

Second chance 801

Chapter 801:

"A key," Cailin said. "An old, ornate antique key. And a ruby bracelet. She told me they belonged together."

Sebastian's posture went rigid. He knew, with the certainty of a man who had searched for two decades, that this was it. The missing piece.

"That key, Cailin," he said, his voice low and urgent, "is the answer. You must get it back here. To New York. Immediately. The Sinclair intelligence network will find the lock it belongs to."

Cailin met her grandfather's gaze and nodded, her own resolve hardening. Her mother's death hadn't been a simple illness. It was the final chapter of a story that began with her flight from this very house. A story that involved a key, a secret, and an enemy so terrifying it had forced a Sinclair to live and die in the shadows.

In the quiet, firelit study, a new pact was forged. Not of money or power, but of blood and vengeance.

Together, they would uncover the truth. And they would make whoever was responsible pay.

The heavy silence in the study was thick with the ghosts of the past. Sebastian walked over to a crystal decanter on a mahogany sideboard and poured two glasses of amber liquid. The scent of aged whiskey filled the air.

He handed one glass to Cailin.

“Now,” he said, his voice shifting from the grief of the past to the pragmatism of the present. “We need to talk about Kegan Aguirre.”

He sat down in a large leather armchair opposite her, his gaze sharp and analytical.

“I don’t need to tell you that the Aguirre family is poison,” he stated bluntly. “Their alliance with the Vances is a web of political corruption and violence. To get caught in it is to invite assassins to your door.”

He leaned forward, his eyes boring into hers. “So you will tell me the truth, granddaughter. What is this man to you?”

Cailin stared into her glass, watching the light fracture through the whiskey. She didn’t hesitate.

“He isn’t the man I love,” she said, her voice clear and steady. She owed her grandfather the unvarnished truth.

“For five years, he was my guardian. My protector. When I was alone, pregnant, and running for my life, he was the only person in the world who offered me a hand. He gave me the resources to build my own empire, and he kept my children safe. I owe him a debt I can never repay.”

She took a small sip of the whiskey, the burn a welcome distraction.

“Tonight,” she admitted, meeting his gaze without flinching, “I was overwhelmed. His proposal... it felt like an answer. A way to finally, definitively slam the door on Hilliard and force myself to move on. It was a moment of weakness. Of wanting an easy solution where none exists.”

Sebastian listened, his expression unreadable. When she finished, he gave a slow, satisfied nod. He had been afraid she was blinded by romance, a fool for a grand gesture. But she wasn’t. She was a Sinclair. Clear-eyed and strategic, even in her pain.

Chapter 802:

“Good,” he said. “Gratitude is a noble emotion. But it is not a foundation for a marriage. The Sinclair family will repay your debt to Mr. Aguirre. In full. But you will not trade your name or your children’s safety for it.”

Cailin drank the rest of the whiskey in one swallow. The fire in her throat was clarifying.

“My only priority now is protecting my children,” she stated, her voice hard as steel. “And finding out who hunted my mother. Men aren’t a part of that equation.”

They finished their conversation, and Cailin left the study. She walked down the quiet, carpeted hallway to the children’s wing, the vast silence of the mansion a comforting blanket. She slipped into their room and curled up in an armchair, watching them sleep, finally allowing herself a moment of peace.

The scene dissolved and reformed in the dim, smoky recesses of a high-end speakeasy in downtown Manhattan.

In the darkest corner of the bar, Hilliard Holloway was slumped in a leather booth. The table in front of him was a graveyard of empty bottles. At least eight of them.

His custom-made shirt was rumpled and stained, his tie pulled loose. A rough, dark stubble was already shadowing his jaw. The polished, powerful CEO was gone, replaced by a ghost haunting a barstool.

He stared with hollow eyes as the bartender polished a glass, his mind a looping, torturous replay of Cailin's hand, the pink diamond sliding onto her finger, the triumphant bloom of the fireworks.

The pain was a physical thing, a tight, crushing band around his chest that made it impossible to breathe. He could only pour more alcohol down his throat, chasing a numbness that never came.

"Well, well. Look what the cat dragged in."

The voice was light, mocking, and dripping with malice.

Hilliard looked up slowly.

Silas Sinclair, dressed in an obnoxious, wine-red suit, slid into the seat opposite him. He surveyed the wreckage on the table and Hilliard's disheveled state.

“Tsk, tsk,” Silas clicked his tongue. “To think you used to run half this city. Now you look like something my dog would refuse to eat.”

Hilliard’s bloodshot eyes narrowed into slits. “Get out, Sinclair,” he growled, his voice a raw, gravelly rasp. “This doesn’t concern you.”

“Oh, but it does,” Silas said with a cheerful, predatory grin. He reached into his breast pocket. “I came to deliver a message. Consider it a courtesy — one you don’t deserve.”

He set a folded card on the table and slid it across with two fingers, the way one might push a crumb toward a pigeon.

Hilliard’s eyes dropped to it. He didn’t move.

“She asked me to make sure you received it personally,” Silas said, his smile sharpening. “No lawyers. No intermediaries. She wanted you to hear it from someone who would enjoy saying it.”

Hilliard unfolded the card with a hand that wasn’t entirely steady. The handwriting inside was Cailin’s — precise, unhurried, and utterly without heat. Not the scrawl of rage. The calm script of finality.

A single line.

“We are done. Do not look for me. Do not look for them. — C.”

Chapter 803:

No salutation. No signature beyond that one clipped initial. As though his name wasn’t worth the ink.

Below the words, there was nothing else. No ring. No token. No theatrical gesture. Just the erasure of him, reduced to six words on a card his cousin had apparently been trusted to deliver like a bill overdue for collection.

Hilliard stared at the card. Every word was a fresh pour of salt into his gaping wounds.

The absence of the ring — that pathetic, hollow symbol he had once forced onto her finger — was somehow worse than if she had thrown it back in his face. She had discarded the memory of it years ago. And now she had discarded him with the same indifference. Not even worth a scene. Not even worth her anger.

A tidal wave of rage, shame, and a grief so profound it felt like suffocation washed over him.

With a guttural roar, Hilliard swept his arm across the table.

Glass exploded. Bottles shattered against the floor, spraying alcohol and shards in every direction.

Silas leaned back effortlessly, avoiding the flying debris without soiling his expensive suit. He stood up, looking down at the broken man weeping amid the broken glass.

He adjusted his cuffs.

“Don’t show your face near her again, Holloway,” Silas said, his voice suddenly devoid of all mockery, replaced by a cold, flat finality. “As far as she’s concerned, you’re already dead.”

He turned and walked out of the bar, leaving Hilliard alone in his self-made hell.

The air in the corner of the Manhattan speakeasy was thick with the stench of spilled liquor and shattered pride. Glass crunched under the bartender’s shoes as he cautiously began to clean up the mess.

Hilliard didn’t move. He sat in the booth, a statue carved from ruin, surrounded by the debris of his own breakdown.

His gaze was fixed, unblinking, on the single object that had survived the carnage.

The cheap silver ring. It lay on the dark wood of the table, catching a faint glimmer of light, a tiny, mocking star in his personal darkness.

Slowly, his hand shaking, he reached for it. This time, he didn't hesitate. His fingers closed around the cool metal, and he squeezed.

He squeezed until the edges of the simple band dug deep into his palm, a sharp, grounding pain. He squeezed until he felt something warm and wet trickle between his fingers. Blood.

The physical agony was a strange kind of relief. It cut through the fog of alcohol and despair, bringing a sliver of sick, twisted clarity. His empire, his name, his pride — it was all meaningless. It had brought him nothing but this. Emptiness.

He brought his clenched, bleeding fist to his lips and pressed the cold metal against them. He closed his eyes. In the silent, roaring chaos of his mind, a new vow was forged. A vow not of love, but of obsession.

He would get her back. Or he would drag them both to hell trying.

Chapter 804:

The scene shifted. Morning sunlight, clean and golden, streamed through the floor-to-ceiling windows of a sprawling bedroom in the Sinclair estate.

Cailin, dressed in a soft silk robe, sat on the edge of a massive bed. On the floor, Aron, Davy, and Elia were surrounded by a mountain of new toys, a king's ransom of playthings delivered overnight.

Elia, clutching a limited-edition doll that was probably worth more than Cailin's first car, crawled onto her mother's lap.

“Are we going to live in this castle forever, Mommy?” she asked, her big eyes wide with wonder.

Cailin smiled, a real, gentle smile, and ran her fingers through her daughter’s soft curls. “Yes, sweetie. We’re going to live here. It’s safe here. No one can bother us anymore.”

Davy, who was meticulously assembling a complex, military-grade drone model, didn’t look up. “Does that mean that mean man, Mr. Holloway, won’t come find us?”

Cailin’s smile tightened for a fraction of a second. The mention of his name was still a splinter under her skin. “Yes, Davy,” she said, her voice soft but firm. “That man is gone from our lives. Forever.”

Aron, who had been silently engrossed in a new, high-spec tablet, set it aside. He looked up, and his eyes — so unnervingly like Hilliard’s, yet deeper, more analytical — met hers.

“The man who made the fireworks last night,” Aron said, his tone far too calm for a child his age. “Uncle Kegan. Is he going to be our new dad?”

The question caught Cailin off guard. She hadn’t realized they had understood the significance of the proposal.

She gathered all three of them close, pulling them onto the bed with her.

“Uncle Kegan is a very good friend,” she said carefully, choosing her words with precision. “He helped us a lot. But marriage is a very big decision. I haven’t decided anything yet.”

She looked at their three small, expectant faces. “How would you feel if he was?”

Elia shrugged. “He’s nice. He buys us cool stuff.”

Davy was more pragmatic. “I don’t care who it is, as long as they can protect you.”

But Aron, her quiet, observant Aron, frowned. He hesitated, chewing on his lower lip.

“What is it, sweetie?” Cailin prompted gently.

“In Europe,” Aron began slowly, “at the villa. I was playing with the security system mainframe... and I saw something.”

Cailin’s entire body went on high alert.

“Uncle Kegan’s men,” Aron continued, “they were in his study. They were shredding and burning files. Lots of them. But I saw the logo on one of the folders before they threw it in the fire.”

“What was the logo?” Cailin asked, her voice tight.

“A snake,” Aron said. “A snake eating its own tail.”

Cailin’s blood ran cold. The Ouroboros.

“And,” Aron added, his voice dropping to a conspiratorial whisper, “I had the audio feed on. I heard them arguing. They were scared. They mentioned a name. They said a woman named ‘Vance’ was a psycho and that Kegan was crazy for provoking her.”

Vance.

Chapter 805:

The name hit Cailin like a punch to the gut. The name her grandfather had spoken in the car. Kegan’s fiancée.

The danger wasn’t a future possibility. It was a present reality. It had been lurking in the shadows all along, even in Europe. Kegan had hidden the extent of the threat from her.

A crack formed in the foundation of her trust in him.

She forced a calm smile, ruffling Aron's hair. "You did a very good job, my little spy. That's our secret, okay? Don't tell anyone."

He nodded seriously.

Cailin stood up and walked to the window, her mind racing. She looked out at the peaceful, manicured lawns of the estate, but she didn't see them. She saw threats. She saw a snake eating its own tail.

She couldn't afford to be passive. She couldn't rely on Kegan's edited version of the truth.

She had to find out exactly who and what the Vance family was. And she had to do it herself.

At that same moment, on a sun-drenched street in Manhattan, Hilliard Holloway stepped out of the dark underground bar.

He blinked against the harsh morning light, a man emerging from his own tomb. He was still wearing the same torn, stained suit. He looked like a ghost.

He reached into his pocket and pulled out the cheap silver ring, turning it once between his fingers — his left hand the only one with any freedom left, his right arm still locked uselessly against his chest in its plaster prison.

He stood there for a long moment, staring at the ring in his palm. Then he hailed a passing stranger — a young man with a cigarette tucked behind his ear — with a sharp jerk of his chin.

“Tie this for me,” Hilliard said, his voice leaving no room for refusal. He produced a short length of black leather cord from his pocket and held it out alongside the ring.

The young man stared at the blood still dried dark on Hilliard’s knuckles, at the disheveled ruin of his expensive suit, at the cold, unreadable authority in his eyes. He didn’t ask questions. He simply threaded the ring onto the cord and knotted it at the nape of Hilliard’s neck with quick, compliant fingers, then stepped back without a word.

Hilliard didn’t thank him. He just turned away, letting the ring settle against his skin, hidden beneath his ruined shirt, resting cold against his heart — a weight he intended to carry until he had no use for it anymore.

A new, terrible purpose burned in his eyes. The king was dead.

But something else, something far more dangerous, had just been born from the ashes.

Chapter 806:

Back at the Sinclair estate, the harsh reality of the outside world felt a million miles away, yet it loomed heavily in Cailin’s mind. Sunlight streamed through the floor-to-ceiling windows, illuminating the joyful chaos of toys scattered across the plush carpet of the children’s bedroom. Cailin sat on the edge of the bed, watching her three children play, but her mind was miles away, caught in the cold, sharp web of information Aron had just given her.

Vance. A snake eating its own tail. A threat Kegan had never mentioned.

She took a deep breath, the air feeling tight in her chest. She forced the anxiety down, smoothing the muscles in her face into a soft smile as she reached out to straighten the slightly rumpled skirt of Elia's dress.

Aron, ever observant, noticed the shift in his mother's focus. He set down his tablet, his small face holding a seriousness that was far beyond his years.

"It doesn't matter who you choose in the end, Mom," he said, his voice calm and steady. "Davy and I won't interfere."

Davy looked up from the drone model he was assembling and nodded vigorously, waving a small plastic propeller.

"Yeah! As long as you're happy. Even if you never get married again, we can protect you!"

The simple, profound loyalty in their words struck Cailin like a physical blow. A hot sting pricked the back of her eyes. She leaned forward, pressing a long, loving kiss to each of their smooth foreheads.

It was Elia, clutching a porcelain doll, who broke the tender moment. She tilted her head, her wide, clear eyes full of innocent confusion.

She chewed on her finger for a moment, a thoughtful frown on her face.

“But why can’t we keep both of them?” she asked, her voice small and guileless. “Uncle Kegan who makes the fireworks, and Mr. Holloway who used to buy me candy. I want two daddies.”

The question landed in the quiet room like a small, perfectly thrown grenade.

For three full seconds, there was absolute silence.

Aron and Davy exchanged a look of pure, fraternal exasperation. They both rolled their eyes at their sister.

“Only a little girl would dream up something that greedy,” Davy muttered under his breath.

A laugh, genuine and surprised, burst from Cailin’s lips. The absurdity of it cut through her tension. She reached out and gently pinched Elia’s soft cheek.

“Because love and marriage aren’t like picking out toys, sweetie,” she explained patiently. “You can’t just have them all.”

As she and Elia dissolved into soft giggles, a sharp, insistent vibration buzzed against the polished wood of the nightstand.

Cailin's smile vanished.

She picked up the encrypted black phone. The screen glowed with a single name: Mia Chen. Mia was one of her old friends. But recently, Mia's life had been entirely derailed by one man: Warren Croft. He was a manipulative, narcissistic scumbag who had been emotionally bleeding Mia dry for months. Cailin had repeatedly warned her friend to cut him loose, knowing the toxic relationship would only end in disaster.

She held a finger to her lips, signaling for the children to be quiet, and answered the call.

"Hello?"

The sound that hit her was a wall of noise — a pounding bass beat, the clatter of glasses, a hundred conversations mashed into an incoherent roar.

Chapter 807:

Over the din, Mia's voice came through, thick, slurring, and choked with tears. She was completely drunk.

"That bastard... Warren Croft..." she sobbed, her words nearly impossible to understand. "You were right, Cailin... He just... trampled my heart... threw it away like trash..."

Cailin's brow furrowed into a tight knot. Mia sounded worse than just drunk; she sounded destroyed. In the background, Cailin could hear the slick, predatory tone of a man's voice trying to chat her up.

"Mia, where are you?" Cailin's voice was sharp now, cutting through the noise. "Which bar in Manhattan?"

There was a sudden crash on the other end, the distinct sound of a glass shattering against a hard surface. A moment later, a different voice came on the line — a man, calm and professional. A bartender.

"Ma'am, my apologies," he said politely. "Your friend is at Velvet Lounge, in Tribeca."

He sounded tired. "She's had six shots of tequila, she's refusing to pay her tab, and she's crying at the bar. It's barely noon, and I can't get her to leave."

"I'll be there in thirty minutes," Cailin said instantly, her voice shifting into the cold, decisive tone of Cali. "Don't let anyone take her. Don't let her leave with anyone. I'll cover her bill and a very generous tip for your trouble. Just keep her safe."

"You got it, ma'am."

Cailin hung up and was on her feet, though a sudden, sharp ache in her right hand immediately curbed her momentum. She winced, consciously adjusting her posture to keep her heavily bandaged right arm strictly immobilized at her side, mindful of her stitches and the doctor's strict orders. The warmth of the loving mother was gone, replaced by the sharp, cold edges of a woman preparing for battle.

She turned to her children, her expression serious.

“Aunt Mia is in trouble,” she said, her tone leaving no room for argument. “I have to go out for a little while.”

Aron immediately picked up his tablet. “I can map a route for you. Avoid the traffic.”

Davy jumped up, brandishing his drone model like a weapon. “I’m coming with you! I’ll be your bodyguard!”

“Absolutely not,” Cailin said, her voice a firm, unyielding command. “You’ll all stay here, in this estate, where you’re safe. You won’t go anywhere. Do you understand?”

The boys nodded, their adventurous spirits deflating under her stern gaze.

She pressed the call button on the wall. Within a minute, the estate’s head butler and two nannies appeared at the door. Cailin gave them a rapid-fire series of precise instructions for the children’s care, her mind already on the drive ahead.

With her orders given, she turned and walked swiftly from the room. She moved down the long, Persian-rugged corridor, grabbing a black trench coat from a hook by the door and awkwardly draping it over her shoulders with her uninjured left hand, unable to shrug it on properly without jarring her damaged arm.

Chapter 808:

As she reached the top of the grand staircase, she nearly collided with Silas, who was ambling toward his own rooms in a silk dressing gown, a cup of coffee in his hand.

He raised a single, perfectly sculpted eyebrow, taking in her hurried exit.

“Trouble in paradise?” he drawled, his voice laced with lazy amusement. “Need me to send a team of heavily armed men with you?”

Cailin shook her head, not breaking her stride.

“Just picking up a drunk friend,” she said over her shoulder. “A squad of your goons would only attract the press.”

She waved off his offer of assistance and continued down the stairs alone. She bypassed the main entrance and headed for the internal access to the garage, immediately signaling for one of the estate’s standby chauffeurs as she walked.

The cavernous space was filled with a collection of supercars that could rival any showroom. Cailin ignored the flashy Lamborghinis and Ferraris, heading straight for a discreet, black Range Rover. Because of her deep, bone-level injury, wrestling a heavy SUV through Manhattan traffic with one hand was entirely out of the question.

She slid into the back passenger seat as a sharply dressed estate driver hurried behind the wheel, the engine rumbling to life with a low growl. The garage door lifted silently, opening to the sunlit, tree-lined drive.

“Velvet Lounge in Tribeca. Fast,” she ordered.

The chauffeur pulled out onto the road, the powerful SUV eating up the asphalt as they accelerated, plunging into the bright, bustling morning traffic, heading for the glittering, dangerous heart of Manhattan.

Cailin pushed the door open before the engine was fully off, the cool night air hitting her face. She strode toward the discreet, unmarked entrance of a bar named Velvet.

The heavy, soundproofed glass door muffled the chaos within. When she pushed it open, the assault on her senses was immediate — a wave of sound, thumping electronic music so loud it vibrated in her bones, and a thick, cloying mixture of expensive perfume and spilled alcohol washing over her.

Her eyes, sharp and accustomed to scanning for threats, cut through the dim, flashing lights and the writhing mass of bodies on the dance floor. It took her less than three seconds to find her target.

Mia was slumped in the darkest corner of the long, polished bar, a small, glittering heap of misery in a sequined dress.

Cailin moved with purpose, her path a straight, uncompromising line through the crowd. She saw a man in a rumpled suit, his face slick with sweat, trying to slide his hand onto Mia’s waist.

Cailin didn't say a word. She simply used her shoulder to shove him, hard. He stumbled sideways, spilling his drink down the front of his shirt.

"Hey, watch it—" he started to snarl, turning to confront her.

He stopped mid-word. The look in Cailin's eyes was not angry. It was worse. It was the flat, dead-eyed stare of a predator looking at something utterly insignificant, something that was simply in the way. The man's bravado evaporated. He muttered an apology and scurried away into the crowd.

Chapter 809:

Cailin reached the bar. She pulled a thick wad of cash from her purse and slapped several hundred-dollar bills onto the counter.

"For her tab," she said to the bartender who had called her. He nodded gratefully.

She put a hand on Mia's shoulder, intending to pull her to her feet. "Mia, let's go."

Mia was dead weight, a boneless heap of despair. She was clinging to an empty tequila bottle like it was a life raft.

She lifted her head, her mascara smeared into black streaks down her cheeks. When she saw Cailin, a fresh wave of tears broke free.

“Why?” she cried, her voice a raw, broken wail. “Why are men so cruel? So cold?”

She launched into a rambling, incoherent tirade against Warren Croft — how he’d ended things over a text message for some family business deal, how he didn’t even have the courage to say goodbye to her face.

Cailin listened, and with every one of Mia’s heartbroken words, a cold, familiar weight settled in her own stomach. She saw Hilliard’s back as he walked away from her at her mother’s funeral. She saw Kegan’s handsome, earnest face as he knelt before her, offering a ring that was built on a foundation of lies.

The exhaustion she had been fighting for days, for years, suddenly crashed over her. The anger, the profound, bone-deep disappointment in men — all of it surged to the surface.

She wasn’t going to drag Mia out of here. Not yet.

Cailin pulled out the high-backed stool next to Mia and sat down. She caught the bartender’s eye and snapped her fingers, a sharp, commanding sound.

“A bottle,” she said, her voice low and tight. “Whiskey. The strongest you have.”

The bartender looked at her, surprised. This cold, elegant woman didn't look like the type to order a whole bottle. But he nodded and returned a moment later with an unopened bottle of Macallan and two heavy crystal glasses, each containing a perfect sphere of ice.

Cailin twisted the cap off the bottle and poured a generous amount into one of the glasses. Without a moment's hesitation, she lifted it to her lips and drank the entire thing in one long, desperate swallow. The whiskey hit the back of her throat like fire, a welcome, purifying burn.

Mia stared at her, her own crying forgotten. She'd never seen Cailin — the unshakable, always-in-control Cailin — do anything so reckless.

"What's wrong with you?" Mia slurred, a small hiccup escaping her lips.

Cailin poured herself another glass, the amber liquid sloshing against the ice. A bitter, humorless smile twisted her lips.

"I almost got engaged tonight, Mia," she said, her voice rough.

Mia's eyes widened in shock. "What?"

"To Kegan," Cailin added, her voice dropping to a cold, flat tone. "But I gave Hilliard's old ring back. Finally. After five years of carrying it around like a chain."

She took a long swallow of whiskey, her eyes growing distant. "And I took Kegan's. I actually took it, Mia. He knelt down right there in the Plaza, and I said yes."

Chapter 810:

Mia's jaw dropped. "Wait. You... you said yes? You're engaged?"

"I don't know what I am," Cailin said, her voice cracking. "I threw one ring away and put another one on. And I still feel like I'm drowning."

Mia reached across the bar and grabbed her hand, squeezing hard. "Then we drink to that. To finally letting go of the wrong ones."

The two women, one heartbroken and one profoundly conflicted, clinked their glasses together.

"To letting go," Mia declared loudly.

"To letting go," Cailin echoed, and they drank.

With each glass, the tight coil of control that Cailin maintained around herself began to unravel. The heat of the alcohol spread through her veins, flushing her cheeks with a feverish, unhealthy red.

"I thought I'd feel free," she confessed to Mia, her words starting to blur at the edges. "Giving back Hilliard's old ring. But I just feel... empty. And so damn tired."

Mia grabbed her hand, her grip surprisingly strong. "Then we dance," she declared, pulling a stumbling Cailin off her stool.

They pushed their way into the center of the pulsating, sweaty dance floor. The music was a physical force, a wall of sound that vibrated through the soles of their feet and up into their chests.

Cailin stood frozen for a moment at the edge of the floor, the bass thudding through her body. She thought of Kegan's face when he'd knelt before her. Of Hilliard's back at her mother's funeral. Of five years of running, hiding, lying, protecting children who didn't even know the full weight of the secrets she carried. Every day she had held herself together with iron control, because one crack would have brought everything down.

But tonight there were no children to protect. No deals to broker. No masks to wear. The iron inside her had rusted through, and the whiskey had finished what the exhaustion had started.

She didn't want to be in control anymore.

She tore off her trench coat, tossing it to the floor. In her thin silk camisole, she moved into the crush of bodies with a raw, desperate freedom, a woman shedding her skin.

They danced — not with grace or seduction, but with a wild, frantic energy. They moved without inhibition, sweat beading on their skin, their bodies twisting and turning to the relentless beat, trying to exorcise the pain. Men tried to close in, drawn to the spectacle of two beautiful, unraveling women. But

every time one got too close, a sharp elbow or a well-placed knee from Cailin, delivered with the unconscious precision of her training, sent them stumbling back.

Half an hour later, they were spent. The alcohol, which had fueled their frenzy, now claimed its victory. Their legs were unsteady, their heads spinning.

A single, frayed thread of Cailin's famous self-control remained. She grabbed Mia, half-carrying, half-dragging her friend through the crowd and out the front door.