

Second chance 861

Chapter 861:

The easy, careless smile that usually played on his handsome face was gone, replaced by a twisted, demonic mask of pure rage. He had received the news in Geneva and had commandeered a supersonic business jet, breaking every international flight regulation to get back to New York.

In the center of the lobby, Mr. Stone stood at attention, his head bowed, awaiting his judgment.

Kegan strode toward him, his movements radiating a lethal, predatory grace. He didn't say a word. He simply drew back his fist and drove it into Mr. Stone's face with a sickening, wet crunch.

The big man staggered back, blood erupting from his nose, but he immediately straightened up again, his expression unchanged, accepting his punishment.

"USELESS!" Kegan roared, the sound echoing in the cavernous space. "I trusted you with her! I gave you one job! And you let some piece of trash with a knife get to her in a school drop-off line?"

Hospital security guards started to move forward, but Kegan's men turned to face them, their hands resting on the weapons concealed beneath their jackets, their eyes flat and dead. The guards froze.

Mr. Stone wiped the blood from his mouth with the back of his hand. "The attacker used a military-grade EMP to disable our communications," he reported, his voice a monotone. "He was disguised as a courier. It was a targeted, professional assassination."

“Who?” Kegan snarled, grabbing Stone by the collar and lifting him half off the floor. “Give me a name.”

“No definitive proof yet,” Stone rasped. “But the Holloway and Sinclair intelligence networks have both concluded it was the Vance family.”

Vance.

The name hit Kegan like a physical blow. His pupils contracted. A muscle in his jaw twitched violently.

He knew the Vances were ruthless. He knew his fiancée, Isadora, was a viper. But he had never imagined they would have the audacity to attempt a public execution of Cailin in the middle of Manhattan.

He shoved Mr. Stone away and stormed toward the elevators, stabbing the button for the top-floor ICU.

The doors slid shut, encasing him in a small, metal box. He slammed his fist against the wall, the impact leaving a deep dent in the stainless steel.

If Cailin died... he would burn the entire state of Florida to the ground. He would start with the Vance family compound, and he wouldn't stop until every last one of them was a memory.

Ding.

The elevator doors opened onto the ICU floor. The hallway was a fortress, lined with armed men from both the Sinclair and Holloway security details.

Kegan took a deep, steadying breath, smoothed his disheveled suit jacket, and stepped out into the hallway, a storm of controlled violence ready to face the man who was his rival, and the woman they both might be about to lose forever.

The moment Kegan stepped out of the elevator, he was met with a wall of armed men. The safeties on a dozen rifles clicked off in unison.

“Get out of my way,” Kegan snarled, pulling his own Glock from its holster and pressing the muzzle to the forehead of the nearest Sinclair guard.

Chapter 862:

From the far end of the hall, Hilliard turned. He had just returned from the penthouse, his face a gray, exhausted mask. He saw the standoff, the raw, feral look in Kegan’s eyes.

“Let him through,” Hilliard commanded, his voice flat. The guards reluctantly lowered their weapons.

Kegan holstered his pistol and stalked down the hallway. He didn’t slow down. He slammed into Hilliard, grabbing him by the collar and shoving him hard against the thick glass of the ICU viewing window.

"This is your fault!" Kegan roared, his face inches from Hilliard's, spittle flying. "You were supposed to be protecting her, you useless bastard!"

Hilliard didn't fight back. He just hung there, limp in Kegan's grip, his eyes empty. "It was the Vances," he said, his voice a dead, rasping whisper. "Because of your goddamn marriage contract."

The words were a stiletto, sliding perfectly between Kegan's ribs. The rage in his eyes faltered, replaced by a flicker of guilt and horrified recognition. He was responsible. His connection to that family had painted the target on Cailin's back.

Hilliard pushed Kegan's hands away. "If you want to rage, go to Florida and burn their house down," he said, his voice cold. "Don't do it here."

From a chair in the shadows, Sebastian Sinclair rose, his cane tapping once on the floor. "This is a hospital, not a pissing contest," the old man said, his voice radiating an authority that neither man could defy. "The next person to raise their voice gets thrown off the roof."

Kegan clenched his jaw, shooting Hilliard one last look of pure hatred before turning to the window. He saw Cailin, pale and still, and the fight drained out of him. His shoulders slumped, and his eyes reddened.

Hilliard ignored him. He walked to the sterile access door of the ICU and buzzed to be let in.

A moment later, he emerged from the scrub room, covered from head to toe in a sterile blue gown, a mask covering his face. He pushed open the heavy glass door and stepped into the hushed, beeping world of the ICU.

The air smelled of antiseptic and death. He walked to her bedside, his steps heavy. Her skin was almost translucent, and the dark, web-like patterns of the poison were more pronounced, spreading across her neck and chest.

He reached out, his gloved hand trembling as he took her hand, the one not bristling with IV lines. It was cold. So cold.

"Cailin... I'm back," he whispered, his voice breaking. "Aron is being so brave. He promised me he would look after the others."

He sank to his knees beside the bed, pressing his masked face against the back of her cold hand. Hot, silent tears soaked into the thin paper of the mask.

"I know you hate me," he choked out, the words a torrent of long-overdue confession. "I know what I was... a monster... a fool..."

Chapter 863:

He had always believed his love was a fortress, that his power and possessiveness were a shield. He saw now, looking at her broken, poisoned body, that they were a cage. A cage that had trapped her, and a target that had drawn the fire of his enemies.

He lifted his head, his eyes raw, filled with a pain so profound it was almost holy.

“Cailin, if you can hear me... if you just wake up... just open your eyes...” His voice dissolved into a choked sob.

“I swear... I’ll let you go,” he whispered, the words tearing his own heart to shreds. “I’ll sign the papers. The ones you wanted. The ones that give you everything. Full custody. No contact.”

He took a ragged, shuddering breath, forcing out the final, ultimate sacrifice.

“You can take the children. Go to Europe. Go anywhere you want. You can... you can marry him. Marry Kegan.”

The words felt like a physical evisceration. He doubled over, gasping for air, the pain in his chest so real, so absolute, he thought he was having a heart attack.

“Just live,” he begged, pressing her hand to his wet face. “Please, just live. Don’t punish me like this.”

Outside the glass, Kegan watched, his expression a mixture of shock and confusion. He had never seen Hilliard Holloway break. He had never seen the king on his knees.

Sebastian sat on the bench, his eyes closed, his fingers tracing the intricate silver pattern on the head of his cane, praying for a miracle that he knew would not come.

The first gray light of dawn filtered through the hospital windows, illuminating a scene of quiet, exhausted despair. Hilliard emerged from the ICU, having spent the entire night on his knees by Cailin's bedside. His eyes were red-rimmed and hollow, dark stubble shadowing his jaw. His expensive suit was a wrinkled, blood-stained ruin.

He was a ghost haunting the hallway of his own personal hell.

As he started toward the waiting room, a figure materialized from a side corridor.

Cordelia Vance.

She wore a simple, elegant white cashmere dress, her expression a perfect mask of gentle empathy. She carried a silver thermos.

"Mr. Holloway," she said, her voice a soft, respectful murmur. "You've been up all night. I had the hotel kitchen make some chicken broth. You should have something."

She held the thermos out to him, angling her body just so, allowing the white gauze bandage on her forearm — the mark of her life-saving donation — to be clearly visible.

Hilliard stopped. His dead eyes flickered to the thermos, then to her face. There was no gratitude. No recognition. Only a vast, cold emptiness.

"I believe I told you," he said, his voice a dry, rasping sound, "to get lost."

Cordelia's eyes instantly welled with tears. It was a masterful performance of wounded innocence. "I just wanted to help," she whispered, her voice trembling. "After all... it's my blood that's in her veins now..."

Chapter 864:

"Don't you dare use that against me," Hilliard cut her off, his voice dropping to a low, menacing growl. He took a step toward her, his sheer physical presence making her flinch back. "The only reason you are not being physically removed from this floor is because she needed what you had. The ten million dollars has been transferred to your account. Our transaction is complete. If I see your face again, I will make you regret ever setting foot in this city."

He didn't wait for a reply. He brushed past her, his shoulder deliberately knocking hers, and strode toward the elevators, leaving her standing alone in the hallway.

The mask of hurt innocence on Cordelia's face vanished, replaced by a look of pure, venomous humiliation. With a choked sound of rage, she threw the silver thermos into a nearby trash can with a loud, metallic clang.

"Tough crowd."

The voice was dry and mocking. The corridor had emptied; not a single nurse, doctor, or security guard remained in sight. Ashely stood leaning against the wall at the other end, a smirk on her pale face.

"It seems your damsel-in-distress routine isn't working on Mr. Holloway, Miss Vance," Ashely said, putting a deliberate, poisonous emphasis on the last name.

Cordelia spun around, her face a storm of fury. She stalked toward Ashely, her heels clicking an angry rhythm on the floor.

"You find this amusing?" she hissed, her voice low and dangerous. "A sewer rat, laughing at me?"

Ashely pushed herself off the wall, her own eyes cold. "I just find it pathetic. You go through all the trouble of playing the hero, and he can't even stand the sight of you."

Cordelia's anger suddenly evaporated, replaced by a cold, cruel smile. She reached out and grabbed Ashely's chin, her nails digging into the soft flesh.

"You think you've won?" she purred. From her pocket, she produced a tiny black USB flash drive, dangling it in front of Ashely's terrified eyes.

"Guess what's on this, little rat," Cordelia whispered. "Every illegal art deal you brokered in Europe. Every shell corporation you set up for Cali. Every single wire transfer that could be traced back to a money laundering operation. Enough to put you in a federal prison for the rest of your life."

The color drained from Ashely's face. A federal prison. She would have her baby in chains.

“Now, if I were to give this to the FBI,” Cordelia continued, her voice a sweet, poisonous caress, “or perhaps, even better, to Hilliard Holloway himself... imagine his surprise, learning that his wife’s best friend is a career criminal.”

“What do you want?” Ashely choked out, her body trembling with a mixture of rage and terror.

Cordelia released her chin, patting her cheek in a gesture of mock affection. “It’s simple. You’re going to be my eyes and ears.”

She leaned in close, her breath cold against Ashely’s ear. “You’re Cailin’s grieving best friend. You have access. You will get close to Hilliard. You will find out everything he knows about the investigation into my family, and you will report it all back to me.”

Her smile vanished. “And if you even think about betraying me, I promise you, not only will you rot in prison, but that little parasite in your belly will suffer a very unfortunate ‘accident’ shortly after it’s born.”

Chapter 865:

Ashely squeezed her hands into fists, her nails digging so deep into her palms that she drew blood. She was trapped. Utterly and completely trapped.

She lowered her head in a gesture of defeated submission. The devil had her soul.

The afternoon air at St. Jude's Preparatory School was thick with the scent of old money and floor wax. The hallways bustled with impeccably dressed parents, their quiet, confident chatter echoing off the polished wood floors.

Hilliard Holloway's arrival silenced them all. He moved through the crowd like a ship of war parting the sea, a dark, imposing figure in a perfectly tailored black suit. The raw, predatory grief that clung to him was a tangible thing, an aura of cold menace that made people unconsciously step aside.

Beside him walked Maya Foster, a woman whose calm, elegant presence served as a stark contrast to his barely contained violence. A longtime friend of the Holloway family, she had answered his desperate, early-morning call without question.

Aron stood waiting for them outside his classroom, his small face a stoic, unreadable mask. When he saw Hilliard, a flicker of shared, terrible knowledge passed between them.

Hilliard didn't offer a hug or a pat on the head. He simply placed a heavy, grounding hand on his son's shoulder.

"I'm here," he said, his voice low. The three words were a promise, a confirmation of their pact.

Aron nodded and led them into the cheerful, brightly lit classroom. The walls were covered in children's artwork, a riot of color and innocent imagination.

The teacher, Ms. Jenkins, looked up and her professional smile faltered. She visibly stiffened at the sight of the titan of industry whose face was usually only seen on the cover of financial magazines.

Hilliard folded his large frame into a child-sized chair, the piece of furniture looking absurdly fragile beneath him. The sheer force of his presence seemed to suck the air out of the room.

“Mrs. Morton... couldn’t make it today?” Ms. Jenkins asked, her voice a little too high.

“She was called away to Europe,” Hilliard said, the lie smooth and practiced, his voice a flat, emotionless baritone. “An urgent matter concerning an art acquisition.”

Maya chimed in, her voice warm and reassuring. “Cailin sends her deepest apologies. She asked us to come in her stead.”

Ms. Jenkins relaxed, launching into a glowing report of Aron’s academic achievements, particularly his prodigious talent in mathematics and coding.

Hilliard listened, his expression unreadable, but inside, a dull, aching guilt was spreading through his chest. This was the first time. The first time in five years he had ever participated in his son’s life.

His gaze drifted to the artwork on the wall. He found Aron’s. It was a simple, stark drawing. A single, dark figure — unmistakably a woman — stood under a large, protective dome, shielding three smaller figures. There was no man in the picture. No father.

The drawing was a punch to the gut. He felt the familiar burn of tears behind his eyes and forced himself to look away.

Chapter 866:

The meeting was interrupted by a commotion in the hallway. The school bell had rung for a short break, and Davy and Elia had come looking for their brother.

Maya quickly excused herself and went to the door to intercept them.

“Daddy!” Elia’s small voice piped up. She slipped past Maya and ran to Hilliard, her arms wrapping around his leg. She looked up at him, her big eyes wide with a worry she couldn’t quite articulate. “Is Mommy really in Europe? When is she coming back?”

Hilliard’s carefully constructed composure threatened to crack. He lifted Elia onto his lap, forcing a smile that felt like a grimace. “Soon, sweetheart. As soon as her work is done.”

Davy stood by the door, his arms crossed, his expression suspicious. “You’re not lying, are you?” he challenged. “If you hurt her, I’ll find a way to make you pay.”

A bitter, humorless smile touched Hilliard’s lips. He reached out and ruffled Davy’s hair. “I swear to you,” he said, his voice thick, “no one on this earth wants her home and safe more than I do.”

Aron stood silently by the teacher’s desk, watching his father juggle the heavy, fragile lie. He looked down at the floor, biting his lip so hard he could taste blood.

Maya, a master of social graces, produced a bar of expensive Swiss chocolate and successfully lured Davy and Elia back into the hallway.

The classroom was quiet again. Hilliard took a business card from his wallet and handed it to Ms. Jenkins.

"If Aron has any trouble," he said, his tone shifting, becoming cold and hard, "or if anyone, and I mean anyone, tries to approach him on school grounds, you call this number. Immediately."

Ms. Jenkins nodded, taking the card as if it were a royal decree.

The conference finally ended. Hilliard walked out into the hallway, feeling more exhausted than if he had just closed a hundred-billion-dollar merger.

He watched his three children, clustered around Maya, and a fierce, desperate wave of protectiveness washed over him. He would get her back. He would fix this. He would put his family back together, no matter the cost.

Just then, a shrill, piercing electronic tone erupted from his pocket.

It was the encrypted satellite phone. The sound was the highest-level security alert. A catastrophe-level warning.

The emergency alert was a digital scream in the genteel, carpeted hallway of St. Jude's. Parents turned to stare, their polite conversations faltering.

Hilliard's face went pale. He spun around, turning his back on the children, and answered the call.

"Hilliard! She's gone!" Julian's voice was a raw, panicked shout on the other end of the line. "They took her! Cailin is gone from the ICU!"

A roar of static filled Hilliard's head. The world tilted on its axis. "What do you mean, gone?" he snarled into the phone, his voice a low, dangerous whisper. "Sebastian's men were everywhere! The entire floor was on lockdown!"

Chapter 867:

"It was Aguirre!" Julian yelled, his words tumbling out in a frantic rush. "That crazy son of a bitch used a military helicopter! They dropped gas grenades down the ventilation shafts on the roof, knocked out the entire floor! By the time we breached the ICU, he was gone! He took her, Hilliard! He took her and the portable ECMO machine and airlifted her off the goddamn roof!"

Hilliard's breath came in ragged, furious gasps. His knuckles were white where he gripped the phone with his limited mobility. "Where? Where did he take her?"

"We tracked the chopper's flight path," Julian said, a note of disbelief in his voice. "He's not heading for an airport. He's not going back to Europe. He's flying north. Upstate New York. Toward the Adirondacks."

Upstate. The word was a key, unlocking a terrible, sudden understanding in Hilliard's mind. Silas's intelligence reports flashed through his memory. The Adirondacks. The location of the Vance family's fortified private compound.

"He's going for the antidote," Hilliard breathed, the pieces clicking into place with horrifying clarity. "That magnificent, suicidal bastard is going to war with the Vances. Alone."

He was no longer thinking. He was acting. Pure, cold, lethal instinct.

"Scramble the Shadow Unit," he commanded, his voice like ice. "Full tactical loadout. I want heavy weapons. I want a convoy of armored SUVs at my position immediately. I don't care if you have to drive through the hospital lobby. Move!"

He hung up and turned. Maya was standing there, her arms around the three children, her face a mask of concern.

Hilliard strode toward them, his expression so grim, so utterly terrifying, that Maya took an involuntary step back.

"Maya," he said, his voice leaving no room for argument. "Take them to the safe house. Initiate lockdown protocol Omega. No one gets in or out."

He looked at her, his eyes burning with an intensity that was almost a physical force. "Whatever you hear, whatever happens, you do not let them out of your sight. Do you understand me?"

She saw the abyss in his eyes and knew this was more than a crisis. This was an apocalypse. She nodded, her own fear forgotten in the face of his absolute resolve.

He knelt, his movement stiff and pained, pulling his three children into a fierce, desperate embrace.

“Daddy has to go get Mommy,” he whispered, pressing a kiss to Elia’s forehead. “I’m going to bring her home.”

Aron grabbed his sleeve, his small hand a desperate vise. “You have to,” he said, his voice trembling. “You have to bring her back.”

Hilliard looked his eldest son in the eye. “On my life,” he vowed.

He stood, turned, and limped toward the exit with a predatory urgency. He didn’t look back.

Ten minutes later, a black, armored Cadillac Escalade was screaming up the FDR Drive. Hilliard was in the back, his body braced against the leather seat, his right arm still encased in the heavy plaster cast and his left shoulder screaming in agony with every jolt of the vehicle. He didn’t care about the pain; he had pushed it into a dark corner of his mind, replaced by a blinding, singular rage.

Chapter 868:

Beside him, a Shadow Unit operative was meticulously prepping his gear, carefully sliding a plate carrier over Hilliard’s braced shoulder and securing the ceramic armor around his torso, treating the injured man like a weapon being armed for battle.

A storm was gathering over the city, the sky a bruised, angry purple.

He put in his tactical earpiece, connecting to the Shadow Unit's encrypted comms channel.

Julian's voice crackled to life. "Boss, we have satellite imagery. Kegan's chopper has landed on the perimeter of the Vance estate. His men are engaging their private security force. It's a goddamn firefight."

"Tell our men to hold their fire unless they are directly targeted," Hilliard roared, his voice vibrating with a lethal authority that masked his physical fragility. "No one touches Cailin! She is mine!"

He knew. He knew that fragile, portable ECMO machine was her only lifeline. A stray bullet, a power failure in the middle of a gun battle, and she would be gone forever. Kegan's insane, reckless assault was going to get her killed.

The clock was ticking. Less than thirty hours left. The poison was eating away at her, second by second.

The Escalade flew past the city limits, a black missile tearing up the interstate, heading for the mountains.

Hilliard didn't care about Kegan. He didn't care about the Vances. He didn't care if he had to start a war that would bring in the National Guard.

He had only one thought. One purpose.

Get to that compound. Get the antidote.

And bring his wife home.

The black Cadillac Escalade tore through the rain like a beast, its armored chassis shrugging off the storm. It skidded to a halt in a spray of mud and gravel at the entrance of the abandoned logging yard, the tires screaming in protest.

The passenger door flew open before the vehicle had fully stopped.

Hilliard Holloway launched himself into the downpour, a tactical rifle held tight against his shoulder, the cast on his other arm a clumsy, white counterweight. He scanned the area, his senses primed for the crack of gunfire, the chaos of a firefight.

There was nothing.

The logging yard was dead silent, save for the relentless drumming of rain on rusted corrugated iron roofs and the sigh of wind through the skeletal remains of old machinery. The air, thick with the smell of wet earth and pine, was utterly still.

No muzzle flashes. No shouting. No war.

He keyed his tactical earpiece, his voice a low, vicious snarl. "Julian, what the hell am I looking at? Your intel said this was the rendezvous point. Where is the firefight?"

Julian's voice crackled back, tight with confusion. "The intel is solid, boss. Kegan's chopper signal went dark right on top of those coordinates. His ground team is pushing the engagement with Vance security less than five miles east of your position. The frontline moved, but he should be here at the landing zone."

Hilliard's gaze cut through the curtain of rain, sweeping across the desolate yard. His eyes locked on a lone figure standing in the center of the clearing.

A tall silhouette, unmoving, letting the freezing rain soak him to the bone.

It was Kegan Aguirre.

Chapter 869:

He was alone. No men, no weapons drawn. He just stood there, a statue of despair carved from shadow and rain.

Hilliard kept his rifle raised, the safety off. He moved forward, each step a deliberate, predatory advance through the sucking mud, the barrel of his weapon trained unwaveringly on the center of Kegan's skull. This had to be a trap.

Kegan turned slowly, his movements heavy, sluggish. The usual mocking smirk was gone from his face. In its place was a terrifying emptiness, a hollowed-out void. His lips were tinged with blue, from cold or rage, or something far worse.

"She's gone."

The words were a raw scrape of sound, like sandpaper on bone.

Hilliard's world narrowed to the space between them. His finger tightened on the trigger. "What game are you playing, Aguirre?" he roared, the sound swallowed by the storm. "Where is she? Where is Cailin?"

A sound that might have been a laugh, or a sob, escaped Kegan's throat. He raised a trembling hand and pointed toward the far side of the yard. A military helicopter, its side door ripped from its hinges, sat half-hidden behind a stack of rotting logs.

"I brought her out of the ICU to get the antidote," Kegan said, his voice cracking. "I was going to trade myself for it. But now... I've lost her."

The words didn't compute. Hilliard's brain was a wall of white static. He closed the distance in three powerful strides, the rifle forgotten. He grabbed the front of Kegan's expensive, rain-soaked coat, his knuckles digging into the man's chest.

He slammed Kegan backward, the impact of his body against a pile of wet lumber a dull, sickening thud. "Lost her? What the hell does that mean?"

A flashback, sharp and unwanted, seared through Kegan's mind.

Hours earlier. The stolen military helicopter touched down on a private airstrip bordering the Vance estate in upstate New York, its rotors roaring as it cut through the gloom.

He had carried her out of the cabin, Cailin a fragile weight in his arms, wrapped in a thermal blanket, the portable life-support unit humming softly against his side. Her face was ashen, her breathing shallow even with the machine's help.

His younger brother, Damian Aguirre, was waiting on the tarmac. He stood flanked by a joint force of Vance mercenaries and a dozen of the Aguirre family's elite guards, a lazy, provocative smile on his face.

"Brother," Damian said, his tone dripping with false concern as he blocked Kegan's path. "Welcome to the fortress."

"Get out of my way, Damian," Kegan growled, his eyes cold. He didn't have time for this. Every second was a second closer to Cailin's death.

Damian's smile widened. "Our father is inside with Silas Vance. He brokered an alliance. Father's orders. The woman doesn't set foot in the main house. He said she's... unclean."

Kegan felt a murderous rage spike in his chest. "I need the antidote. I know they have it."

"Oh, father has it," Damian confirmed, shrugging. "But he'll only see you. Alone. He said to leave your little stray here."

Chapter 870:

It was a trap. Kegan knew it. But then he looked down at Cailin's face, at the faint blue tinge around her lips. He had no choice. He was walking into the lion's den, and he had to leave his entire world unprotected at the door.

He carried her to the small, private medical outpost adjacent to the landing pad, placing her gently on a gurney. He gave his most trusted man, Mr. Stone, a single, hard look. "Don't let anyone near her. Not even a doctor I don't approve."

Then, alone, Kegan had turned and walked toward the fortress-like mansion on the hill, preparing to face the devil who was his father and the Vance patriarch.

The memory shattered. Back in the rain-swept logging yard, Kegan shoved Hilliard off him, his eyes blazing with a wild, grief-stricken fire.

"I went to get the antidote," he choked out, rain and tears mixing on his face. "I had to see my father and Silas. It was the stupidest mistake of my life."

Hilliard stared at him. For the first time, he saw past the rivalry, past the hatred. He saw pure, unadulterated agony on Kegan Aguirre's face.

Slowly, deliberately, he lowered the rifle. Killing him now would solve nothing.

Julian's voice crackled in his ear. "Boss, the Shadow Unit is in position on the perimeter. We can clear this place in ninety seconds."

"Stand down," Hilliard commanded, his voice low. "Switch to search and rescue protocol. I want a five-mile grid search initiated, now."

He turned back to Kegan, his own expression a mask of cold, hard control. The storm raged around them, trapping the two mortal enemies in a cage of shared desperation.

"Tell me everything," Hilliard said, his voice flat and deadly. "What happened?"

Kegan wiped the rain from his face, his hand shaking. He began to speak, his voice raw with the story of a deal with the devil.

From the deep woods, the lonely howl of a wolf cut through the night, a lament for a soul lost in the storm.

The flashback continued, Kegan's voice narrating the memory as if it were happening in real time, the rain in the logging yard blurring with the oppressive atmosphere of his father's study.

He pushed open the heavy, oak-paneled door. The air inside was thick with the smell of old leather, expensive cigar smoke, and the suffocating weight of absolute power.

Silas Aguirre sat behind a desk the size of a small car, a lion in his den. He wasn't looking at Kegan. He was calmly, methodically polishing an antique Colt revolver, the soft scrape of the cloth against the blued steel the only sound in the room.

"For a son who's been living on the outside," Silas said, his voice a low, gravelly rumble, not looking up, "you finally deign to come home."

Kegan ignored the barb. He walked to the desk, his hands clenched into fists at his sides, fighting the primal urge to lunge across the polished mahogany. "The antidote," he said, his voice tight. "I know you have it. Name your price."