want you. You know that."

He paused.

“But I’m going to wait until my legs have fully healed. And when that day comes-” His thumb moved slowly across her knuckles. “I intend to give you something worth waiting for.”

Amelia tilted her head.

With a perfectly straight face, she offered to take matters into her own hands in the meantime.

Theodore shook his head.

Firm. Not unkind. Completely certain.

“I want us to get there together,” he said. “At the right time.”

–

Something in Amelia shifted at that something quiet and real, beneath all the sharpness she usually kept in place.

“I’ll hold you to it,” she said softly. “I’ll remember.”

The warmth between them settled into something gentler.

Theodore exhaled slowly, then said he was going to shower.

He paused before turning the wheelchair toward the door.

“Tomorrow will be long,” he said, without looking back. “Legal matters with your father, loose ends from today. You should sleep.”

He got as far as the doorway.

Then he stopped. Glanced back.

“I want a goodbye kiss.”

Amelia laughed despite herself – a real one, unguarded, the kind that happened before she could decide whether to allow it.

She crossed the room and gave him one.

That night, Stone Botanicals’ sabotaged equipment wasn’t the only thing dominating every feed.

Theodore’s name was trending across every major platform.

Clips of him rising from his wheelchair during the livestream had spread within the hour. The commentary was relentless – people marveling that Amelia had apparently accomplished what an entire roster of top specialists had failed to do. That Theodore was recovering. That the Crimson Moon Pack's heir was no longer a question mark.

Every voice that had once sneered about a broken Alpha paired with a low-rank nobody she-wolf from a weak Pack had gone conspicuously quiet.

The new consensus was simple: this was the strongest bond the Northern Packs had seen in a generation.

Griffin stared at his phone.

The hashtags scrolled past, one after another.

The tendons along the back of his hand stood out sharply against his skin.

From the doorway, one of his men spoke.

“Alpha Griffin – Ms. Stone has arrived.”

Griffin didn't look up immediately.

“Take her to the guest room,” he said. “Tell her to shower.”

When Celine came back out, she crossed the room toward him with a carefully arranged expression.

Soft. A little shy. Calculated to land exactly right.

She had read the room the moment she arrived. Griffin had taken hit after hit these past weeks, and that made him reachable in a way he normally wasn't. She knew better than to waste a moment like this.

Vulnerable men were easy to reach.

She had been waiting for an opening like this for a long time. Tonight, she told herself, she would finally become his in every sense that mattered.

“Come here,” Griffin said. His voice was flat.

Celine crossed to him barefoot.

Things moved quickly after that.

And then, at the worst possible moment, she spoke.

She asked him, in a small voice, to be gentle with her tonight.

Griffin's brow pulled together.

He let out a short, humorless sound – not quite a laugh.

“What exactly,” he said, “do you think you’ve done to earn that?”

There was nothing gentle in his voice. Only barely leashed aggression – the kind that had been building for days, looking for somewhere to go.

Celine's hands trembled where they pressed against his abdomen.

She steadied herself.

Then she said quietly:

“...Because I'm pregnant.”

Alpha's Abandoned Daughter is the Secret Heiress! - Chapter 436[1,254 words]

(Griffin's POV)

“...Because I'm pregnant.”

The words hit the air.

Griffin went completely still.

Then he pulled back and slapped her hard, the sound sharp and flat in the quiet room.

–

Celine's head snapped to the side. She let out a choked sound, more shock than pain.

Griffin's voice came out low and dangerous.

“Why didn't you take precautions?”

Celine pressed her hand to her cheek. Her eyes filled immediately, the tears spilling before she could stop them.

“I just – I wanted to give you a pup,” she whispered. “I thought-”

Griffin laughed. It was a short, ugly sound.

“You thought.” He repeated the words like they disgusted him. “You have no right to think things like that.”

His hand shot out and grabbed a fistful of her hair.

Celine cried out.

He yanked her over, his grip ruthless.

“If you won’t handle it yourself,” he said quietly, “then I’ll take care of it for you. Right now.”

“Griffin, please-” Her voice broke. “I’ll go to the hospital. Tomorrow. I swear, I’ll go first thing-”

He didn’t stop.

Celine begged. She promised. She swore on everything she had.

Griffin didn’t stop.

It wasn’t until the sheets beneath her darkened – a slow, spreading stain – that he finally pulled away.

He looked at the blood for a moment.

Then he looked away.

“What a waste,” he said under his breath.

He stood and straightened his clothes without looking at her again.

“Get her out of here,” he said to the man by the door. “Change the sheets.”

Two men came in. Celine didn’t resist as they lifted her. She had gone somewhere else entirely – somewhere behind her own eyes, quiet and unreachable.

Griffin didn’t watch them go.

He stood at the foot of the stripped bed, staring at nothing.

And then, slowly, a thought surfaced.

Jade had never submitted to him. Not once. No matter what he did, she kept that wall up – cold, untouchable, immovable.

But if Jade were pregnant with his child-

He turned the idea over carefully.

Would she change then?

The thought settled into something that felt almost like a plan.

(Theodore's POV)

The next morning, Amelia left early with Jaxon to handle the legal paperwork from the day before.

Theodore had intended to go directly to the office.

Then his phone rang.

It was Alpha King Gideon's personal line.

Theodore looked at the screen for a moment, then answered.

The call was brief. The tone was not a request.

He redirected to the old mansion instead.

The study felt heavier than usual when Theodore entered.

Gideon was already seated behind the desk, his white hair immaculate, his posture unchanged from decades of command. But something in his expression was different this morning.

Watchful. Careful in a way that Gideon rarely needed to be.

"Someone entered this study last night," Gideon said, without preamble.

Theodore settled into the chair across from him.

"Have you identified who it was?" he asked.

His voice was completely calm.

Gideon studied him for a long moment.

“I want to know,” Gideon said slowly, “why you brought Mason back to the old mansion.”

Theodore met his grandfather’s gaze without flinching.

Then he smiled – a small, unhurried thing.

“To make him follow me,” he said simply.

Gideon’s expression shifted.

“Explain.”

Theodore leaned back slightly.

“Someone wanted to use Mason to get rid of you,” he said. “And then pin it on me. The story they were building was clean – Theodore, still bitter over his mother’s death, finally making his move against the old man who sent his brother away.”

He paused.

“I needed Mason close enough to watch. And I needed whoever was pulling his strings to believe their plan was still working.”

Gideon’s jaw tightened.

“Victor and Garrett.”

It wasn’t a question.

Theodore confirmed it with a slight nod.

“The two of them together,” he said. “They’ve been coordinating. Mason was their instrument – but he’s also my mother’s creditor. That gave him a reason to be near me that no one would question.”

Gideon’s hands pressed flat against the desk.

“They used me as a pawn,” he said. The words came out very quietly.

“They did,” Theodore said. “And even if Mason had failed, they would have had a contingency. People who want someone dead don’t stop at one attempt.”

Gideon said nothing for a moment.

The silence in the study was complete.

Then Gideon exhaled – a long, slow breath that seemed to cost him something.

“Have you ever,” he said carefully, “suspected me? In your mother’s death?”

Theodore didn’t look away.

“Yes,” he said. “I considered it.”

Gideon’s expression didn’t change, but something behind his eyes did.

“But I only follow evidence,” Theodore added. “Suspicion without proof means nothing to me.”

Gideon stood.

He moved slowly to the window, his hands clasped behind his back, and looked out at the grounds below.

For a long time, he said nothing.

When he finally spoke, his voice had changed – lower, and further away, as though he were speaking from somewhere inside a memory rather than the room.

“You’ve never met your grandmother,” he said.

Theodore said nothing. He waited.

“She came from a distinguished bloodline,” Gideon continued. “Old family. Serious people. But she had no interest in any of it – the business, the politics, none of it. What she cared about was divination. Prophecy. She had a gift for it that I never fully understood.”

He paused.

“She came after me. Said we were fated. I thought it was flattery – the kind of thing people say when they want an advantageous match.”

A faint sound that might have been a laugh, or might not have been.

“I treated the marriage as exactly that. An alliance. Nothing more.”

He was quiet again for a moment.

“Then everything she predicted came true. One after another. The pack grew. Our position in the Northern Territories became what it is today. Everything she had said would happen – happened.”

Theodore watched his grandfather's back.

He had never heard him speak like this. Unhurried. Unguarded.

—

“She told me she would die at forty,” Gideon said. “I didn’t believe her. I didn’t think I needed to. I didn’t

think I even cared.”

His shoulders shifted slightly.

“She died at forty.”

The words landed without drama. That was what made them heavy.

“I didn’t understand what I’d lost until it was already gone,” Gideon said. “The world went flat after that. I couldn’t explain it to anyone. I’m not sure I understood it myself.”

(Theodore’s POV)

Gideon turned back from the window.

“After she died, I became dependent. On seers. On oracles. Any prediction, any reading, any sign. I couldn’t make a significant decision without consulting someone.”

His voice was steady, but the steadiness cost him something.

“When your brother was born, someone told me the child would bring ruin to the family. Your mother

fought me. She begged me not to listen.”

He met Theodore’s eyes.

“I listened to the oracle instead.”

Theodore kept his face still.

“Sending the child away destroyed your mother,” Gideon said. “And what happened after – her accident – I have never been able to fully separate myself from that chain of events.”

He came back to the desk slowly and stood beside it, not sitting.

“I have carried that for a long time,” he said. “It is why I invested in you the way I did. More than any other child or grandchild in this family. I knew what my decision had cost you.”

He looked at Theodore directly.

“And then we discovered that Ronan was not who we believed him to be. That he was your father’s illegitimate son. That the child I sent away – your brother – had been somewhere else entirely, all this time.”

His voice dropped.

“My guilt reached a point I had no name for.”

He paused.

“It was at that moment that I made my decision. Completely and without reservation.”

His golden eyes – the same shade as Theodore’s – held steady.

–

“Whatever happens in this family, whatever anyone else claims or attempts the position of heir to the

Crimson Moon Pack belongs to you. Only you.”

Alpha’s Abandoned Daughter is the Secret Heiress! - Chapter 437[981 words]

(Author’s POV)

Gideon let out a slow breath.

The sound was heavy, like something he had been holding for a very long time.

“I’ve said a great deal just now,” he began, his voice low and measured. “Whether you believe me or not, I want you to know this your mother’s death was indirectly caused by my decision to send your brother away.”

He paused.

“But I never intended to harm her.”

His golden eyes held steady on Theodore’s face.

“You have every right to resent me. Even to hate me. But I hope you will carry the Crimson Moon Pack forward and make it stronger.”

The silence that followed was complete.

Then Gideon continued, quieter now.

“I’m an old man. I don’t have many winters left in me.” He moved back toward the desk slowly. “I never anticipated that Garrett and Victor’s ambitions would grow so monstrous – that they would be willing to take my life to secure their position.”

He stopped.

“If that is where things stand, then perhaps it is worth using my life as the final move. To cut off their ambitions entirely. To secure your place as heir – once and for all.”

Theodore looked at his grandfather for a long moment.

The truth of the situation had become unmistakably clear to them both.

Unless the family legacy was surrendered to Garrett’s branch or Victor’s branch, neither side would ever stand down. And Gideon carried the full weight of his guilt every time he looked at Theodore – this eldest grandson who had been left to stand alone while others circled.

Garrett and Victor each had parents, siblings, entire networks rallying behind them.

Theodore had none of that.

The brother he had grown up with was a fraud. His real brother Jasper had been missing for years. His father Theron was not only weak but a liability at every turn.

The one grace in all of it was Amelia.

Gideon knew it with the certainty of a man who had lived long enough to recognize what mattered. That young woman had both the strength and the loyalty his grandson needed. The Moon Goddess had truly blessed Theodore the day he found her.

Gideon straightened his shoulders.

“I am willing to play my part in whatever plan you have in mind,” he said. “Even if it places me in genuine danger.” His voice was firm. “I want to see with my own eyes whether those two grandsons are truly capable of killing their own Alpha to seize power.”

Theodore held his grandfather’s gaze.

“I will do everything within my power to keep you safe,” he said quietly. “That is my promise.”

Gideon nodded once.

Then something shifted in his expression – the gravity easing slightly, replaced by something more careful, more personal.

“Your leg,” he said. “How is it?”

Theodore said nothing at first.

He placed both hands on the armrests of the wheelchair. Slowly, deliberately, he pushed himself to his feet.

He stood.

Then he walked measured steps, steady – across the full length of the study.

–

Gideon watched without a word.

Something in his eyes changed. The hard, calculating edge that decades of command had built into him softened, unmistakably, as he watched his grandson move across the room under his own power.

When Theodore returned to the chair, Gideon spoke again.

–

“Cherish her,” he said simply. “Don’t make the same mistake I made – waiting until something is lost before understanding its worth.”

Theodore met his grandfather’s gaze.

“I’m luckier than you were,” he said, with quiet certainty. “I’ve known my own heart from the very beginning.”

Gideon was silent for a moment.

Then, before Theodore rose to leave, he made one final request.

“Find a suitable reason,” he said, “to bring Mason closer to me.”

“He does,” Theodore said.

Marcus was silent for a moment. “Then all of this is designed to draw the threat into the open,”

“Yes.”

Theodore’s voice was even, unhurried.

“Before the wedding at the end of the month,” he said, “I will settle things with Garrett and Victor completely.”

He didn’t look back toward the library.

“I will not allow anything to cast a shadow over that day.”

Marcus said nothing more. He simply walked beside him, steady as always.

It was midday when Theodore’s phone rang.

He glanced at the screen.

Amelia.

He answered immediately.

“Theodore.” Her voice came through warm and slightly rushed, carrying the familiar sound of someone in the middle of a busy day. “I’m going to be tied up with the lawsuit all afternoon. I won’t be able to come by for your treatment.”

A faint note of apology in her voice.

“So I was thinking – just come over to my place tonight. I’ll do it then.”

The corner of Theodore’s mouth curved upward.

“Alright,” he said. “See you tonight.”

“See you tonight!”

The call ended.

Stone River Pack House

As dusk settled over the estate and the lights came on one by one, Theodore wrapped up the last of his work.

He called ahead to let Gideon know he wouldn’t be returning for dinner.

Then he drove to the Stone River Pack House.

Seraphina was just stepping out of the kitchen, carrying a plate of fruit, when she spotted him at the entrance.

Her face broke into a warm, unhesitating smile.

“Theodore, you’re here!” She set the plate down on the side table and waved him in.
“Amelia mentioned you’d be coming- I had Agnes prepare all your favorites.”

The words were simple.

But something about them caught him off guard.

The unassuming warmth of being remembered. Of someone taking the trouble to make him feel at home

without being asked, without needing a reason.

It reached somewhere he hadn’t expected.

For just a moment, it reminded him of his mother – of a warmth he had almost forgotten how to recognize, the kind that asked nothing in return.

He stood there for half a second longer than he intended.

Then Amelia’s voice came from behind him.

“Theodore, you’re here? Perfect timing – Jaxon and I just got back ourselves!”

He turned.

She came to stand beside him, slightly out of breath, her dark hair loose around her shoulders, her sapphire eyes bright from the long day.

He looked at her.

And smiled.

“Seraphina said she made my favorites tonight?”

Alpha’s Abandoned Daughter is the Secret Heiress! - Chapter 438[
1,232 words]

(Amelia’s POV)

I caught the meaning in his words right away.

“I told her to,” I said, smiling without any pretense. “We’ve had lunch together enough times. I know exactly what you like.”

Theodore looked at me for a moment, something warm and unguarded in his golden eyes.

Behind us, I heard Seraphina and Jaxon exchange a quiet glance. A second later, Seraphina made some

vague comment about checking on the kitchen, and Jaxon followed without missing a beat.

Smooth. Very smooth.

I walked around to the back of the wheelchair and looked at Marcus.

“I’ve got it from here.”

Marcus gave a small nod and stepped to the side.

I took the handles and pushed Theodore toward the entrance.

“Comfortable?” I asked.

“Very,” he said.

Once we were inside, Theodore glanced back at me.

The tension from the day had already left my shoulders. I could feel it – the lightness that came after a fight you’d actually won.

He noticed.

“The lawsuit went well,” he said. It wasn’t really a question.

“Completely.” I moved around to face him. “Thanks to the evidence you provided, there was nothing left to argue. We won without a single loose thread.”

“But no direct proof tying Griffin to the two medical companies.”

“Not yet.” I sighed. “We know he pulled the strings. We just can’t prove it on paper.”

Theodore leaned back slightly, his expression calm and measured.

“It doesn’t matter. Griffin doesn’t need to be caught directly. He’s already cornered.” His voice was even. “The Drake family has taken hit after hit, and they can’t touch us. Zane Jenkins has been watching all of this. A man like that doesn’t keep a broken tool around.”

I thought about that.

“Once Zane cuts him loose,” I said slowly, “Griffin loses everything that’s been protecting him

“And then we finish it,” Theodore said. “The material we already have is more than enough

I nodded.

“The Drake family was always just a means to an end for Zane. The moment they become a liability, he’ll discard them without blinking.”

I reached out and took Theodore’s arm.

“Try walking to the sofa,” I said.

He looked at me. Then, without argument, he placed his weight against my arm and pushed himself upright.

It was slow. Deliberate. Each step careful and controlled.

But he made it.

He lowered himself onto the sofa, and I felt the breath leave my chest in quiet relief.

From the corner of my eye, I saw Seraphina standing near the hallway. Her hand had gone to her mouth.

Her eyes were bright.

She didn’t say anything. She didn’t need to.

I stood up. “I’ll get some water so you can wash your hands.”

“I’ll bring it,” Seraphina said quickly, her voice slightly unsteady. “I’ll just – I need to check something in the back anyway.”

She disappeared before I could respond.

I sat back down beside Theodore and picked up a strawberry from the plate on the table.

“Open up,” I said.

He gave me a look.

I held it out anyway. He took half of it, and I ate the other half.

“Eclipse is locked down,” he said, as if we hadn’t just had a small domestic moment. “The Drake family’s biggest operation in Northgate City, completely frozen. I had people release damaging material on their competitors at the same time – the kind that makes those competitors hungry. Right now, every rival Griffin has is circling him.”

“You pushed them all into position at once.”

“It seemed efficient.”

I almost laughed.

I reached for another strawberry, ate it whole, and said, “I’ve been digging into Lily Garden Talent Agency.”

Theodore went still.

“The things happening inside that place,” I continued, “are exactly the kind of evidence that buries someone permanently. I’ve been waiting for the right moment to release it.”

“And Celine is the trigger.”

“Yes.” I looked at him. “Griffin wanted to use her hatred for me as a weapon against me. Fine. I’ll use her to bring down Lily Garden instead. Turn his own piece against him.”

Theodore was quiet for a moment.

“I have witnesses,” he said. “Women we pulled out of that agency. They’re ready to speak.”

“Good. I have someone on the inside right now. Collecting evidence of coercion, deception, everything.” I paused. “When the time comes, we hit from every direction at once.”

Before Theodore could respond, Seraphina’s voice came from the hallway.

“Dinner’s ready! Come on, all of you – tonight we celebrate. Stone Botanicals is safe, and I want to enjoy it properly.”

After dinner, we went upstairs together.

At the top of the landing, Theodore glanced toward my room.

“I’ll come find you after I’ve cleaned up,” he said.

“Just come straight in,” I told him. “Don’t knock.”

He said nothing, but the corner of his mouth moved.

I went to my room, showered quickly, and immediately called Silas.

“Tomorrow morning,” I told her. “Start coordinating the media channels. We release the Lily Garden material in stages – not all at once. Let it build.”

“Understood,” Silas said. “I’ll have the first wave ready before sunrise.”

I hung up.

The door opened.

Theodore came in and pushed it shut behind him. The click of the latch was quiet in the room.

I was sitting on the bed, still slightly damp from the shower, and I stretched my arms above my head with a long exhale.

“You know,” I said, “Northgate City is exhausting. Back in Meadow Brook, my biggest problem was whether the moonlight herbs had enough water.”

“And now your biggest problem is dismantling a criminal empire.”

“Exactly. The upgrade was not requested.”

Theodore wheeled closer, and then without much ceremony—he stood.

He sat down on the edge of the bed beside me.

“Marcus is already coordinating the victim statements,” he said. “Personal accounts, written in their own words. Different angles, different stories. All pointing to the same place.”

“That’s good.” I turned to look at him. “When it comes out, there won’t be anywhere for Griffin to—”

I stopped.

He was already looking at me.

The distance between us was small. The room was quiet. Something in the air shifted – the way it does when a conversation ends and something else begins.

I opened my mouth.

His closed over mine.

It was not hesitant. It was not gentle in the way of something uncertain. It was slow and deep and entirely deliberate, the kind of kiss that doesn't ask permission because it already knows the answer.

I felt myself tipping backward.

–

My shoulders met the bed, and Theodore's hand came up behind my head one arm braced, fingers sliding through my hair, cradling the back of my skull so I didn't fall hard.

He kissed me like he had time. Like there was nowhere else either of us needed to be.

I bit him- lightly, without thinking.

A low laugh rumbled in his throat.

He took my wrist and pressed my hand against the side of his neck. I could feel his pulse under my palm. Steady and fast at the same time.

His fingertips traced down the line of my leg, slow and deliberate, sliding from my calf upward.

A shiver moved through me before I could stop it. My core pulled tight.

When the kiss finally broke, neither of us was breathing evenly. My hair was spread across the pillow. His collar was askew.

My face was burning.

I looked up at him through half-lidded eyes.

"What's gotten into you tonight?"

His fingers moved across my cheek, unhurried, tracing the line of it like he was memorizing something.

"My legs are almost healed," he said quietly. His voice was low, rougher than usual. "I thought a little preparation might be appropriate."

The gold in his eyes caught the light.

“Tell me,” he murmured, a slow smile forming at the corner of his mouth. “Are you looking forward to it as much as I am?”

Alpha’s Abandoned Daughter is the Secret Heiress! - Chapter 439[1,380 words]

(Theodore’s POV)

Amelia wrapped her fingers around mine.

Then she bit down—lightly, deliberately on the tip of my index finger.

“Very much so, she murmured against my skin.

The words hit me like a current. Every carefully maintained wall I’d built over the last hour came apart in an instant.

I’d lived thirty years with iron self-control. I’d faced down rival Alphas, survived assassination attempts, endured years of pain in that wheelchair.

None of it had prepared me for this.

My jaw tightened. I could feel the heat spreading through my chest, my hands, the base of my spine.

Not yet.

I pulled my finger back slowly and closed my hand into a fist under the edge of the blanket.

She had to remember this. Every detail of it. I would make certain of that – but not tonight, not like this, not when I’d only just taken my first real steps.

When I finally gave her that, it would leave no room for regret.

Then her phone buzzed.

The vibration broke through the silence like a stone dropped into still water.

I exhaled. Slow. Controlled.

“Answer it,” I said. My voice came out rougher than I intended.

Amelia turned and reached for the phone on the nightstand.

The moment she saw the screen, the warmth left her expression.

She sat up and answered.

“Ethan.”

I watched her face.

Whatever Ethan said on the other end, it changed her immediately. Her spine straightened. Her eyes sharpened.

“Say that again,” she said.

A pause.

“How many?”

Another pause.

“Don’t move. Don’t approach them. Don’t let Alaric go near them either.” Her voice was flat and precise. “I have people in the village. Stay where you are and wait.”

She hung up.

For a moment she just sat there, the phone in her hand, staring at nothing.

“What happened?” I asked.

She set the phone down and turned to face me.

“A group arrived in the village today. Fourteen of them. They told the locals they’re here for a long holiday – a full month.” She paused. “Ethan recognized one of them. A man who should have been executed. A serial killer.”

I went still.

“Ethan thinks they’re assassins,” she continued. “Sent by Griffin or someone higher up. Targeting him and Alaric.”

She was already reaching for the phone again.

Silas picked up on the second ring.

“I need everything you can find on a group of fourteen people who arrived in Meadow Brook today,” Amelia said without preamble. “One of them is a convicted serial killer who was supposed to be on death row.

Verify that first. Then I want full background on all fourteen.” She paused. “And increase coverage on Alaric, the pack members in that village, and Ethan. All three. Tonight.”

“Understood,” Silas said. “I’ll have preliminary results within the hour.”

Amelia ended the call.

I’d been watching her the whole time.

“You think this is Zane Jenkins,” I said.

“Who else would it be?”

I shook my head slowly.

“That’s exactly why I don’t think it’s him.”

She looked at me.

“Zane Jenkins has survived this long because he never moves in straight lines,” I said. “Sending fourteen people – including a known death row convict – into a village where you already have eyes? That’s not his method. He’s too careful for something this visible.”

Amelia was quiet for a moment.

“Then what is it?”

“I don’t know yet,” I said honestly. “But something about this doesn’t fit. It’s too obvious. Too easy to trace back.”

She pressed her lips together.

“Maybe that’s the point,” she said. “Draw our attention to the village while something else happens somewhere else.”

“Possibly.”

“Or maybe someone is using a death row escapee as a message. To tell us they have resources we haven’t accounted for.”

“Also possible.”

She exhaled through her nose.

“Either way,” she said, her voice dropping to something colder, “if those people are truly escaped convicts and they set foot anywhere near Alaric or the pack members – I won’t be calling the authorities to handle it.”

The look in her eyes was not warm.

“They’ll disappear into the forest,” she said quietly. “And no one will find them.”

I said nothing. I didn’t need to.

The room had grown late around us. The light was low. Outside, the city was quiet.

“Get some sleep,” I said finally.

She glanced at me.

For a moment I thought she might argue. But the tension in her shoulders eased, just slightly.

“You too,” she said.

(Celine’s POV)

Two days.

That’s how long I’d been unconscious.

I came back to myself slowly – the ceiling first, then the white walls of the recovery room, then the dull ache spreading through my lower abdomen.

I pressed my hand flat against my stomach.

Empty.

The word landed in my chest like a blow.

I’d planned this so carefully. A pup would have given me leverage. It would have tied Griffin to me in a way that couldn’t be undone. It would have given me something to hold over him – something even his coldness couldn’t dismiss.

And he’d taken it from me without blinking.

He didn’t even hesitate.

The rage moved through me in slow, ugly waves.

I'd given him everything. My obedience, my time, my body. I'd swallowed every humiliation with a smile because I'd believed it was building toward something.

And he'd had the child removed like it was an inconvenience.

My phone rang.

I stared at the ceiling for one more second. Then I picked it up.

"Three o'clock," Griffin said. No greeting. "Bring me a girl. Young. Similar face and bearing to Jade York.

Have her ready."

The line went dead.

I lowered the phone.

Similar to Jade.

Of course. Because Jade had escaped him, and now he wanted a replacement. A copy. Something that looked close enough to scratch whatever itch she'd left behind.

I sat up slowly, ignoring the pull of pain in my abdomen.

Men.

Every single one of them. Without exception.

They used what they wanted and discarded the rest. They smiled at you until they found something shinier. They made you believe you were necessary right up until the moment they proved you weren't.

I stood in front of the mirror.

My face was pale. There were shadows under my eyes. I looked like someone who had just spent two days unconscious in a recovery room, which was exactly what I was.

I picked up my makeup brush.

By the time I was finished, you couldn't tell.

The administrator brought twenty-three girls into the selection room.

I walked down the line slowly, looking at each face.

Most of them were too soft. Too young. Too blank. They had none of the particular quality Griffin had described – that sharpness behind the eyes, that cool self-possession that Jade carried like armor.

Then I stopped.

Near the end of the row.

A girl with dark hair and quiet eyes. She held herself differently from the others – not nervous, not eager.

Just still.

Her eyes were the closest thing to Jade's I'd seen.

"What's your name?" I asked.

"Sherry," she said.

"And what are you hoping to get out of being here?"

She met my gaze without flinching.

"I want to learn a real skill," she said. "Something I can use to support myself. I'm not looking for shortcuts

or things that don't belong to me."

I stared at her.

What an irritating answer.

There was no ambition in it. No hunger. No understanding of how the world actually worked – that waiting quietly for what you'd earned got you nothing, that you had to take what you wanted before someone else did.

But she had the eyes.

That was all that mattered right now.

"There's a good opportunity available," I said smoothly. "A position. Well-compensated." I smiled. "We'll get you ready."

I nodded to the staff beside me.

They moved to escort her out.

At three o'clock exactly, I brought Sherry to the Drake house.

She'd been dressed and styled. She looked presentable. From a distance, in the right light, the resemblance to Jade was passable.

Griffin was already on the sofa when we entered.

He looked up.

His eyes moved to Sherry.

The expression on his face went flat.

I watched him take her in – the hair, the face, the way she stood. I saw the moment he decided she wasn't enough.

"Name," he said.

"Sherry," I answered for her.

He raised one hand.

A servant stepped forward from behind the sofa, lifting a bundle of clothing from the low table. They carried it across the room and stopped in front of Sherry.

The fabric was minimal. Deliberately so.

"Put this on," Griffin said.

Sherry's eyes went wide.

She turned to me and I saw the fear in her face, raw and sudden, cracking through the composure she'd held all afternoon.

"You said this was a job interview," she whispered. Her voice was trembling. "Why do I have to wear something like this..."

Alpha's Abandoned Daughter is the Secret Heiress! - Chapter 440[
1,255 words]

(Celine's POV)

Sherry's hands trembled as she stared at the bundle of fabric in the servant's arms.

“I can’t wear that,” she said. Her voice was barely above a whisper.

Griffin’s expression shifted instantly.

The relaxed indifference drained from his face and was replaced by something colder, harder.

“Stop asking questions,” he snapped. “I told you to change. Change.”

His voice cracked through the room like a whip.

Sherry flinched so hard she nearly stumbled backward.

Then she turned to me.

Her eyes were wide, desperate, searching my face for something – reassurance, rescue, anything.

“Celine,” she whispered. “I don’t want to do this. You told me this was a job interview. A real job.”

I kept my expression smooth.

I pressed one hand lightly to her shoulder and let my voice go soft, honeyed, the way I’d learned to do when I needed someone to stop thinking and start complying.

“Listen to Griffin,” I said gently. “Be a good girl. If you make him happy – really happy – your whole life changes. No more struggling. No more working yourself to the bone just to get by.” I tilted my head and smiled. “You’d never have to worry about money again.”

Sherry stared at me.

For a moment I thought it had worked.

It hadn’t.

She stepped back, out of my reach, and shook her head slowly.

“I just want to learn a skill,” she said. Her voice had gone quiet and flat. “Something real. Something I earned.” She glanced toward the door. “I’m not interested in shortcuts. I’m not interested in attaching myself to anyone. I want to leave.”

She turned.

I moved before I even decided to.

My hand shot out and grabbed her arm, spinning her back around.

The warmth vanished from my face.

“You’re not leaving,” I said.

“Let go of me-”

“Take the clothes,” I said, my voice dropping low. “And change. Now.”

She pulled against my grip, panic flashing in her eyes.

“Let me go! You lied to me, this isn’t-”

The slap landed before she finished the sentence.

The sound of it was sharp and clean in the silent room.

Sherry went still.

Her hand flew to her cheek. Her eyes filled immediately, tears spilling over before she could stop them.

I shoved the clothing against her chest.

“Put it on,” I said.

She was shaking. Her breath came in ragged, uneven pulls. But she was alone in this room with two people who were not going to let her walk out, and eventually the fight drained out of her the way it always did.

She changed.

Standing there in front of both of us, her arms wrapped around herself, her face burning with humiliation and tears running silently down her cheeks.

Griffin leaned back against the sofa cushions.

His gaze moved over her the way a predator assesses something it hasn’t decided whether to eat yet.

“Show me something,” he said. “A talent. Anything.”

Sherry’s head came up.

The shame in her eyes hardened into something else.

“I’m sorry,” she said. Her voice cracked but held. “I can’t do this.”

She lunged for the door.

She made it two steps.

Griffin’s expression didn’t even flicker.

“Bring her back,” he said.

His men moved.

They dragged her back to the center of the room and held her in place.

Griffin stood.

He walked toward her slowly, unhurried, and then drove his foot hard into her abdomen.

The sound she made was awful.

She folded in on herself and collapsed to the floor, gasping, curling into a tight ball with her hands pressed to her stomach.

I watched from across the room and said nothing.

Stupid girl. The thought moved through me without much feeling. *You could have made this easy.*

Griffin stared down at her without expression.

I knew what he was calculating – I’d learned to read him well enough for that. Zoey had slipped out of his control. Zane Jenkins was furious about it. Griffin needed a replacement, something close enough to Jade to smooth things over and buy back Zane’s patience.

This girl was a tool. Nothing more.

He turned to me.

“One week,” he said. “Train her. If she still can’t perform by then-” his eyes moved to me with flat, cold meaning- “you’ll answer for it alongside her.”

The humiliation burned all the way down to my bones.

I smiled.

“Understood,” I said.

I got Sherry out of the Drake house and into the back of the car.

The door had barely closed before I hit her.

My palm connected with her cheek – the same one I’d struck before- and she cried out and pressed herself against the far window.

“What is wrong with you?” I snarled. “I told you to cooperate. One simple thing. Why can’t you just listen?”

She was shaking.

Her whole body trembled against the car door, her shoulders hunched, her breath coming in small, broken sobs.

“You lied to me,” she whispered.

“I gave you an opportunity,” I snapped. “You’re too stupid to recognize it.”

I leaned toward her, close enough that she pressed back harder against the glass.

“One week,” I said. “That’s what we have. If you haven’t learned to behave by then – I promise you, I will make sure you suffer for it long before Griffin gets his chance.”

She said nothing.

She just cried, quietly, her face turned toward the window.

I sat back.

The rage was still there, hot and restless under my skin, with nowhere to go.

I cracked the window open. Cold air rushed in, cutting through the stale warmth of the car.

Amelia.

The thought arrived the way it always did – sudden, sharp, trailing something that felt like poison.

Every piece of this. Every humiliation, every compromise, every moment of swallowing my pride and smiling through it – it all traced back to her.

If she had never come back, none of this would have happened.

I would still have the Stone family's support. I would still have Rhys. I would still have a position worth protecting.

Instead I was sitting in the back of a car threatening a crying girl because Griffin Drake needed a replacement toy.

I hate her.

The thought settled in my chest like a stone.

I hate her, and one day-

My eyes drifted to the window.

And stopped.

Amelia was walking out of a building across the street.

Not the hospital. Not the Stone River Pack House.

A residential tower. High-end, private, the kind of building that didn't have its name displayed anywhere visible.

I sat up straighter.

And then I saw who was with her.

Not Theodore.

Not Marcus, not Jaxon, not any of the Stone family.

A man. Dark hair. Tall. The kind of face that photographed well from any angle.

I recognized him in an instant.

Jasper Calder.

One of Starlight Entertainment's most talked-about artists. A writer turned public figure, currently on every trending list in the territory.

They were walking side by side, close, coming out of the same building.

"Stop the car," I said.

My driver pulled over without a word.

I already had my phone out.

I raised it to the window and pressed the shutter once, twice, five times, ten.

Frame after frame. Amelia and Jasper, side by side, stepping out of a private residential building together.

I lowered the phone and looked at the photos.

There it was.

Theodore's fiancée, walking out of a private apartment building with another man. Alone. No entourage, no explanation.

The smile that spread across my face was the first real one I'd felt all day.

So that's how it is.

Theodore was careful, controlled, impossible to manipulate directly. He trusted Amelia in a way that had made every attempt to wedge between them fail.

But this?

This was something else entirely.

I scrolled through the photos slowly, savoring each one.

I already knew which outlets would pay the most for something like this. The ones that didn't ask questions. The ones that ran the story first and printed the corrections never.

The hashtag formed in my mind without effort.

#AmeliaStoneAndJasperCalder.

Clean. Simple. Devastating.

By the time Theodore saw it, the damage would already be done.