

Second chance 781

Chapter 781:

Gregg attempted to salvage a shred of dignity, stammering that they didn't know, claiming Cailin's identity had been hidden from them.

Silas Sinclair laughed harshly from behind his father. "Ignorance is not an excuse for cruelty, Holloway. It's just proof of your incompetence."

Sebastian struck his cane against the floor again, silencing the room. He leaned in close to Gregg, his voice dropping to a terrifying whisper.

"You will never speak to my granddaughter again. You will never look at her. You will never breathe the same air as her."

He stood tall, addressing the entire room, his declaration echoing like a decree from a king.

"Cailin Sinclair is under the absolute protection of this dynasty. Any slight against her, any whisper, any hostile action..."

Sebastian paused, his gaze sweeping over the Wall Street executives, ensuring they understood the financial gravity of his next words.

“...will be considered an act of war against the Sinclair global empire. And I will salt the earth of anyone who stands against us.”

A collective shiver ran through the ballroom. The threat was not an empty boast. Everyone knew Sebastian had the capital to ruin any company in the room.

Hilliard had remained silent during the exchange. He finally pushed his wheelchair forward, his hand instinctively hovering over his bandaged chest as he moved out of his father’s shadow.

Sullivan and Spencer Sinclair immediately tensed, stepping in front of Cailin to block Hilliard’s path. They viewed him as the primary source of her past pain.

Hilliard stopped, respecting the physical boundary they set. His eyes locked solely on Cailin, ignoring the hostile stares of her uncles.

Gregg glared at his son, hissing under his breath, demanding Hilliard do something — to use his past marriage to salvage the situation.

Hilliard looked at his father with an expression of profound, exhausted disgust, realizing Gregg still only saw Cailin as a corporate asset.

“You still don’t get it, do you?” Hilliard said to Gregg, his voice devoid of anger, replaced by a chilling clarity.

“She isn’t a prize to be won or a merger to be negotiated. And she certainly isn’t a shield to protect your pathetic ego.”

Gregg’s face contorted in fury as he realized his son was publicly turning against him in front of the most powerful people in New York.

Hilliard turned his attention back to Sebastian and bowed his head slightly — a gesture of genuine respect he had never shown another man.

“Mr. Sinclair,” Hilliard said, his voice steady despite the emotional wreckage inside him. “Your threat is unnecessary regarding me.”

Sebastian narrowed his eyes, assessing the broken but resolute man standing before him, waiting for the catch.

Hilliard looked past the wall of Sinclair men. His gaze found Cailin’s eyes. He conveyed a depth of remorse that words could barely capture.

He took a deep breath, preparing to make a public declaration that would shatter the Holloway dynasty from the inside out.

The flashing cameras of the press corps outside the doors seemed to pause. They sensed the monumental weight of the moment unfolding between Hilliard and the Sinclairs.

Chapter 782:

Hilliard kept his eyes locked on Cailin, ignoring the furious, sputtering protests of his father, Gregg, echoing behind him.

“For five years, I thought I was protecting my empire,” Hilliard said, his voice carrying a raw, unvarnished vulnerability that shocked the room.

“But in my arrogance, I allowed the only thing of true value in my life to be driven away, abused, and discarded.” He didn’t look at Gregg, but the implication was clear.

Sebastian Sinclair watched Hilliard closely. His grip on his cane loosened slightly. He recognized a man who had been completely broken by his own hubris.

Hilliard took a slow, agonizing breath. “You don’t need my protection, Cailin. You never did. You survived me, and you survived this family.”

Cailin’s stoic expression wavered for a fraction of a second. The raw honesty in Hilliard’s voice pierced through her defenses more effectively than any threat.

“And now,” Hilliard continued, gesturing to the formidable Sinclair family surrounding her, “you have the backing you always deserved.”

Gregg stepped forward and grabbed Hilliard’s arm, hissing that Hilliard was embarrassing the family and needed to stop this pathetic display.

Hilliard violently shook off Gregg's hand. The physical rejection mirrored his absolute emotional detachment from his father.

"The Holloway family is an embarrassment, Gregg," Hilliard stated loudly, ensuring the press near the doors caught every word.

"It's a toxic, rotting empire built on arrogance, and I will no longer be the architect of its cruelty."

Jeraldine let out a horrified sob, realizing her son was publicly resigning from the dynasty she had sacrificed everything to maintain.

Hilliard turned back to Cailin. The billionaire CEO persona was completely stripped away. He was left as only a man drowning in regret.

"I am not stepping back because I'm intimidated by the Sinclair wealth," Hilliard said, his eyes burning with intense, tragic sincerity.

"I'm stepping back because, looking at you now, standing in your truth..."

He paused. The silence in the ballroom was so profound you could hear a pin drop. The New York elite hung on his every word.

“...it is I who am unworthy of you.” The confession dropped like a guillotine blade, severing the final thread of his pride.

A collective gasp rippled through the crowd. The most ruthless corporate predator in New York had just publicly surrendered his ego to the woman he wronged.

Cailin stared at him. She looked from her grandfather’s strong, protective hand on her shoulder to the broken man wheeling himself away. The warmth of her newfound family was real, a safe harbor she never thought she’d reach. But looking at the wreckage of her past, the cheers of her soul remained silent. There was only a profound emptiness where the blinding fire of revenge used to be. Her heart executed a painful, complicated rhythm.

Sebastian Sinclair nodded slowly, offering a silent, begrudging respect for a man willing to publicly immolate his own ego.

Hilliard didn’t wait for a response. He knew he hadn’t earned one. He turned his wheelchair around, his posture straight but his spirit heavy.

Chapter 783:

Without a backward glance at his horrified parents or the empire he had built, Hilliard began to roll toward the exit of the ballroom.

The crowd parted for him — not out of fear this time, but out of a strange, solemn reverence for a man walking to his own execution.

Gregg screamed after him, his voice cracking with rage, declaring that if Hilliard walked out that door, he would be disinherited and left with nothing.

Hilliard didn't even break his stride. He raised a hand dismissively — a silent confirmation that he accepted the terms of his exile.

The heavy brass doors opened for him. He disappeared into the flashing lights of the press, leaving the Holloway dynasty headless and fractured.

Cailin watched the doors close. The heavy ruby necklace felt cold against her palm. She realized that an entire era of her life had just violently ended.

Catherine Sinclair gently touched Cailin's arm, pulling her attention away from the doors and back to the warmth of her new family.

Sebastian Sinclair placed a comforting hand on Cailin's shoulder. He stood tall beside his granddaughter amidst the ruins of the Holloway gala, pulling her close into the protective circle of the Sinclair family, preparing to lead her away and introduce her to her true empire.

The heavy brass doors swung shut behind Hilliard, muffling the chaotic symphony of camera shutters and reporters' shouts.

Inside the Plaza ballroom, the air was thick enough to choke on.

Before Sebastian could usher Cailin toward the exit, Gregg Holloway's chest heaved, his face a mask of purple rage. He couldn't process it. His son, the heir to a multi-billion-dollar empire, had just thrown it all away. For a woman.

He spun around, his eyes locking onto Cailin with a murderous intensity.

"You," he spat, the word dripping with venom.

He stormed toward her, his heavy footsteps echoing on the marble floor. He broke through the loose formation of Sinclair security, stopping just short of the human wall her family had formed around her.

"You're a monster," Gregg hissed, his voice raw and shaking. He pointed a trembling finger at her face. "He sacrificed everything for you, and you stand there with a heart of stone. No gratitude. Nothing."

Cailin stood beside Sebastian, her expression utterly flat. It was like watching a rabid animal flinging itself against the bars of a cage. She had no intention of defending herself against a man who had lost all reason.

Jeraldine Holloway, her face streaked with ruined mascara, rushed to her husband's side. She clutched his arm, her voice low and strained, an urgent plea cutting through his rage. "Gregg, please. Not here. Not like this." She tried to pull him back a step, her eyes darting between him and the stony-faced Sinclairs. "We need to think before we make this worse."

The remaining Wall Street executives exchanged uneasy glances. They were witnessing the complete and utter implosion of a dynasty, a spectacle more riveting than any market crash. They stayed silent, but their eyes drank in every detail of the drama.

Chapter 784:

Sebastian Sinclair's grip on his silver-tipped cane tightened, the knuckles of his hand turning white. He was about to verbally flay the man for his insolence, but a smooth voice cut through the tension from behind him.

Silas Sinclair glided forward from the edge of the family circle. He held a half-empty glass of champagne, a cold, mocking smile playing on his lips. He moved with a lazy grace that was more threatening than any overt display of aggression.

He positioned himself slightly in front of Cailin, a casual, elegant shield.

He looked Gregg up and down, his gaze dripping with contempt.

"Sacrifice?" Silas drawled, taking a slow sip of his champagne. "Feelings? I'm fascinated to hear the Holloway family lecture anyone on those topics."

The sheer disdain in his tone was a slap in the face.

Gregg's rage flared. "He just gave up his entire future for her! He walked away from the empire! What greater love is there than that?" he roared, his voice cracking.

Silas let out a short, sharp laugh, a sound completely devoid of humor.

“An excellent question,” he said, setting his champagne glass down on a passing waiter’s tray.

He reached into the inner pocket of his bespoke suit and pulled out his phone. The screen glowed in the dim ballroom.

“Let’s talk about love and sacrifice, shall we?”

He tapped the screen, pulling up an encrypted file. It was an old, archived schedule, but the details were perfectly preserved. He angled the phone so the guests closest to him could see the official Holloway letterhead.

“This,” Silas announced, his voice ringing with theatrical clarity, “is Hilliard Holloway’s private schedule from three years ago. Specifically, the day of Cailin’s mother’s funeral.”

Cailin’s breath hitched.

The words hit her like a phantom limb aching. The memory, a cold, suffocating weight, pressed down on her chest. Her fingers, hanging loose at her side, curled into a tight fist, her nails digging into her palm.

“Let me read you the itinerary,” Silas said, his voice laced with cruel precision. “Morning: board meeting. Noon: power lunch with investors.”

He paused, letting the mundane details hang in the air before delivering the killing blow.

“Evening: attend the annual English Family Charity Gala. Attire: black tie. Plus one: Ms. Charla English.”

He looked up from the phone, his eyes locking onto Gregg’s.

“So, while my cousin was standing alone in the freezing rain, burying her mother,” Silas’s voice dropped to a venomous whisper, “Hilliard Holloway was in a custom tuxedo, smiling for cameras with his arm around another woman.”

A collective, horrified gasp sucked the air out of the room.

It wasn’t just an affair. It was a level of cold-blooded cruelty that even the most cynical predators on Wall Street found shocking.

Gregg’s face went from purple to a pasty, bloodless white. He opened his mouth, then closed it. There was nothing to say. It was a well-documented society event. The photos had been in every gossip column for weeks.

Chapter 785:

Jeraldine’s attempts to calm her husband ceased abruptly. A wave of hot, suffocating shame washed over her. She dropped her head, unable to meet anyone’s eyes. It was she who had insisted Hilliard attend, to show a united front with the English family, to secure the merger. She had personally sent him to his mistress’s side on the day his wife buried her mother.

The air around Sebastian Sinclair turned glacial. The raw, unrestrained killing intent rolling off him made the guests closest to him physically recoil, taking a step back.

He turned his head, his hawkish gaze falling on Cailin. The fury in his eyes was eclipsed by a wave of profound, gut-wrenching pain for the girl who had endured this alone.

“That boy,” Sebastian’s voice was a low, dangerous rumble, a promise of annihilation, “is rotten to the bone. He isn’t worthy to clean the dirt from a Sinclair’s shoes.”

Cailin took a deep, steadying breath. The wave of nausea passed. She had relived that day in her nightmares a thousand times. Hearing it spoken aloud now, in this room, didn’t break her. It freed her.

She met Gregg’s horrified gaze.

“Hilliard’s fate is his own making,” she said, her voice clear and cold as a winter morning. “I never asked him to give up anything. He’s simply running from the consequences of his own sins.”

Gregg swayed on his feet. He had lost. He had lost his son, his moral high ground, and the respect of his entire world in the span of thirty minutes. He looked old, pathetic, and utterly defeated under the weight of a hundred judgmental stares.

Silas pocketed his phone.

“You should probably go after him,” he suggested with a final, dismissive wave of his hand. “Wouldn’t want the Holloway Group to file for bankruptcy protection before the market opens tomorrow.”

Sebastian ignored the Holloways completely now, as if they were nothing more than furniture. He turned to Cailin, his expression softening, and gently took her hand.

“Let’s go home,” he said softly.

The Sinclair security team moved as one. They formed a human wedge, parting the stunned crowd with quiet, irresistible force, carving a wide, clear path to the ballroom doors.

As Cailin walked past Gregg and Jeraldine, she didn’t grant them a single glance. They had ceased to exist for her.

The Sinclair family swept out of the ballroom, a silent, powerful tide.

In their wake, the whispers began. The sharks of Wall Street started to circle, smelling the blood in the water. The Holloway empire was vulnerable.

Gregg collapsed into a nearby chair, the last of his strength gone. He buried his face in his hands, the sound of his own ragged breathing loud in his ears. He had not only lost an heir. He had made an enemy of the most powerful family in New York.

Cailin followed her grandfather down the long, opulent corridor, the thick carpet swallowing the sound of their footsteps. With every step, she felt a three-year-old shackle crumbling to dust around her heart. She was finally walking toward a new life.

Cailin's hand rested lightly on Sebastian's arm as they moved through the gilded lobby of The Plaza. The Sinclair security detail formed a seamless, moving perimeter around them, their presence a silent testament to untouchable power.

Chapter 786:

Through the grand glass doors, a war of light was being waged.

The entrance was a chaotic sea of flashing cameras. Dozens of reporters had descended upon Hilliard the moment his wheelchair emerged outside, trapping him at the base of the hotel's stone steps.

"Mr. Holloway! Is it true you've been forced out by the Sinclairs?"

"Was renouncing your inheritance a condition of their investment?"

Microphones were shoved aggressively toward his face.

Hilliard sat rigidly in his motorized medical wheelchair at the bottom of the steps. With his right arm completely immobilized in a thick plaster cast and his left shoulder shattered, he was entirely unable to

move his hands. His hair was slightly disheveled, his suit jacket hanging loosely on his frame. The aura of the untouchable CEO was gone, replaced by a raw, unnerving stillness. His eyes, however, were not on the reporters. They were fixed on the approaching figures in the lobby.

He saw her. Cailin.

A desperate energy surged through him. He jammed his chin against the chair's specialized joystick, propelling the heavy machine aggressively forward and forcing a reporter to jump aside as he tried to move toward the doors, toward her.

Instantly, two of Sebastian's guards, men built like NFL linebackers, moved to the front. They formed an immovable human wall on the stairs above him, blocking Hilliard's path. He was ten feet away, but it might as well have been a mile.

Gregg and Jeraldine stumbled out of the ballroom, their faces pale with panic. "Hilliard!" Gregg shouted from the top of the steps, seeing his son surrounded. He frantically waved for the Holloway security team to intervene, to clear a path.

Hilliard ignored his father's call completely. His gaze was locked on Cailin, who had now stopped just inside the doors, watching the scene unfold with detached curiosity.

He raised his voice, projecting it over the media frenzy, aiming it at every camera, every microphone, every recording device.

"Five years ago," he began, his voice raspy but clear, "I was a coward. A bastard. I made a mistake for which there is no forgiveness."

A wave of shocked gasps rippled through the press corps. Pens scribbled furiously. Recorders were held higher. This was not a denial. This was a confession.

Hilliard's eyes, filled with a terrible, burning agony, met Cailin's cold, indifferent ones.

"There has only ever been one woman for me," he declared, his voice ringing with the conviction of a man on the gallows. "Cailin Morton was, is, and always will be my wife."

"Hilliard, shut your mouth!" Gregg shrieked from the top of the steps, his face contorted in horror. "Don't bring any more shame on this family!"

Hilliard didn't even flinch. He was beyond shame. He was in a hell of his own making.

Then he dropped the bomb that silenced the entire street.

"I am willing to renounce my name."

He looked past the guards, past the reporters, directly at Sebastian Sinclair. His tone, once that of a king, was now that of a beggar.

Chapter 787:

“If it means I can stay by her side... I will join the Sinclair family. I will take her name.”

The concept was so alien, so utterly humiliating in the world of old money and patriarchal dynasties, that it broke the reporters’ brains. They stared, mouths agape, forgetting to ask questions. The Wall Street tycoons who had followed the spectacle to the lobby looked at each other in stunned disbelief. A Holloway, offering to become a Sinclair? It was the ultimate surrender.

Jeraldine let out a thin, piercing scream. The thought of her son, the Holloway heir, becoming an accessory to another man’s dynasty was too much. Her legs gave out, and she collapsed into the arms of a nearby assistant.

“Traitor!” Gregg bellowed, clutching his chest as if staving off a heart attack. “You’re no son of mine! I’ll have you disowned! I’ll print it in every paper in the country!”

Hilliard was oblivious to his parents’ meltdown. His entire world had narrowed to the woman standing on the other side of the glass. He was a prisoner awaiting his sentence, and she was his judge, jury, and executioner. He searched her face, praying for a flicker of pity, of understanding, of anything.

He found nothing.

Cailin stood, framed by the doorway, looking down at him from her elevated position. There was no emotion in her eyes. Not pity, not satisfaction. Only a profound, bone-deep weariness.

She spoke, her voice not loud, but it cut through the air with the chilling finality of a blade.

“A love that arrives late,” she said, each word a perfectly polished stone of contempt, “is cheaper than grass.”

She took a small, deliberate step back.

“You could offer me the world, Hilliard, and I wouldn’t bother to look back. You’re not worthy.”

The words struck him with the force of a physical blow. His battered frame shuddered violently against his wheelchair, and the color drained from his face, leaving it a waxy, pale mask of despair. He had offered his name, his pride, his entire identity. And she had trampled it into the dirt without a second thought.

Sebastian Sinclair watched his granddaughter’s cold execution with a grimly satisfied expression. He grunted, a sound of approval, and motioned for his guards. “Clear a path.”

The security team moved, pushing reporters aside to create a channel down the steps to the waiting fleet of black Rolls-Royces.

Hilliard’s body moved on pure instinct. As she walked past him toward the driveway, he frantically engaged his chin controls to chase her, but two Sinclair guards immediately intercepted his wheelchair. They grabbed the heavy frame and shoved it back hard. Unable to lift his useless arms to brace himself, he was thrown violently against his seat, his chest exploding in a fresh wave of pain.

Cailin was just a few feet from the open door of the lead car.

Suddenly, a low, synchronized hum filled the air, growing rapidly in volume. It came from the direction of Central Park.

Every head, including Hilliard's, instinctively turned toward the sound.

Chapter 788:

Hundreds of drones, their LED lights blinking in a riot of color, ascended into the night sky in a perfect, geometric formation.

The reporters, smelling a new, even bigger story, swung their cameras upward, away from the broken man in the wheelchair.

The drones shifted with breathtaking speed, their lights coalescing against the dark canvas of the sky. They spelled out a message, massive and brilliant, illuminating the entire length of Fifth Avenue.

The glowing letters were stark and clear:

CAILIN, LOOK DOWN.

Cailin, who had been about to step into the car, froze. Her hand paused on the door handle. She turned, her brow furrowed in confusion, and followed the silent command of the sky.

Her gaze fell to the wide, empty driveway in front of the hotel entrance.

The drone-spun message hung in the sky, a glittering, impossible command. The traffic on Fifth Avenue had slowed to a crawl as drivers and pedestrians stared, mesmerized by the spectacle.

A soft, distinct vibration came from inside Cailin's evening bag.

She pulled her gaze from the sky and retrieved the sleek, encrypted black phone Kegan had given her.

The screen was lit with a single, simple message.

I'm downstairs. Walk toward the fountain.

A jolt of surprise, sharp and unexpected, shot through her. Kegan. Here. In New York. She knew he was prone to grand, insane gestures, but this... this was a declaration of war on a public stage.

She leaned in and whispered a few words into Sebastian's ear. "A friend is here. I need to handle something."

Sebastian's eyes flickered from Cailin's face to the drone display in the sky. A flicker of suspicion, of patriarchal caution, crossed his features. But he saw the resolve in his granddaughter's eyes. He gave a curt nod.

"Take two men," he commanded, his voice low. "Keep your distance, but keep her in sight."

Cailin handed her wrap to her aunt Catherine and, with a quiet nod of thanks, began to walk. She descended the hotel steps, her heels clicking softly on the stone, and moved toward the grand Pulitzer Fountain that dominated the center of the plaza.

Hilliard saw the shift in her direction instantly. His senses, honed by years of corporate warfare, screamed that he was losing her. Not just for the night, but forever.

A primal, animalistic roar tore from his throat. He was a cornered beast. He jammed the joystick of his motorized wheelchair forward, the machine jolting violently as he plowed through the stunned reporters, his only thought to intercept her, to stop her.

He recognized the style of the drone show. The sheer, unapologetic arrogance of it. It had Kegan Aguirre's fingerprints all over it. That madman. That arms dealer.

Just as Hilliard reached the edge of the plaza, his wheelchair coming to a jarring halt at the lip of the stone steps, a figure blocked his path.

Silas Sinclair.

He had moved with a silent, fluid grace, positioning himself perfectly. He stood with one hand casually tucked into the pocket of his trousers, the other hanging loose at his side.

Chapter 789:

"She's a free woman, Holloway," Silas said, his voice deceptively mild. "You have no right to interfere."

Hilliard's eyes were bloodshot, two burning coals of desperation and rage. "Get out of my way, Sinclair," he snarled, his voice a low growl. "You don't know who he is. He's dangerous. A goddamn gunrunner. She'll be in danger."

A cruel, mocking smile touched Silas's lips. "Really? Because from where I'm standing, the most dangerous man in Cailin's life has always been you."

The two men were locked in a standoff at the top of the stairs, a tableau of old power versus new money, of family versus a broken obsession. The reporters, sensing a fresh angle to the story, swarmed again, their flashes illuminating the tense confrontation.

Meanwhile, back at the hotel entrance, Gregg Holloway, having just seen his wife Jeraldine helped into a car, was struck by a sudden, cold calculation.

He grabbed the arm of his head of security.

“Find the children,” he hissed, his voice a venomous whisper, his face a mask of grim determination. “I want those three kids. Now.”

Hilliard was a lost cause. A write-off. But the bloodline... the bloodline was an asset. Three children with Holloway blood were the ultimate bargaining chip against the Sinclairs. He would not leave this battle empty-handed.

The security chief nodded grimly and dispatched a team of plain-clothed operatives, who melted away into the crowds and side entrances of the hotel, beginning their silent, predatory hunt.

Out in the plaza, Cailin walked. The cool night air felt good against her flushed cheeks. The chaotic energy of the past few hours was being replaced by a strange, electric sense of anticipation. She thought of the past five years in Europe — of Kegan, the phantom guardian who had appeared out of nowhere, solving problems with quiet, terrifying efficiency, protecting her and the children from the shadows that nipped at their heels.

Hilliard was still struggling in his chair, a lion caught in a net. He could see her back, straight and resolute, as she walked away from him. A panic unlike any he had ever known seized him. It wasn't the fear of losing a company or a deal. It was the visceral, soul-deep terror of watching the woman he loved walk willingly into the arms of another man, a man who could replace him.

“CAILIN!” he yelled, his voice raw with a despair that echoed across the wide, open space.

Her stride faltered for a single, infinitesimal moment.

But she did not turn.

She squared her shoulders and kept walking.

Silas watched Hilliard's desperate plea fail, a look of immense satisfaction on his face. He casually adjusted his cufflinks and gave a subtle hand signal to the Sinclair guards, who solidified their human wall around the broken man.

Chapter 790:

As Cailin approached the fountain, a strange thing happened. The ambient lights around the plaza suddenly dimmed. The crowd of tourists and onlookers, who had been chattering and taking photos, went silent. As if on some unseen cue, they parted, moving to the sides like the Red Sea, creating a wide, empty corridor.

A path, paved with a thick carpet of fresh white rose petals, materialized at her feet. It stretched from where she stood all the way to the base of the magnificent fountain.

The air, once smelling of city exhaust and street food, was now filled with the intoxicating scent of roses and something else — the crisp, celebratory aroma of expensive champagne.

Cailin stepped onto the petal-strewn path. Her heart, which had been a steady, controlled drum, began to beat a frantic, uncontrolled rhythm against her ribs.

She had a sinking, thrilling feeling she knew what was about to happen.

At the end of the path, the cascading water of the fountain seemed to part. A single, powerful spotlight cut through the darkness.

From the shadows behind the water, a tall, elegant figure emerged, stepping into the light.

The sound of the fountain's cascading water was a gentle roar in the suddenly silent plaza. The spotlight was a clean, cold circle of white, and in its center stood Kegan Aguirre.

He wore a black, custom-tailored tuxedo, the kind that cost more than most people's cars. His dark hair was swept back from his forehead, and the sharp, aristocratic lines of his face were thrown into stark relief by the harsh light. He looked less like a man and more like a dangerous, beautiful myth. A fallen angel, perhaps. Or a king.

He wasn't flanked by his usual army of black-suited guards. He stood alone at the end of the path of roses, his dark, intense eyes fixed solely on Cailin as she walked toward him.

She stopped a few feet away, the scent of roses and champagne overwhelming her senses. She looked at this man, this enigma who had crossed an ocean for her, who had orchestrated this insane, breathtaking spectacle, and felt a warmth spread through her chest, a stinging heat behind her eyes.

The crowd, held back by an invisible line, let out a collective, hushed sigh. The women in the audience stared, captivated by the raw, predatory charisma radiating from the man in the spotlight.

Kegan closed the distance between them. He took her right hand, his touch surprisingly gentle, and lifted it to his lips, pressing a soft, reverent kiss to the back of her hand, his eyes never leaving hers.

“I told you,” he murmured, his voice a low, magnetic rumble that vibrated through her skin. “When you were done taking out the trash, I would come for you.”

Cailin’s heart skipped a beat. She knew he was a man of his word, a madman who followed his own code, but she never imagined this. Not here. Not in front of the world.

Kegan released her hand and took a half-step back.

Then, under the watchful gaze of a thousand eyes and a hundred cameras, he lowered himself with a fluid, practiced grace.

He went down on one knee.

The plaza erupted.