

Second chance 811

Chapter 811:

The cold autumn air of the Manhattan street hit them like a slap. It didn't sober them up. It made the world tilt and spin even more violently.

They stumbled together, a mess of tangled limbs and high heels, and collapsed onto the cold, hard curb of the sidewalk. Cailin kicked off her shoes, her bare feet a shocking contrast to the grimy pavement.

She fumbled in her purse for her phone, trying to open the Uber app. The screen was a blurry mess of light and color. She couldn't make her fingers hit the right letters.

With a growl of frustration, she was about to hurl the useless device into the street.

Just then, a pair of expensive, hand-stitched black leather shoes entered her blurry field of vision, stopping just inches from her bare feet, blocking the hazy glow of the nearest streetlight.

Cailin's head was heavy, a leaden weight on her neck. She forced her eyes to travel upward — past the perfectly creased legs of a man seated in a high-tech wheelchair, over a stark white shirt and a thick plaster cast locking his right arm tightly against his chest — to a face half-hidden in the shadows of the streetlight.

Hilliard Holloway.

He sat before her, a silent, menacing statue. The streetlight carved sharp, angry lines into his face. His eyes were dark pits, and from them radiated an intensity that was terrifying. He wasn't looking at her like a person. He was looking at her like something he had lost and just found again — something he would never let go of.

Around his neck, she could just make out the thin black line of a leather cord disappearing under his collar.

Her alcohol-soaked brain took a few seconds to process his presence. A slow, sluggish wave of anger rose through her.

"You... you piece of trash..." she slurred, the words thick and clumsy. "Go away."

He didn't react to the insult. It was as if he hadn't even heard her. He turned his head slightly, his gaze falling on a man standing a few feet behind him in the shadows — his assistant, Mr. Jensen.

"Find Warren Croft," Hilliard's voice was a low, cold rasp. "Get him out of whatever hole he's hiding in. Tell him to come get his woman."

Mr. Jensen nodded once, a silent, efficient machine. He stepped away, pulling out his phone to execute the order without question.

Hilliard's attention snapped back to Cailin. Unable to reach out with his shattered left shoulder or his right arm trapped in its plaster prison, he gave a curt tilt of his head. A burly bodyguard stepped forward from the shadows, his large frame eclipsing the streetlight.

"Put her in the car," Hilliard ordered.

"Don't touch me," she protested, trying to pull away as the bodyguard reached down for her. Her struggles were pathetic, the weak flailings of a kitten.

Hilliard watched coldly as his man effortlessly slid one arm under her knees and the other around her back, lifting her off the curb in one smooth motion.

Chapter 812:

The sudden feeling of being airborne, of being held, sent a jolt of panicked adrenaline through her. She gasped, her hands instinctively flying up to grab the front of the bodyguard's shirt for balance.

Mia, seeing Cailin being carried away, scrambled to her feet. "Hey! Put her down!" she yelled, swaying unsteadily.

Mr. Jensen, having finished his call, moved to intercept her. He blocked her path with a polite but immovable firmness.

"Mr. Croft is on his way, Ms. Chen," he said, his voice calm and soothing. "If you would please wait here."

Hilliard's wheelchair hummed softly as he navigated it forward, gliding closely beside the bodyguard who carried Cailin as if she weighed nothing. He moved toward a black Maybach idling silently at the curb, its tinted windows like obsidian mirrors.

Just as he reached the car, a Toyota Camry with a glowing Uber sign in the window pulled up beside them. The driver, a young man with a righteous glint in his eye, rolled down his window.

"Hey! What are you doing?" he shouted, his voice full of civic outrage. He held up his phone. "Tell your muscle to put her down right now, or I'm calling 911. I swear to God."

Hilliard stopped. He turned his head slowly, and his cold, dead eyes met the driver's. The sheer, unadulterated menace in that single glance made the young man's breath catch in his throat. The words died on his lips.

"She's my wife," Hilliard said. His voice was quiet, almost a whisper, but it carried the chilling weight of an unbreakable vow. It was a statement of fact. A claim of ownership.

The Uber driver froze, his thumb hovering over the call button. He looked at Cailin, who was struggling weakly in the bodyguard's arms but not screaming for help. He hesitated.

Hilliard didn't wait for him to decide. He turned his wheelchair and continued to the Maybach. His own driver had already opened the rear door and lowered the automated ramp.

Once Hilliard was secured inside the spacious cabin, he nodded. With a careful efficiency that was completely at odds with his imposing size, the bodyguard placed Cailin inside on the soft leather seat directly beside Hilliard.

She immediately curled into a ball, a low, miserable sound escaping her lips as she muttered his name like a curse.

The heavy door closed with a solid, definitive thud, sealing them in their own private, silent world.

He lowered the window a few inches using his partially mobile left hand.

“Make sure Croft gets her home,” he ordered Jensen. “And make sure there are no pictures. No record of this.”

The Maybach pulled away from the curb, melting silently into the river of Manhattan traffic, leaving the noise and chaos of Tribeca behind.

Inside the car, the only light came from the passing streetlamps, which slid across their faces in a hypnotic, rhythmic pattern. The air was thick with the smell of whiskey and Cailin’s perfume, now mingled with the clean, cold scent of fir that always clung to Hilliard.

Chapter 813:

Cailin stirred restlessly, her body overheating from the alcohol. She started tugging at the thin strap of her camisole, trying to pull it off. A large expanse of her pale, smooth skin was exposed in the dim light.

Hilliard's jaw clenched. His eyes darkened.

His suit jacket was already draped loosely over his shoulders like a cape, to accommodate the bulky cast on his chest. Shifting his weight, he used his semi-functional left hand to shrug it off completely, letting the dark fabric fall over her to cover her exposed skin.

He couldn't pin her flailing hands down with his useless arms. Instead, he leaned into her space, using the heavy, solid bulk of his plaster-encased right side to block her frantic movements, trapping her securely against the corner of the leather seat.

With a tremendous effort from his injured left side, he awkwardly guided her head to rest on his shoulder. He could feel the warmth of her breath against his neck, a sensation that was both agonizing and exquisite. The silver ring, hanging from the cord beneath his shirt, felt like it was burning a brand into his skin.

"Where are we going?" the driver asked from the front seat.

Hilliard didn't hesitate. He didn't give the address of the Sinclair estate.

"The St. Regis," he said, his voice a low, final command.

The Maybach bypassed the main entrance of The St. Regis, slipping into a private underground tunnel reserved for its most exclusive guests. Under Hilliard's tight-lipped instructions, his bodyguard carefully carried Cailin, now completely cocooned in his suit jacket, through a service entrance and into a private

elevator that ascended directly to the presidential suite. Hilliard followed closely behind, his right arm completely immobilized in its thick plaster cast and his left shoulder heavily braced, his jaw set in stone.

The moment the heavy suite door clicked shut behind them, sealing them off from the world, Cailin's body convulsed in the bodyguard's arms. A wretched, gagging sound tore from her throat as her stomach revolted.

Hilliard's expression tightened. He moved with sudden urgency, striding across the opulent living room and into the cavernous marble bathroom. "Put her down by the toilet. Then wait outside," he ordered. The bodyguard gently lowered her to the floor beside the toilet just as she began to vomit.

She retched violently, her body trembling as she expelled the whiskey that had poisoned her system. It was a raw, ugly, undignified moment.

Hilliard knelt on the cold tile beside her, his expensive suit forgotten. He showed no trace of disgust. Physically unable to use his hands, he awkwardly positioned his body, bracing his uninjured right side against her trembling frame to keep her from collapsing onto the floor. He leaned his head down, using his chin to gently nudge her sweat-dampened hair away from her face.

When the heaving finally stopped, she collapsed against him, boneless and weak. Tears of pure physical misery leaked from the corners of her closed eyes. She was muttering something incoherent, her mind lost in a drunken haze.

"Send a female attendant in here. Now," Hilliard called out to the bodyguard in the hall.

Minutes later, a discreet housekeeper hurried in.

Chapter 814:

“Clean her face,” Hilliard commanded, standing by like a looming shadow.

He watched with meticulous, almost reverent attention as the attendant dampened a thick, soft towel with warm water from the tap and began to wipe Cailin’s mouth and cheeks with the utmost care, as if tending to a priceless, broken artifact.

Under the bright, unforgiving bathroom lights, he saw it: a thin, faint scratch on her forehead, a few small abrasions on the heel of her hand — souvenirs from her fall onto the curb, from fending off men in a bar.

A flicker of something dark and violent moved behind his eyes. A cold, possessive rage. He hated that he hadn’t been there sooner. He hated that the world had been allowed to leave its dirty marks on her.

At his sharp directive, the attendant carefully lifted Cailin and supported her out of the bathroom, laying her gently on the vast, king-sized bed.

“Get the first-aid kit,” Hilliard instructed.

Using a cotton swab dipped in antiseptic, the attendant began to carefully clean the scrapes on her hand. The sting of the alcohol on the raw skin made Cailin flinch in her sleep, a small whimper escaping her lips. She tried to pull her hand away.

“Shh, it’s alright,” he murmured, his voice a low, rough whisper. He leaned his weight against her thrashing arm, pinning it firmly but gently with his body until the attendant was done. When it was finished, he couldn’t stop himself — he leaned down and pressed a soft, lingering kiss to the back of her hand where it rested on the mattress.

His gaze then fell on her dress — the thin silk camisole, stained and smelling of stale liquor. His throat went dry. His pulse hammered in his ears. The dark, primal urge to take her, right here, right now, while she was helpless and his, was a physical force, a roaring fire in his blood.

He squeezed his eyes shut, his jaw clenched so tightly it ached. He fought it down. He knew, with a terrible certainty, that if he crossed that line while she was like this, he would lose her forever. There would be no coming back from it.

“Fetch one of my white shirts from the dressing room,” he told the attendant, his voice tight. He took a long, steadying breath, deliberately turning his back to the bed. “Take off her soiled clothes and dress her in the shirt.”

He stood motionless, staring at the far wall, listening to the rustle of fabric as the attendant worked with clinical efficiency — a stark contrast to the fire raging inside him.

Once the attendant had finished and was dismissed for the night, Hilliard turned back. The soft cotton fabric fell to her mid-thigh, the wide collar slipping off one shoulder, exposing the perfect, pale curve of her skin. The sight was more intoxicating, more dangerous, than if she had been completely naked.

Chapter 815:

The attendant had pulled the heavy duvet up, covering her to her chin. He sat on the edge of the bed for a long time, just watching her breathe, the rise and fall of her chest under his shirt.

He leaned over her, his gaze tracing the line of her jaw, his breathing feather-light against her skin. His eyes lingered on her lips, slightly swollen and parted in sleep. The desire was a living thing, a monster clawing at the inside of his chest.

He leaned down, his own lips just a fraction of an inch from hers. He could feel the warmth of her breath. He stopped. He held himself there, trembling with the effort of his restraint.

Then, with a final, desperate act of possession, he gently bit down on her lower lip — just a small, sharp pressure, enough to leave a mark. A tiny, dark bruise that would be there in the morning. A brand. His brand.

He straightened up, a bitter, self-loathing smile twisting his mouth.

He walked out onto the suite's expansive private balcony. Unable to take a cold shower with his plaster cast, he stood for hours in the freezing night wind, letting the biting chill cool his fevered blood — as cold as it would go.

The next morning, a sliver of bright, painful sunlight pierced through a gap in the curtains, striking Cailin's eyes.

She groaned, a wave of nausea and a pounding headache crashing over her. She lifted a hand to her throbbing temples, her whole body aching with the brutal hangover.

She blinked, her vision slowly coming into focus. This wasn't her room. The ceiling was too high, the furniture too modern and impersonal. A cold knot of panic tightened in her stomach.

She shot upright, the duvet pooling around her waist. She looked down at herself. She was wearing a man's white dress shirt. Nothing else. Her own clothes, her underwear, were gone.

A primal fear, cold and sharp, seized her heart. She threw back the covers, her hands frantically checking her own body. There was no pain, no soreness that suggested a violation. Only the deep, soul-crushing ache of too much alcohol.

She scrambled out of bed, her legs unsteady, and stumbled into the bathroom. She stared at her reflection in the vast mirror. Her hair was a mess, her face pale. She saw the small, neatly bandaged scrapes on her hand.

And then she saw her mouth.

On her lower lip, a small, distinct, purplish bruise. A bite mark.

It wasn't from a fall. It wasn't an accident. It was a deliberate, intimate, possessive mark.

The air in her lungs turned to ice. She could smell it now, a faint, lingering scent in the air. Fir and expensive cologne.

Hilliard.

The panic was gone, replaced by a wave of pure, cold, murderous rage.

Cailin leaned over the marble sink, splashing her face with handfuls of cold water. The shock of it helped clear some of the fog from her brain, but it did nothing to erase the phantom feeling of his presence, the humiliating mark on her lip. She scrubbed at it furiously with a towel, as if she could wipe away the memory.

Chapter 816:

She stormed out of the bathroom, her eyes scanning the presidential suite with a new, heightened sense of alarm. The place was empty. He was gone.

On the nightstand, a glass of warm honey water sat waiting for her. Next to it, tucked under the glass, was a piece of hotel stationery. Instead of his usual sharp handwriting, the words were neatly penned in the sterile, obedient script of his assistant, yet they still radiated Hilliard's unmistakable, arrogant tone.

Mia is home with Warren. Your clothes are being cleaned. Drink the water. The driver is waiting for you downstairs.

The sheer, controlling audacity of it made her blood boil. She crumpled the note into a tight ball and threw it into the wastebasket. She wouldn't touch anything he had prepared for her.

She stalked into the walk-in closet. Her own dress was gone, but hanging in its place was a complete, brand-new outfit — a tailored black pantsuit, a silk blouse, even a new set of lingerie. All in her exact

size. The thought of him directing his staff to meticulously arrange this, of him sitting paralyzed in his wheelchair, barking orders while a female nurse wiped her face, undressed her, and slipped her into his oversized shirt last night, felt like an even deeper violation.

She gritted her teeth and changed, pulling on the new clothes. She took the white shirt — his shirt — and threw it onto the floor with disgust, as if it were contaminated. Grabbing her clutch from the nightstand, she marched out of the suite without a backward glance.

Downstairs, she ignored the discreetly waiting Maybach and hailed her own taxi. The drive back to the Sinclair estate through Manhattan's morning rush hour was a blur of angry, fragmented thoughts.

The taxi dropped her at the massive iron gates. She took a deep, steadying breath, smoothed down her suit, and tried to compose her face into a mask of calm neutrality as she walked into the mansion.

She found Silas and her aunt Catherine in the sun-drenched breakfast room, enjoying coffee and pastries at the long, formal dining table.

Silas looked up as she entered, his eyes, sharp as a surgeon's scalpel, sweeping over her. He noted the new clothes, the faint shadows of exhaustion under her eyes.

"Good morning, Cailin," he said, a lazy, knowing smile playing on his lips. "You must have had quite a long walk last night."

Cailin's jaw tightened. She pulled out a chair and sat, forcing herself to meet his gaze. "I picked up Mia. We stayed at a hotel in the city."

Catherine set down her silver fork, her expression full of gentle concern. "Oh, you poor dear. You look exhausted. Are you alright? Your lip..."

Her voice trailed off as her eyes fixed on Cailin's mouth. She frowned.

"Did you bump into something? There's a rather nasty bruise there."

Cailin's heart did a painful lurch. She instinctively brought a hand up to cover her mouth, a hot flush of shame and anger creeping up her neck.

Chapter 817:

"It's nothing," she stammered, the lie feeling clumsy and obvious on her tongue. "I bit it. Drinking water too fast last night."

Silas let out a soft, appreciative chuckle. He leaned back in his chair, thoroughly enjoying her discomfort.

"Really?" he drawled, his eyes glinting with malicious amusement. "Because from here, it looks less like you bit it, and more like you were bitten. By something rather large. A dog, perhaps?"

The insult, so precise and humiliating, landed like a slap. Cailin's face went from flushed to pale. He knew. Of course he knew. He was calling Hilliard an animal.

Catherine, sensing the sudden, sharp tension in the air, quickly tried to smooth things over. "Well, the children were asking for you this morning," she said brightly, changing the subject. "They have a mountain of new toys to show you."

Cailin seized the lifeline, grateful to escape the burning scrutiny of Silas's gaze. She forced herself to talk about the children, to smile, to pretend that everything was normal, while inside, a storm of fury raged.

After a few more minutes of forced pleasantries, she excused herself and fled to her room. She locked the door behind her, leaning against the solid wood and sucking in a deep, shuddering breath.

She walked to the vanity and stared at her reflection, at the mark on her lip. It was a brand. A message. A reminder that he could get to her anytime, anywhere.

The fear was quickly consumed by rage. She would not be his victim. Not again.

She grabbed her phone and dialed the number for Kegan's head of security.

"I want the perimeter of this estate hardened," she said, her voice cold and hard. "Triple the patrols. I want a standing order: no one from the Holloway family, or anyone associated with them, is to be allowed within a mile of these gates. Is that clear?"

As she hung up, her phone buzzed with an incoming text message. It was from an unknown, blocked number.

The message contained only six words.

That shirt looked good on you.

A chill, colder and more terrifying than any anger, snaked up her spine. She spun around and stared out the window at the peaceful, sunlit gardens. It felt like a pair of eyes were out there in the shadows, watching her every move.

She furiously blocked the number, but she knew it was a futile gesture. For a man like Hilliard, a blocked number was not a barrier. It was an invitation.

Miles away, in his penthouse office overlooking the city, Hilliard Holloway sat confined in his customized medical wheelchair before a wall of glass. His right arm remained heavily encased in plaster, and a rigid brace completely immobilized his shattered left shoulder. Beside him, his loyal assistant leaned in, carefully adjusting a long, bendable straw to his boss's mouth. Hilliard took a slow sip of black coffee, a dark, satisfied smile playing on his lips despite his broken state.

He had breached her walls. He was inside her head again. And he was never, ever leaving.

Chapter 818:

The heavy oak doors to Hilliard's office were thrown open with such force that they slammed against the interior walls. Julian Holloway stormed in, his face a mask of fury, ignoring the frantic protests of Hilliard's executive assistant.

Hilliard turned slowly from the window, placing his coffee cup on the massive, polished surface of his desk. He looked at his cousin, his expression cold and unsurprised.

“What in the hell were you thinking last night at the Plaza?” Julian demanded, planting his hands on the desk and leaning forward, his voice tight with rage. “You blew up a multi-billion-dollar alliance! You publicly humiliated Kegan Aguirre! The market opened an hour ago, and our stock is already down three points, Hilliard! The board is screaming for your head!”

Hilliard let out a short, humorless laugh. He walked to the bar cart in the corner and poured a glass of whiskey.

“And what would you have had me do, Julian?” he asked, his voice dangerously quiet. “Stand by and watch Cailin walk into a goddamn slaughterhouse?”

“Slaughterhouse?” Julian shot back, his voice dripping with sarcasm. “Kegan Aguirre is one of the most powerful men in the world! He worships the ground she walks on! He’s a hell of a lot better than the bastard who broke her heart five years ago!”

The glass in Hilliard’s hand creaked under the pressure of his grip. His eyes went from cold to glacial. He closed the distance between them, his voice dropping to a low, venomous hiss.

“Worships her?” he sneered. “That psychopath didn’t tell her the most important thing about himself. He’s already sold. The Aguirre elders sold him off before he was born.”

Julian stared at him, his anger momentarily forgotten, replaced by confusion. He was a Holloway; he knew the world of arranged mergers and alliances. But the circles Kegan moved in were darker, more ancient.

Hilliard returned to his desk and tapped a few keys on his secure terminal. An encrypted file opened on the screen. He angled the monitor so Julian could see it.

Emblazoned at the top of the file was a family crest Julian didn't recognize — a snake eating its own tail.

"Kegan Aguirre is bound by a dynastic marriage pact to Isadora Vance," Hilliard explained, his voice flat and clinical. "It's not a business deal, Julian. It's a blood pact. It's the foundation that holds two criminal empires together."

He brought up another file, this one filled with political connections, backroom deals, and a long list of conveniently dismissed criminal charges.

"The Vances run Florida," he said grimly. "They own judges, senators, law enforcement. They are violent, territorial, and they do not tolerate threats to their bloodline. Kegan's little public proposal wasn't a romantic gesture. It was an act of war. He didn't protect Cailin. He painted a target on her back. On the backs of her children."

Julian stared at the screen, the color draining from his face. He saw the names, the connections. He understood. This was not a society scandal. This was a mob war waiting to happen.

Chapter 819:

“He put her in the crosshairs of one of the most dangerous families on the East Coast,” Hilliard said, his voice raw with a fury directed not at Julian, but at Kegan. He downed the whiskey in one swallow. “I blew up his proposal because I was the only one in that damn plaza who knew what a death sentence it was.”

Julian was silent for a long moment, processing the terrifying implications. He looked at Hilliard, a new, grudging respect in his eyes. For all his faults, Hilliard’s predatory instincts when it came to protecting Cailin were second to none.

“She has the Sinclairs now,” Julian said finally, his tone still harsh. “She doesn’t need you.”

Hilliard stood up, leaning his knuckles on the desk, his eyes burning with a desperate, obsessive fire.

“The Sinclairs can protect her from a corporate takeover,” he growled. “They can’t protect her from a sniper’s bullet. The Vances are snakes, Julian. And they’re already in the city. They were there last night.”

He revealed that his private intelligence team, the Shadow Unit, had tracked Eleonora Vance’s vehicle to the Plaza. They had been watching the entire spectacle from a blacked-out Bentley across the square.

A cold dread washed over Julian. Hilliard wasn’t being paranoid. He was being realistic.

Hilliard opened a drawer in his desk. He pulled out a black, compact Glock, the metal gleaming under the office lights. He set it down on the desk between them.

“Forget the stock price,” he commanded, his voice leaving no room for argument. “Forget the board. Your only job now is her.”

He pushed the gun toward his cousin.

“You’re my proxy. You’ll take the best men from my personal detail. You will provide a covert layer of security for Cailin and the children. Twenty-four seven. You will be their shadow. You will report every threat, every anomaly, directly to me. And you will eliminate any threat that gets too close.”

Julian looked from the gun to Hilliard’s face. This wasn’t a request. It was a battlefield commission. He took a deep breath, picked up the gun, and tucked it into the holster inside his jacket.

“She’ll never thank you for this, you know,” Julian said, a touch of his old mockery returning. “She’ll hate you for it.”

Hilliard’s hand went to his chest, his fingers unconsciously brushing against the spot where the silver ring hung beneath his shirt. His eyes were hollow, but his voice was filled with an unshakable, terrifying resolve.

“I don’t need her to thank me,” he said. “I just need her to be alive.”

Julian shook his head at the sheer, tragic madness of it all. He turned and walked out of the office, leaving Hilliard alone with his ghosts and his war.

Hilliard picked up his secure phone and dialed the head of his Shadow Unit.

“Full surveillance on the Vance women,” he ordered, his voice like ice. “I want to know every move they make, every person they talk to. And be ready. If they make a move on her, you have my authorization to neutralize the threat. Permanently.”

Chapter 820:

“Terminate connection,” Hilliard instructed, his voice hoarse but steady. The voice-activated speakerphone on his desk clicked off, ending the call with his Shadow Unit. Confined to a specialized medical wheelchair, his right arm completely immobilized in a thick plaster cast and his left shoulder heavily braced, he could do little more than breathe shallowly through his shattered sternum. Unable to move his hands even a fraction of an inch, he relied entirely on automated systems.

A sharp knock sounded at his office door. Mr. Jensen entered, his face pale and etched with an uncharacteristic urgency.

“Sir,” Jensen said, his voice tight. “There’s been a development.”

Hilliard’s eyes narrowed. “What is it?”

“Unmarked vehicles were spotted patrolling the outer perimeter of the Sinclair estate last night,” Jensen reported. “Our sources have also picked up chatter on the dark web. A new bounty has been posted. A high-value one. For information on the daily routines of Ms. Sinclair and her children.”

Hilliard's blood ran cold. The Vances were moving faster than even he had anticipated. The target wasn't just Cailin anymore. It was her children.

"Deploy the Shadow Unit to Long Island immediately," Hilliard commanded, his frustration leaking into a lethal calm as he stared down at his paralyzed, useless hands. "Full-spectrum surveillance around the Sinclair estate. I want to know every vehicle, every individual, every anomaly within a five-mile radius. And get Julian on the line. His assignment starts now."

The scene shifted to the sun-drenched grounds of the Sinclair estate on Long Island. Inside the main living room, however, the atmosphere was anything but sunny. It was heavy, oppressive, like the air before a hurricane.

Sebastian Sinclair sat in his high-backed chair, his hands clasped over the silver head of his cane. His face was grim, his eyes like chips of granite as he listened to his head of intelligence deliver a report.

"Sir, our counter-surveillance grids have just flagged multiple hostile indicators," the man reported, summarizing the rapidly escalating threat. "We are tracking unauthorized reconnaissance vehicles probing the outer perimeter, and our interceptors have decoded a surge of mercenary traffic. They are mobilizing in response to a newly posted dark web bounty specifically targeting Ms. Sinclair and the children."

Cailin, sitting on a nearby sofa, felt a chill despite the warmth of the room. The Vances. They moved with terrifying speed.

Sebastian slammed the base of his cane onto the marble floor. The sharp crack echoed through the silent room.

“From this moment,” he declared, his voice a low, powerful rumble, “this estate is under Red Level lockdown.”

He turned his gaze to Silas, who stood near the fireplace, and to another man who had just arrived from Europe — Seth Sinclair, another of Cailin’s cousins. Seth was built like a heavyweight boxer, with a restless energy and the hard, watchful eyes of a man who had seen combat.

“Silas, Seth,” Sebastian commanded, his tone that of a general issuing orders. “You will both drop everything else. Your sole responsibility, from now until this threat is neutralized, is the twenty-four-hour personal security of Cailin and the children.”

Seth cracked his knuckles, a grim smile on his face. “Anyone lays a hand on my cousin, I’ll snap their neck,” the former Marine said, his voice a gravelly promise.