

Second chance 841

Chapter 841:

She tapped the button on her discreet Bluetooth earpiece. "Seth," she said, her voice calm and low. "Gray sedan, four o'clock. Run an interference test."

"On it," his voice crackled back.

The light turned green. As Cailin accelerated smoothly, the Escalade behind her suddenly swerved into the right lane, cutting off the gray sedan and forcing it to slam on its brakes.

The sedan didn't try to follow. It immediately took a sharp, illegal right turn into a narrow, one-way alley and vanished.

A professional move. A scout. They were being watched.

Cailin felt a prickle of unease on the back of her neck, but she forced it down. She couldn't let the children see her fear.

The convoy turned onto the private, tree-lined road leading to St. Jude's Preparatory, the exclusive Upper East Side school the children attended. The drop-off zone was a chaotic but orderly ballet of luxury cars, uniformed security guards, and parents rushing their children toward the grand, columned entrance.

Cailin brought the Range Rover to a smooth stop at the curb. Just as she was about to unbuckle her seatbelt, the encrypted phone she'd tossed on the center console began to vibrate, the screen flashing with a single name: Kegan.

She snatched it up, her heart giving a hopeful leap. Maybe he had news about Ashely.

She answered, her voice sharp. "Kegan, where have you been? I need your help."

The voice that answered was not that of a concerned ally. It was tired, strained, but still laced with that familiar, unnerving tone of absolute control.

"Forget about your friend for a moment, Cailin," he said, his voice a low purr. "We have more important things to discuss. I've been thinking. And you've had time to think. Tell me, when are you going to put my ring back on your finger?"

The question, so possessive, so utterly tone-deaf to the current crisis, sent a chill through her. He wasn't offering help. He was demanding submission. He believed that if she just agreed to be his, all her problems would magically disappear, solved by his power.

Cailin looked in the rearview mirror at her children, who were gathering their backpacks, oblivious. She thought of Aron's anxious face the night before. She thought of her promise.

She took a deep breath, and when she spoke, her voice was like a shard of ice.

"I am never going to marry a man who lies to me about who he is and the danger he brings into my life," she said, each word a final, irrevocable judgment. "We're done, Kegan."

There was a moment of dead silence on the other end of the line. Then a soft, chilling chuckle.

"You'll learn, Cailin," he said, his voice suddenly devoid of all warmth. "You'll learn that I am the only one who can truly protect you."

The line went dead.

A feeling of profound dread washed over her. She shoved the phone into her bag and quickly got out of the car, opening a large black umbrella against the rain. She moved to the back door to help the children out.

Chapter 842:

The air was filled with the rhythmic patter of rain on a hundred umbrellas, the laughter of children, the hurried goodbyes of parents. A normal, everyday scene.

She knelt on the wet pavement, kissing each of her children on the forehead. "Be good. Listen to your teachers. I'll be right here when school is out."

They smiled, turned, and ran toward the warmth and safety of the school's entrance.

As she watched them go, a flicker of movement in her peripheral vision snagged her attention. Something wrong. Something out of place.

A man in a bright yellow rain poncho, the kind worn by food delivery couriers, was moving through the crowd. But he wasn't moving like a normal person. He flowed through the gaps between people with a silent, fluid grace that was utterly unnatural. He was a shark gliding through a school of fish. And he was heading directly for her.

The alarm bells in her head didn't just ring; they screamed. The instincts honed over five years in the underworld took over. She straightened up, her hand diving into her coat pocket, her fingers closing around the cold, hard cylinder of her tactical pen.

But he was too fast. Impossibly fast. He was a machine, a blur of yellow in the gray rain.

A sliver of silver flashed in the dim light. A thin, black-bladed dagger seemed to materialize from the sleeve of his poncho.

Cailin twisted, throwing herself backward, but her high heel skidded on a wet paving stone. The slip cost her a fatal fraction of a second.

There was no sound of tearing fabric, just a dull, wet, sickening thud. The black dagger plunged into her left side, just below the ribs, sinking all the way to the hilt.

The pain was a white-hot explosion, a supernova of agony that stole the air from her lungs.

The assassin didn't try to pull the blade out. He instantly released the handle, spun, and melted back into the now-panicked crowd, disappearing as quickly as he had appeared.

Cailin gasped, a choked, strangled sound. Her knees buckled. She slammed back against the side of the Range Rover, the black umbrella clattering to the ground.

At that exact moment, across the street, the rear door of a black Maybach was kicked open with such force that it flew off its hinges and crashed onto the pavement.

Hilliard Holloway erupted from the car like a force of nature. He didn't shout. He roared. A raw, guttural, animalistic sound of pure, undiluted terror.

He sprinted across the street, shoving people out of his way, his eyes locked on her. He wasn't looking at the fleeing assassin. He wasn't assessing the threat.

His entire world had been reduced to a single, horrifying image: the woman he would burn the world down for, slumping to the ground in a spreading pool of her own blood.

Chapter 843:

The rain was cold, but the blood flowing from her side was terrifyingly warm. It soaked through her silk blouse in an instant, a hot, sticky tide of her own life draining away. The black hilt of the dagger protruded from her ribs, a grotesque, obscene violation.

The school drop-off zone exploded into chaos. Parents screamed, grabbing their children and running in every direction. The orderly scene devolved into a panicked mob.

Aron, Davy, and Elia, only a few yards away, heard the commotion and turned. They saw it all in one world-shattering instant. Their mother, collapsing against the car, a knife handle sticking out of her side.

“MOMMY!”

Elia’s shriek was a sound of pure, primal agony. It cut through the noise and the rain. She broke free from her brother’s grasp and ran back, her small legs pumping, her face a mask of terror.

Aron and Davy were right behind her, their own faces pale with shock, tears streaming down their cheeks as they ran toward their fallen mother.

Before Seth or Julian could fight their way through the stampeding crowd, Hilliard was there. He slid the last few feet on the wet pavement, landing on his knees beside her. His hands, usually so steady, so unshakably confident, were trembling violently.

“Cailin. Cailin, look at me. Breathe,” he commanded, his voice raw, cracking with a terror she had never heard from him before. He ripped off his expensive suit jacket, wadding it up and pressing it firmly against the wound, around the hilt of the dagger.

Her vision was starting to blur at the edges. A strange, spreading numbness was creeping out from the wound, a cold, tingling sensation that was far more frightening than the pain.

Poison. The blade was poisoned.

She bit down on the inside of her cheek, hard. The sharp, metallic taste of her own blood and the jolt of pain cleared her head for a precious few seconds. She had to stay awake. She had to.

She grabbed his wrist, her bloody fingers leaving crimson streaks on his skin. Her grip was surprisingly strong.

"The children," she gasped, her voice a faint, reedy whisper against the sound of the rain. "Don't... don't worry about me. Get them. Get them away from here."

The kids reached her then, a whirlwind of small, terrified bodies. Elia fell to her knees in the bloody puddle, her tiny hands reaching for the wound, trying to stop the bleeding, her sobs tearing her small body apart.

Aron stood frozen, his jaw clenched, silent tears carving paths through the grime on his face. Davy, his face contorted with a rage far beyond his years, scanned the crowd, looking for the man who had done this.

Cailin summoned every last ounce of her will. The pain was a roaring fire, threatening to consume her, but she fought it back. She pushed Elia's small, blood-smeared hands away from the wound.

"Listen to me," she said, her voice suddenly hard, commanding, the voice of a mother giving her final order. She pointed a trembling finger at Hilliard. "You will go with him. Now. That is an order."

Chapter 844:

It was the first time. The very first time she had ever entrusted her children to him. The first time she had ever acknowledged him as their protector.

The unspoken meaning of the act hit Hilliard like a physical blow to the chest. His eyes, already red, filled with tears. He ripped his head around and roared at his driver, who had just reached the scene.

“DAVIS! GET THEM IN THE MAYBACH! LOCK THE DOORS! NO ONE GETS NEAR THAT CAR WITHOUT MY DIRECT COMMAND!”

Mr. Davis, a former Special Forces operator with a face like granite, didn’t hesitate. He scooped up the screaming, struggling Elia in one arm and used his broad body to shield the boys, herding them toward the waiting, indestructible car.

“NO! I want my mommy!” Elia shrieked, kicking and fighting in his arms.

Aron took one last, long look at Hilliard. In his young eyes was a universe of warning, of grief, and of a desperate, reluctant trust. He grabbed Davy’s hand and followed Davis into the car.

The heavy door of the Maybach slammed shut. The solid, definitive thunk of the locks engaging was the sound of a vault being sealed. They were safe.

The knowledge that her children were secure was the last thread holding Cailin's consciousness together. It snapped.

A deep, shuddering gasp escaped her lips, followed by a torrent of dark, blackish blood that poured from the corner of her mouth.

Julian and Seth finally broke through, their guns drawn. Seth, his face a mask of pure rage, made to pursue the assassin's trail.

"Don't!" Julian yelled, grabbing his arm. "He's long gone! Secure the perimeter! Get the car!"

Hilliard didn't wait. He bent down, his arms sliding under Cailin with an almost impossible gentleness, carefully avoiding the protruding dagger. He lifted her from the cold, wet ground.

He kicked open the rear door of the Range Rover and laid her across the wide leather seat, then scrambled in beside her.

"MOUNT SINAI! TRAUMA ONE! TELL THEM TO HAVE THE BEST SURGICAL TEAM IN THE CITY WAITING!" he bellowed at Julian, who was now in the driver's seat. "IF SHE DIES, I WILL HOLD EVERY SINGLE ONE OF YOU PERSONALLY RESPONSIBLE!"

Julian slammed his foot on the accelerator. The heavy armored truck's tires spun for a second on the slick pavement, then gripped. The vehicle shot forward like a missile, scattering the remaining onlookers.

In the back, Hilliard pulled Cailin's head into his lap, cradling her against him. His shirt, his suit, his hands — everything was soaked in her blood.

He bent his head down, pressing his forehead against hers. His tears, hot and desperate, mixed with the cold rain on her skin.

"Please," he whispered, his voice completely broken. "Please, Cailin. Don't leave me. Please don't leave me."

The armored Range Rover tore through the streets of Manhattan like a wounded beast, its horn blaring a continuous, desperate cry. Julian drove with a controlled recklessness, running red lights, forcing other cars onto the sidewalk. The wail of police sirens started to rise in their wake.

Chapter 845:

Inside the rear cabin, the air was thick with the smell of blood and something else — a faint, sickly-sweet odor like bitter almonds.

Cailin lay in Hilliard's arms, her skin a waxy, grayish color. Her lips were turning a dark, unnatural shade of purple. Her breathing was a shallow, rattling gasp, a terrible sound like a broken machine. On her neck, faint, dark, web-like patterns were beginning to appear under her skin, like black veins spreading from the wound.

Hilliard kept pressure on the wound, his hands stained a deep, horrifying crimson. Blood continued to seep through his fingers, warm and slick.

“Stay with me, Cailin! We’re almost there! Just look at me, damn it!” His voice was a ragged, pleading wreck. Tears streamed down his face, dropping onto hers, but he was oblivious to them.

Her eyelids fluttered open. Her gaze was unfocused, lost. She could only see the blurry outline of his face, a mask of pure, unadulterated terror.

A violent cough wracked her body. A thick spray of dark, almost black, blood erupted from her mouth, spattering the collar of his once-white shirt.

A raw, wounded sound escaped Hilliard’s throat. He tried to wipe the blood from her lips with his sleeve, but it was useless. More just trickled out.

She knew. She was dying. The poison was a fire in her veins, burning away the connections between her brain and her body. She didn’t have much time.

With a surge of effort that seemed to take every last bit of energy she possessed, she lifted her free hand and grabbed a fistful of his bloody shirt.

“Listen... to me... Hilliard...” Her voice was a bare whisper, a thread of sound in the chaotic rush of the car.

“No! Don’t talk! Save your strength!” he begged, his voice cracking. “You’re not going to die! I forbid it!” He was shaking his head, a frantic, desperate denial of the reality in his arms.

She ignored his pleas, her eyes locking on his, her gaze suddenly sharp and intense. She was a mother, and she had final instructions to deliver.

“Aron,” she rasped, each word a monumental effort. “He’s... allergic to peanuts. Severe. EpiPen... in his bedside table... He has nightmares... needs a nightlight...”

The words were knives, twisting in Hilliard’s heart. He was choking on his own sobs. “I know. I’ll remember. Cailin, please, stop.”

“Davy,” she pushed on, her breath rattling in her chest. “He acts tough... but he’s afraid of being alone. Don’t... don’t ever lock his door... Don’t be too hard on him...”

Dark, bloody foam was starting to form at the corners of her mouth.

“Elia... strawberry ice cream... her favorite... but only one scoop... or her stomach hurts... She sleeps... with the old teddy bear... the one with one eye...”

She finished the litany of small, intimate, life-sustaining details. Her eyes, burning with a final, desperate intensity, bored into his. She pulled him closer.

Chapter 846:

“Protect them,” she commanded, a single, perfect tear escaping the corner of her eye and tracing a path through the blood on her cheek. “Don’t let your family... consume them. Let them... be free...”

"I swear it," he cried, burying his face in the crook of her neck, his body shaking with uncontrollable sobs. He was no longer a titan of industry. He was a broken man, a helpless child. "I swear on my life, Cailin. Anyone who touches them, I'll kill them myself."

A faint, almost imperceptible smile touched her lips. She had heard him. The fingers clutching his shirt began to loosen.

"Hilliard..." she whispered, her voice fading. "Actually, I..."

Her voice stopped.

Her eyes went vacant, the light in them extinguished in an instant. The hand on his shirt went limp, falling away to slap softly against the leather seat.

"Cailin?" Hilliard's head snapped up. "Cailin!"

He gently tapped her cheek. No response.

His trembling fingers went to her neck, searching for a pulse. He found it, but it was a faint, thready flutter — a moth's wingbeat against his skin. And even as he felt it, it was fading. Fading to nothing.

“NO!”

The sound that tore from Hilliard’s throat was not human. It was the sound of an animal whose soul has been ripped from its body. A raw, piercing, world-ending scream of absolute loss and despair.

The sound was so powerful it seemed to shake the very frame of the truck. In the front seat, Julian flinched, his own eyes burning as he slammed the accelerator to the floor.

The Range Rover skidded around a final corner, its tires screaming in protest, and fishtailed to a halt under the red-and-white striped awning of the Mount Sinai Hospital Emergency Room entrance.

The tires had barely stopped screeching when Julian threw his door open and vaulted out, screaming for a gurney, for a crash team, for anyone.

Hilliard kicked his own door open with such force it dented the side of a parked ambulance. He emerged from the vehicle carrying Cailin, her limp body cradled in his arms, and stormed into the bright, chaotic world of the emergency room.

“HELP HER!” he roared, his voice a raw, shredded thing. “A billion dollars! I’ll give a billion dollars to the doctor who saves her!”

His wild, blood-soaked appearance and the sheer, primal force of his grief sent a wave of panic through the waiting room. People scrambled out of his way.

Instantly, a team of doctors and nurses converged, pushing a gurney toward him. He laid Cailin down with a reverence that was completely at odds with his savage demeanor, but his hands refused to let go. He gripped the metal rails of the gurney, his knuckles white, as they began to run toward the trauma bay.

“Sir, you can’t come in here!” a large male nurse said, trying to block his path.

“She’s my wife!” Hilliard snarled, trying to shove past him. “I’m not leaving her!”

Julian grabbed him from behind, wrapping his arms around Hilliard’s chest in a desperate bear hug. “Hilliard, stop! You’ll only be in their way! Let them work!”

Chapter 847:

The logic, as cold and brutal as it was, finally penetrated Hilliard’s grief-stricken haze. The fight went out of him. He sagged against Julian, his strength completely gone, and slid down the cold, sterile wall to the floor.

The double doors to the trauma room swung shut. The red light above them flicked on, a glaring, accusatory eye.

He sat there, on the linoleum floor, covered in her blood, and waited.

Minutes later, a nurse in blue scrubs hurried out, a tablet in her hand. “Family of the patient?”

Hilliard shot to his feet. "I'm her husband."

The nurse began firing questions, her voice rapid and professional. "Any major illnesses or surgeries in the last five years? Any known drug allergies? Is she on any blood thinners? Any pre-existing conditions at all?"

The questions were like a series of punches to his gut. He opened his mouth to answer, but no words came out.

Five years.

She had been in Europe for five years. He didn't know if she'd been sick. He didn't know what medications she might have taken. He didn't know if the birth of their three children — a fact he had only recently discovered — had left her with any complications. He knew nothing. The five-year chasm of his absence had opened up at his feet, a black, terrifying abyss of ignorance.

"I... I don't know," he stammered, the words tasting like ash in his mouth. The self-loathing that washed over him was a physical, nauseating wave. "We were... separated."

The nurse's eyes, visible over her mask, held a flicker of judgment, but she didn't have time for it. She spun around and rushed back into the trauma room. "Patient history is unknown! Run a full toxicology screen and prep for a massive transfusion protocol!"

Hilliard stared at the closed doors. He lifted his fist and slammed it into the drywall with all his strength. Plaster cracked. The bones in his hand screamed in protest, but he felt nothing. The pain was a distant, insignificant thing compared to the gaping wound of his own failure.

If she died because he wasn't there, because he didn't have the answers that could save her life, he would never, ever forgive himself.

The next two hours were a blur of hell. The intermittent, terrifying shriek of alarms from inside the trauma room. The frantic, muffled shouts of the medical team. Each sound was a new torture.

Finally, the doors opened again. A surgeon, his green scrubs stained with blood, walked out, pulling off his mask. His face was grim.

Hilliard and Julian rushed forward. Hilliard couldn't speak. He couldn't bring himself to ask the question, terrified of the answer.

"The blade was expertly placed," the surgeon began, his voice heavy. "It was a miracle, really. It missed her spleen and the descending aorta by millimeters. We've repaired the internal damage and stopped the bleeding. The physical trauma... she will survive that."

A tiny, fragile sliver of relief pierced through Hilliard's despair.

"But," the surgeon continued, and the word hung in the air like a death sentence. Hilliard's heart plummeted back into the abyss.

Chapter 848:

“The dagger was coated with an extremely complex synthetic neurotoxin. We’ve run it against every known antidote in our database. Nothing works. It’s a custom compound, something we’ve never seen before.”

The doctor looked him straight in the eye. “The toxin has already entered her central nervous system and induced a deep coma. We’ve put her on life support, but it’s only a matter of time. Unless we can identify the specific chemical makeup of the poison and synthesize a targeted counter-agent, her organs will begin to fail. She has forty-eight hours. Maybe less.”

The world tilted. Hilliard staggered back, Julian’s hand on his arm the only thing keeping him upright.

Through a small window in the trauma room door, he could see her. She was pale as death, a tube down her throat, a dozen wires connecting her to the machines that were now breathing for her, living for her.

The despair in his eyes vanished. It was burned away, replaced by something else. Something cold, and dark, and absolutely murderous.

He turned to Julian, his voice no longer human. It was the sound of grinding stone, of a tomb being sealed.

“Find it,” he commanded. “Get the Shadow Unit. Get every asset we have. Tear this city apart, piece by piece. I want that antidote. And I want the name of the person who did this to her.”

The top-floor VIP waiting suite at Mount Sinai had been converted into a war room. The air was thick with the smell of stale coffee and a silent, simmering rage. Hilliard sat on a plush leather sofa, his hands still caked with Cailin's dried blood. He stared at a fixed point on the floor, his eyes hollow and dead.

Julian handed him a steaming paper cup of black coffee. Hilliard took it, his fingers leaving bloody smudges on the white cardboard, but he didn't drink.

"We need a target," Julian said, breaking the suffocating silence. He opened a ruggedized tablet, a list of potential enemies glowing on the screen.

"It wasn't Ashely Trevino," Julian said, thinking aloud. "She's still missing, presumed to be a Vance hostage. She has no motive."

He paused. "Kegan Aguirre. He made that threatening call this morning, right before the attack."

"No," Hilliard said, his voice a flat, dead rasp. He didn't even look up. "Not his style. That psychopath is possessive, not destructive. He wants to own her, not break her. This kind of poison... it's too impersonal for him."

The door to the suite opened, and Seth and Silas Sinclair walked in, bringing the cold, damp air of the rainy night with them. Seth's face was bruised and swollen from his earlier scuffle with the Vance security team.

He strode directly to Hilliard, grabbed him by the collar of his blood-stained shirt, and hauled him to his feet.

“You were supposed to be protecting her!” Seth roared, his face inches from Hilliard’s. “This happened on your watch!”

Hilliard didn’t resist. He didn’t even blink. He just let himself be held, his empty eyes meeting Seth’s furious ones.

Chapter 849:

“You can kill me later,” Hilliard said, his voice devoid of all emotion. “Right now, tell me what you found.”

Silas stepped forward and placed a calming hand on Seth’s arm, pulling him back. He pushed his gold-rimmed glasses up the bridge of his nose, his eyes behind them as cold and calculating as a snake’s.

He tossed a thin file onto the coffee table.

“The assassin is dead,” Silas announced, his voice clipped and precise. “Bit down on a cyanide capsule hidden in a molar the second Seth’s men got their hands on him. He was a professional. A ghost.”

He let that sink in for a moment. “It gets worse,” he added. “Every security camera, public and private, in a three-block radius of the school was fried. A localized EMP burst, triggered five minutes before the attack. Military-grade. There are no digital footprints. No witnesses who saw a face. Nothing.”

Silas looked at Hilliard. "This wasn't a crime. It was a covert operation."

Hilliard slowly lifted his head. The dead emptiness in his eyes was gone, replaced by the raging fires of hell.

He spoke one word, his voice a low, guttural snarl.

"Vance."

Silas gave a single, sharp nod. "Agreed. No one else has the political cover in this city to pull off something this clean and this brazen."

Hilliard stood up, the movement stiff, unnatural. He was a man held together only by the promise of vengeance.

"Julian," he commanded, his voice like ice. "Activate every field operative in the Shadow Unit. I want them armed for urban warfare. We are going to hit every known Vance property in this city. We will burn them to the ground until they give us what we want."

Silas didn't try to stop him. A thin, cruel smile touched his lips.

"My intelligence network will provide you with the exact coordinates of every safe house, every office, every residence," he offered. "The Sinclair family would be delighted to assist."

In the cold, sterile quiet of the hospital suite, an unholy alliance was forged in blood and rage. A war between dynasties was about to be declared on the streets of New York, all to find a single vial of antidote.

Far below, in the hushed, beeping quiet of the Intensive Care Unit, Cailin lay still. A machine breathed for her, another pumped drugs into her veins.

Her consciousness was adrift in a cold, black ocean.

The darkness coalesced, taking the shape of a memory. The shabby, cramped apartment of her childhood. The smell of stale cigarette smoke and damp plaster.

A woman stood with her back to her, staring out a grimy window at the city lights. A thin, anxious silhouette.

Her mother. Seraphina.

Mom? Cailin tried to call out, but in the dream, she had no voice.

Seraphina turned. Her face wasn't twisted with the paranoia and fear Cailin remembered. It was calm. A deep, sad, knowing calm.

She glided across the dream-space and reached out, her fingers impossibly cold as they brushed against Cailin's cheek.

Chapter 850:

Listen to me, Cailin, her mother's voice echoed in her mind, a memory so vivid it felt real. Remember what I told you. Never trust them. Never trust the snakes who wear crowns.

The image of her mother began to flicker, to distort, like a bad television signal.

Especially Nikolai Vance. If you ever hear that name, you don't ask questions. You run.

The dream was tearing itself apart, the edges dissolving into static.

Because it's not just the bracelet he wants... He wants...

The voice was suddenly cut off, replaced by a high-pitched, piercing whine that filled Cailin's head. On the hospital bed, her brow furrowed in distress. Her fingers twitched, a single, spastic movement.

The air in the VIP waiting room was so thick with tension it felt like solid ice. Confined to his customized medical wheelchair, Hilliard had just disconnected the call, the order to unleash the Shadow Unit on every known Vance property in the city still hanging in the silence.

Just moments prior, the agonizing wait had been shattered when a swarm of medical staff sprinted past the waiting suite, frantically wheeling Cailin's bed out of the ICU. A sudden, violent seizure had triggered an immediate transfer to the surgical wing, leaving the men outside paralyzed with a new dread.

Then a sound cut through the quiet.

A piercing, high-pitched alarm shrieked from deep within the surgical corridor. It was a raw, electronic scream of absolute crisis.

The red light.

It was the direct line from Trauma One, the most critical operating room in the hospital.

Hilliard's pupils contracted to pinpricks. The heavy mahogany coffee table in front of him became an obstacle. His right arm was trapped in a thick plaster cast, his left shoulder heavily braced, leaving him entirely unable to move his hands. But the feral desperation in him wouldn't be stopped. With a violent thrust of his chin against the specialized joystick, he sent his heavy motorized chair ramming brutally into the table. The massive piece of furniture scraped across the floor with an ear-piercing screech.

Julian and Silas were a half-step behind him, their polished leather shoes pounding a frantic, suffocating rhythm on the gleaming linoleum floor.

The heavy lead-lined doors to the surgical suite were shoved open from the inside. A nurse, her scrubs soaked in blood, stumbled out. Her face, visible above her mask, was paler than the sterile white walls.

“She needs blood! Right now!”

The nurse’s voice cracked, shattered by a terror so profound it was almost inhuman. She was waving a piece of paper, a lab report stained with a fresh, wet smear of crimson.

Hilliard’s motorized chair cut off her path in an instant. He couldn’t reach out to grab her — his limbs locked in their rigid medical restraints — but the sheer, crushing aura of his presence made her shrink back against the wall.

“What do you mean she needs blood? Use the blood bank! I’ll buy the entire goddamn blood bank!” he roared, his voice echoing in the sterile corridor, every forceful breath sending spikes of sheer agony through his fractured sternum.