

Second chance 821

Chapter 821:

Silas, ever the strategist, simply pushed his glasses up his nose. "My counter-surveillance teams are already in place, Father. Not so much as a fly will get through our electronic net."

Cailin listened to the war council being held on her behalf and felt a conflicting mix of emotions. There was the deep, primal comfort of being protected by this powerful, formidable family. But there was also a suffocating sense of being trapped, of her hard-won independence being stripped away.

"Grandfather," she started to protest, "I have work I need to do at The Vault. I can't be a prisoner here."

"You can and you will," Sebastian retorted, his voice absolute. "Until we know exactly what cards the Vance family holds, you will not leave these grounds without my express permission. And you will never, ever be alone."

Cailin took a deep breath. She looked at the determined faces of her family. For her children's safety, she had no choice. She gave a curt, reluctant nod of assent.

Just then, the butler entered the room, his expression impassive.

"Sir," he announced, "there is a gentleman at the main gate. He says he is the head of security for a Mr. Kegan Aguirre, and he insists on speaking with Ms. Sinclair."

Sebastian let out a low, irritated grunt. He was clearly not pleased with the man who had caused this mess. But he gave a weary wave of his hand. "Let him in."

A minute later, a man was escorted into the living room. He was tall, broad-shouldered, and his face was a completely emotionless mask. He moved with a silent, deadly grace.

He stopped before Cailin and gave a slight, formal bow.

"Ms. Sinclair," he said, his voice as flat and devoid of inflection as a machine. "My designation is Mr. Stone. Mr. Aguirre has assigned me and my Alpha team to oversee all of your off-site movements."

Seth immediately stepped forward, placing himself between Cailin and the newcomer. His posture was aggressive, a clear challenge.

"The Sinclairs don't need any outside help," Seth growled.

Mr. Stone's eyes didn't even flicker. "My orders come directly from Mr. Aguirre," he stated calmly. "They are non-negotiable."

The air in the room crackled with tension. The raw, physical power of Seth, the Sinclair bulldog, versus the cold, lethal professionalism of Mr. Stone, the Aguirre assassin. They were two predators from different jungles, suddenly forced into the same cage.

Cailin rubbed her throbbing temples. She was no longer just a target. She was a territory, being fought over by three of the most dangerous men in the world. She looked out the window at the peaceful, manicured gardens, completely unaware that somewhere beyond these walls, events were already in motion that would soon shatter the fragile calm entirely.

The wide, circular driveway of the Sinclair estate looked like a presidential motorcade was about to depart. Three identical black armored Cadillac Escalades sat idling, their engines a low, menacing thrum in the quiet morning air.

Chapter 822:

Cailin walked out of the mansion's front doors, dressed in a sharp black pantsuit, a leather portfolio of sensitive documents for The Vault clutched in her hand. Her face was a mask of cold resignation.

Instantly, she was flanked.

Seth materialized at her left, a walking mountain of muscle and protective fury, his eyes constantly scanning the tree line. Mr. Stone appeared at her right as if from thin air, a silent, dark shadow, his hand resting casually inside his jacket, inches from his weapon. The two men moved in a tense, unspoken orbit around her, each refusing to cede an inch of territory to the other.

Cailin reached the lead vehicle, the one designated for her. A Sinclair driver held the rear door open. But her attention was immediately drawn to a sleek silver sedan parked just ahead of her motorcade, bearing the neutral gold crest of the Vault Arbiters. Given the strict Red Level lockdown she had initiated, only a sanctioned Arbiter with absolute diplomatic immunity was permitted to bypass the estate's outer gates for today's critical transaction.

However, as the sedan's door was pushed open, it wasn't an elderly neutral official who emerged.

Julian Holloway swung his legs out, unfolding himself from the vehicle. He was wearing a ridiculously flamboyant trench coat and a pair of sunglasses, despite the overcast sky. He leaned against the car, a cocky grin on his face.

"Morning, sunshine," he said, blowing her a sarcastic kiss. "Your new head of security, at your service."

Cailin stopped dead. Her face, already cold, turned to ice. "How the hell did you get past my perimeter?" she demanded, her voice razor-sharp. "I gave explicit orders. No Holloways are allowed within a mile of this estate."

Julian tapped a heavy, gold-embossed document against his chin, his grin widening. "Hilliard bought out your designated Arbiter last night. As his chief proxy, I now hold the mandated joint-key clearance. Under The Vault's ancient truce laws, your gate guards had to let me through, or you legally forfeit your right to access the deposit box today." He took a presumptuous step toward her Escalade. "And since I'm here to ensure my employer's interests are protected, I'll be riding with you."

Hilliard. This had her obsessive, controlling ex-husband's manipulative fingerprints all over it. He had found the one legal loophole in her Red Level security.

Seth's reaction was more visceral. The sight of a Holloway daring to insert himself into their security detail and approach Cailin's personal vehicle was an unforgivable insult.

"Get the hell away from her," Seth snarled. He lunged forward, grabbing the front of Julian's expensive coat, intending to physically throw him into the meticulously manicured hedges.

Julian, for all his foppish airs, was surprisingly fast. He dropped his sunglasses, his playful demeanor vanishing. He twisted, breaking Seth's grip, and countered with a sharp jab aimed at Seth's ribs. The two men exploded into a brief, violent flurry of professional-grade combat right there on the pristine gravel driveway.

Chapter 823:

Mr. Stone, watching the brawl with the detached interest of a scientist observing insects, slowly drew his pistol halfway from its holster. His cold, calculating eyes seemed to be weighing the odds, deciding which of the two combatants would be easier to eliminate if he became a liability.

"Enough!"

Cailin's voice was a whip crack of pure, undiluted authority. It cut through the grunts and the sound of scuffling feet, and both men froze instantly, their hands still locked on each other's jackets.

She fixed Julian with a glare that could have frozen fire. She knew she couldn't shoot him or turn him away without violating The Vault's protocols, but she wouldn't let him control the board.

"You will sit in this car, and you will not speak," she commanded. "If you cause any more trouble, I will personally open the door and kick you out onto the Long Island Expressway. Am I clear?"

Julian immediately raised his hands in a gesture of surrender, his charming, infuriating grin returning.

“Crystal, my queen,” he said. “Just an innocent bystander, earning a paycheck.”

Cailin took a deep, steadying breath, fighting the overwhelming urge to go back into the house and lock the door. She ducked her head and slid into the cavernous back seat of the Escalade.

Seth shot Julian one last murderous look before climbing in and taking the seat to Cailin’s left. Julian, undeterred, squeezed in on her right, effectively sandwiching her between them.

Mr. Stone, seeing the seating arrangement, silently took his place in the front passenger seat, his cold eyes watching the two men in the rearview mirror.

The motorcade began to move, sweeping down the long drive and out onto the main road toward Manhattan.

The atmosphere inside the SUV was suffocating.

“So,” Julian began, breaking the tense silence, “do they teach you how to do anything besides grunt and lift heavy things in the Marines, or is that the full curriculum?”

“At least we fight our own battles,” Seth shot back, his voice a low growl. “We don’t send our little cousins to do our dirty work like some cowardly CEOs I could mention.”

The two of them started bickering like children, their insults flying back and forth across Cailin's lap. She felt a migraine beginning to pulse behind her eyes.

She closed her eyes, pulled a pair of noise-canceling headphones from her bag, and put them on, determined to block out the ridiculous alpha-male posturing on either side of her.

The convoy hit the city, and the traffic thickened. As they approached Fifth Avenue, they slowed to a crawl, then stopped completely. A sea of red taillights stretched for blocks ahead of them.

The driver's voice crackled over the internal intercom. "Ma'am, we have a problem. NYPD has the intersection at 59th and 5th completely shut down. It's total gridlock."

Seth was instantly on high alert. He ripped Cailin's headphones from her ears. "What's happening?"

He reached under his seat and pulled out a compact submachine gun, the click of him chambering a round echoing in the tense silence of the car.

Chapter 824:

Julian's playful facade was gone, his hand disappearing inside his coat. Mr. Stone was already pulling up satellite imagery on a ruggedized tablet in the front seat, searching for an escape route.

Cailin lowered her window a few inches and peered out. The air was filled with the sound of sirens. A wall of police cars, their lights flashing in a chaotic red-and-blue rhythm, blocked the entire intersection.

Then she saw it.

Cutting through the frozen traffic, escorted by a phalanx of police motorcycles, came a convoy. A dozen identical black Chevrolet Suburbans with heavily tinted windows moved with an arrogant, unstoppable momentum.

They didn't have any official markings, but Cailin's sharp eyes caught the license plates. They were all from Florida. Special government plates.

Julian, looking at the same procession, swore under his breath. He leaned closer to Cailin, his voice low and grim.

"That's them," he said. "That's the Vance family. They're here."

The armored Escalade was a steel prison, trapped in a sea of immobile yellow cabs and frustrated commuters. Cailin watched the last of the Vance family's arrogant convoy sweep through the police barricade and disappear down a side street. The sheer, blatant display of power — the ability to shut down one of the busiest intersections in the world for their own convenience — sent a cold dread through her.

She pulled out her secure phone and dialed Silas's private number.

"They're here," she said without preamble. "Tell me what you know."

Silas's voice on the other end was grim, all traces of his usual flippancy gone. "The patriarch, Nikolai Vance, is in town. The official story is that he's attending a retirement dinner for a federal judge. It's a power move, Cailin. A show of force." He paused, and his voice dropped lower. "Be careful of the mother, Eleonora. She's the real snake in that family. She will view Kegan's actions as a direct attack on her dynasty, and she will not hesitate to eliminate the source of the problem. That means you."

Cailin hung up, the weight of his words settling in her chest. This wasn't a business rivalry. This was a war against a family that operated above the law.

The traffic remained at a complete standstill for what felt like an eternity — forty minutes of sitting in the tense, suffocating silence of the SUV. The coffee she'd had at breakfast and the adrenaline coursing through her veins were having a predictable effect. A pressing, uncomfortable physical need was making it impossible to concentrate.

She pointed a finger out the window at the magnificent, gilded facade of The Plaza Hotel, which loomed over the gridlocked street corner.

"Pull over," she commanded the driver. "I need to use the restroom."

Seth and Julian both protested at once.

"It's too exposed," Seth argued. "We can't secure a public space like that."

Mr. Stone simply unbuckled his seatbelt. "I will clear the facility," he stated flatly.

Chapter 825:

“No,” Cailin said, her tone absolute. “You will not follow me into the ladies’ room. You will all wait in the corridor outside the door. You will form a perimeter. No one gets in or out without my say-so. That’s an order.”

The three men exchanged unhappy looks but knew better than to argue.

A moment later, Cailin was striding through the opulent, gold-leafed lobby of The Plaza, a bizarre honor guard of three grim-faced, heavily armed men trailing in her wake. They followed her to a quiet, carpeted corridor on the ground floor that led to the restrooms.

As she pushed open the heavy, polished wood door, the three of them took up positions outside, forming a formidable, human triangle of security.

The restroom was an oasis of quiet luxury. Soft classical music played from hidden speakers, and the air smelled of expensive floral perfume. It was completely empty.

Cailin walked to the long marble vanity, turned on a gold-plated tap, and splashed cold water on her hands and face.

As she reached for a linen hand towel, she heard it.

A sound so faint it was almost imperceptible — a soft, choked gasp of pain, coming from the very last stall at the end of the row.

She froze. Every nerve in her body went on high alert. The instincts of the woman who had survived in the underworld for five years took over. That wasn't the sound of someone feeling unwell. It was the sound of someone seriously hurt.

She moved silently, her feet making no sound on the tiled floor. Her hand slipped into the pocket of her suit jacket, her fingers closing around the cool, hard metal of a tactical pen.

As she got closer to the last stall, another smell cut through the perfume — the cloying, metallic scent of blood.

Her eyes dropped to the floor. Her heart stopped.

From beneath the small gap at the bottom of the stall door, a dark, crimson liquid was slowly seeping out, pooling on the pristine white marble.

She didn't hesitate. She took a step back and kicked. Her heel struck the lock with a sharp crack, and the door flew open.

The scene inside made the breath seize in her lungs.

A woman in a dirty, standard-issue hospital gown was curled on the floor, half-submerged in a pool of her own blood. Her face was a ghostly, waxy white, her forehead slick with cold sweat. She was pregnant, her belly a high, round mound under the thin fabric. Her hands were clamped to her abdomen as if trying to hold herself together, and from between her legs, blood was flowing in a terrifying, steady stream.

Cailin's mind reeled, her tactical instincts instantly clashing with the sheer horror of the sight. She didn't know this woman, but a chilling detail caught her eye: on the breast pocket of the stained gown was a small, embroidered crest — the logo of a private medical facility known to be funded by the Vance family. The puzzle pieces clicked together with sickening clarity. The gridlock outside, the arrogant convoy, the sudden police barricades — it wasn't just a show of force. They were hunting this escaped woman.

Chapter 826:

The stranger's eyes fluttered open. She saw Cailin, and a flicker of desperate, primal hope ignited in their depths. Her lips, cracked and pale, moved, but no sound came out.

"Hold on, I've got you," Cailin said, dropping to her knees in the blood, her expensive suit forgotten. Her mind raced, instantly shifting into triage mode as she grabbed a thick stack of clean linen towels from the vanity cart, pressing them firmly against the source of the bleeding.

The woman's hand shot out and grabbed Cailin's arm, her grip shockingly strong. Her nails dug into Cailin's flesh.

"Save... my baby..." she rasped, her voice a raw, broken whisper.

"I will," Cailin promised fiercely. She ripped off her suit jacket and wedged it under the woman's hips to elevate them, trying to slow the hemorrhage. She opened her mouth to scream for help, to call for her guards and demand an ambulance.

At that exact moment, a commotion erupted in the corridor outside. A woman's voice, high-pitched, arrogant, and sharp, cut through the heavy door.

"Get these dogs out of my way! Do you have any idea who I am? You can't block the path of a Vance!"

Cailin's blood ran cold. The Vances. Here. Now.

The sounds of a scuffle broke out — Seth and Julian's angry shouts as they tried to hold the line against the Vances' bodyguards. The enemy was at the gate. And she was trapped in a bathroom with a bleeding, pregnant fugitive that Eleonora Vance clearly intended to erase from existence.

The heavy restroom door slammed open, crashing against the marble wall with a deafening boom. Two of the Vances' black-suited bodyguards had forced it.

Through the doorway, Cailin could see Seth and Julian being held at bay, the muzzles of suppressed pistols aimed discreetly at their heads. They were seething but neutralized.

Eleonora Vance swept into the room, her emerald green suit a stark slash of color against the white marble. She walked with the imperious air of a queen entering a peasant's hovel. Behind her trailed her daughter, Isadora, her pretty face pinched with bored irritation.

Eleonora's expensive heel stepped into the spreading pool of blood. She looked down at her shoe with a grimace of pure disgust, then her sharp, cold eyes followed the crimson trail to its source in the open stall.

"Ugh, how disgusting!" Isadora shrieked, covering her nose with a gloved hand as she took in the scene. "What is that thing?"

Cailin, still kneeling in the blood, looked up. She fixed the two women with a stare so full of cold, murderous rage that it should have been a physical weapon.

Eleonora's eyes widened slightly as she recognized Cailin. A slow, cruel smile spread across her face.

"Well, well. A Sinclair," she sneered. "I see you enjoy keeping company with sewer rats in public restrooms."

She gave a dismissive wave to one of her guards. "Get her away from that filth. I want this mess cleaned up before the hotel staff starts asking questions."

A guard moved toward Cailin.

Chapter 827:

"Don't you touch her," Cailin snarled, her voice a low, animalistic growl. Keeping her useless, heavily bandaged right hand strictly protected against her side, she threw her entire body weight forward, using

her uninjured left arm to shove the approaching guard back. “You lay one hand on her, and I swear to God the Sinclair family will hunt you down and bury you.”

The guard hesitated. The standoff was a tense, silent tableau of blood, wealth, and menace.

Suddenly, the strange pregnant woman let out a thin, piercing cry of pain. Her body convulsed, and her arm flailed wildly.

As Cailin reached out with her uninjured left hand to hold the thrashing woman, her own sleeve slid back. It revealed Cailin’s left wrist, and securely fastened on it was her mother’s heirloom — an antique, heavy gold bracelet set with a single, massive, blood-red ruby.

Eleonora’s mocking expression froze. Her eyes locked onto the bracelet, and her pupils contracted to pinpricks. The color drained from her face. She looked as if she had seen a ghost.

Ignoring the blood, she lunged forward and grabbed Cailin’s left wrist, her manicured fingers digging into the pale skin. She stared at the bracelet, her breath coming in short, sharp gasps.

“This bracelet...” she whispered, her voice shaking with a violent, unrecognizable emotion. “Where did you get this? This is the Vance heirloom! It’s been missing for twenty years!”

The words exploded in the small space. Isadora stared at her mother in shock. Cailin’s mind reeled. That bracelet... it was her mother’s. The one Seraphina had given her with the antique key.

The connection slammed into her with the force of a physical blow. Her mother's flight from her family, her life of fear... it was all connected to them. To the Vances.

The pregnant fugitive, who had barely escaped from the Vance family's secret medical facility, heard the name — Vance. With the last of her strength, her survival instincts screaming, she reached up and tightened her grip on Eleonora's arm. She was a brilliant, desperate liar who recognized an immediate opportunity to use her knowledge of the family's secrets to her advantage.

"Save me..." she gasped, her voice barely audible but crystal clear. "Save my baby... and I'll tell you... everything she doesn't know... where this bracelet truly came from... its origin..."

A look of wild, obsessive greed flashed in Eleonora's eyes. That bracelet was the key to a secret that could shift the balance of power within the entire Vance dynasty.

She spun around, her decision made in an instant.

"Get my medical team down here now," she shrieked at her guards. "The best equipment, the best doctors! I want her stabilized!"

"Mother, what are you doing?" Isadora cried, horrified. "She's a fugitive! She's disgusting!"

Eleonora turned and slapped her daughter across the face, the sound echoing off the marble.

“Shut up, you fool,” she hissed, her eyes blazing with a cold fire. “Her life is now more valuable than yours.”

It was the brutal, unsentimental calculus of a true dynasty. Power over everything.

Cailin watched, stunned into silence. She didn’t correct the pregnant stranger’s lie. It was a lifeline. A chance.

Minutes later, a private medical team swarmed the restroom. They worked with swift efficiency, administering an IV, applying pressure bandages, and loading the fugitive onto a portable gurney.

Chapter 828:

Eleonora followed them out, pausing only to give Cailin one last, cold look. “Stay out of this, Sinclair,” she warned.

The corridor was clear. Seth and Julian rushed to Cailin’s side as she shakily got to her feet, her hands and suit covered in the stranger’s blood. They escorted her through the now-bustling lobby.

As they reached the main entrance, the grand revolving doors spun, and a man entered. He was older, with a mane of silver hair and a face carved from granite. He moved with an aura of immense, quiet power that made the entire lobby seem to hold its breath.

It was Nikolai Vance. The patriarch.

His cold, intelligent eyes swept the lobby and landed on Cailin. Their gazes locked across the gilded space.

And Cailin's world tilted on its axis. A memory, sharp and painful, ripped through her. A page from her mother's hidden diary.

Nikolai.

The name echoed in her skull, a ghost from a blood-stained diary.

Nikolai.

Cailin's breath hitched. The gilded chaos of The Plaza Hotel lobby dissolved into a tunnel, and at the far end was him. A man with a mane of silver hair. To Cailin, he moved with a gravity that felt cold and inexorable, and his gray eyes seemed to her utterly devoid of warmth as they swept the room. For a fraction of a second, Cailin felt the chilling certainty that they would land on her, that he would know her.

A cold sweat broke out across her skin. Her fingers went numb. The air thickened, pressing in on her lungs until she couldn't draw a full breath. Her mother's frantic, desperate handwriting flashed behind her eyes, words of terror scrawled in the margins of a forgotten journal.

He didn't stop. He didn't look at her. He and his phalanx of federal-agent-level bodyguards continued their unhurried path toward the main entrance, a silent, deadly procession.

But the cold remained. It was a physical thing, a shard of ice sliding down her spine.

“Cailin.”

Seth Sinclair’s voice was a low growl beside her. His massive frame shifted, a mountain of muscle moving half a step to his left, deliberately blocking the line of sight between her and the departing Vance patriarch. He had seen the look on her face, the sudden, stark terror that had bleached the color from her cheeks.

Julian Holloway, on her other side, had dropped his usual playful smirk. His face was hard, his eyes narrowed. His hand had disappeared inside his trench coat, resting on the butt of the Glock Hilliard had given him.

“Problem?” Julian murmured, his voice tight. “Do we need to get out of here?”

The question snapped Cailin back to the present. She looked down at her own hands, at the dark, dried-red flakes of Ashely’s blood crusted under her fingernails and staining the cuff of her white silk blouse.

Chapter 829:

The image of Eleonora Vance flashed through her mind — her cold, greedy stare fixed on the ruby bracelet, the way she had lunged for Ashely’s wrist as if nothing else in the world mattered. A woman like that didn’t save a stranger’s life out of compassion. She saved assets. Ashely was a vault of information now, and Eleonora would not let her walk free. She would keep her. Use her. Ashely was a hostage.

The ruby bracelet. An heirloom.

Nikolai Vance. A monster from the past, now a clear and present danger.

She took a ragged breath, forcing the air into her starving lungs. The panic receded, replaced by the familiar, cold precision of Cali.

“Yes,” she said, her voice a raw, scraped whisper that held the unyielding command of a general. “Get me back to Long Island. Now.”

She didn’t wait for their confirmation. She turned and strode toward a side exit, her pace fast and purposeful. The three of them formed a tight, protective diamond around her, moving as one unit through the gawking lobby crowd.

An armored black SUV was waiting, its engine humming. A Sinclair driver held the rear door open. Cailin slid inside, the heavy door thudding shut behind her, sealing her in a world of tinted glass and silence.

She leaned her head back against the cool leather, closing her eyes. Her mind was a supercomputer, processing the new, terrifying variables.

Ashely was no longer just a fugitive. She was a pawn, held by the Vance family. And that meant the ruby bracelet, and the secrets it held, were now in their hands.

Cailin's fingers went to her inner pocket, feeling the hard, rectangular outline of the one weapon she had left: the mysterious safe deposit box her mother had died to protect.

An hour later, the SUV crunched to a halt on the gravel driveway of the Sinclair estate. The manicured lawns and stately architecture were a world away from the violent chaos of the city.

A butler rushed out to greet them, his face etched with concern as he took in the blood on Cailin's clothes.

"Ms. Sinclair, shall I have a bath drawn for you immediately?"

"No," Cailin said, brushing past him. She didn't have time for comfort. She had to move.

She crossed the grand foyer, her heels clicking an urgent rhythm on the marble floor. She ignored the concerned looks from the staff, her path set. She climbed the sweeping staircase to the second floor, heading directly for her grandfather's study.

She pushed open the heavy oak doors without knocking.

Sebastian Sinclair sat behind a desk the size of a small boat, a pair of reading glasses perched on his nose. He was reviewing a file, a detailed intelligence report on Florida's political landscape. He looked up as she entered, his sharp eyes taking in her disheveled state, the blood, and the raw determination etched on her face. He showed no surprise.

Cailin walked straight to the desk. From an inside pocket of her jacket, she pulled out the small, metal box she had retrieved from the fire. Its surface was blackened with soot, slightly warped from the heat.

She placed it on the polished mahogany with a heavy, definitive thud.

“This,” she said, her voice steady and cold, “is connected to Nikolai Vance.”

Chapter 830:

A flicker of something sharp and dangerous lit Sebastian’s eyes. He slowly removed his glasses, setting them down on the file. His gaze fixed on the box, his expression turning grim.

Cailin recounted everything, her words clipped and precise. The restroom. Ashely’s sudden, catastrophic bleeding. The ruby bracelet on her wrist. And the chilling appearance of the Vance patriarch in the lobby. She left nothing out.

As he listened, Sebastian’s face grew darker, the lines around his mouth tightening into a hard, unforgiving mask. When she finished, a heavy silence filled the room.

He reached out and picked up the box, turning it over in his hands. He examined the lock, a complex dial mechanism.

"This is a relic," he murmured, his voice a low rumble. "A mechanical cipher lock. Cold War-era. Soviet design. Extremely difficult to crack without the combination."

He met her eyes, his own gaze filled with a cold fury she had never seen before.

"I will put my best people on this immediately," he promised. "The best cryptographers in the world. In the meantime," he added, his voice hardening, "you are not to leave this estate. Under any circumstances. Do you understand me, Cailin?"

She gave a single, sharp nod. She understood perfectly.

She turned and left the study, closing the doors behind her. A storm was coming to New York, a hurricane of secrets and blood that had been brewing for more than twenty years. And she was standing directly in its path.

Across the city, in a sterile room that smelled of antiseptic, Ashely Trevino was living a different kind of nightmare.

The transition from unconsciousness to awareness was a brutal, jarring ascent. Ashely Trevino's first sensation was a dull, throbbing pain deep in her abdomen. Her second was the blinding, sterile glare of a surgical lamp aimed directly at her face.

She tried to lift a hand to shield her eyes, but it was yanked to a stop. A sharp, metallic clatter echoed in the silent room.

She looked down.

Her right wrist was locked to the metal bedrail with a thick, medical-grade restraint.

Panic, cold and sharp, lanced through her. Her free hand flew to her stomach, her fingers pressing against the high, firm curve of her pregnancy. The agonizing, downward-pulling sensation of the miscarriage was gone. The baby was still there. She could feel the faint, reassuring pressure from within.

They had saved her baby.

The wave of relief was so profound it almost made her weep. But it was immediately followed by a new, more terrifying question.

Why?

The electronic lock on the room's door hissed, and the door slid open.

Eleonora Vance walked in, her high heels clicking on the polished concrete floor like tiny, merciless hammers. She was followed by Isadora, whose face was twisted into a mask of pure revulsion. Isadora carried a small silver tray. On it sat a single hypodermic needle, filled with a clear, shimmering liquid.