

Second chance 871

Chapter 871:

Silas carefully placed the revolver on a velvet cloth. He steepled his fingers, his cold, dead eyes finally lifting to meet Kegan's. "My price is not something you can afford, my son. Unless you pay with yourself."

He slid a single, thick document across the desk. It was bound in dark blue leather. A marriage contract.

"Sign it," Silas commanded, his voice devoid of emotion. "You will marry Isadora Vance. You will merge the Vance family's political machine in Florida with our logistics network. You will solidify the alliance I have spent a decade building."

Kegan stared at the document. The blood in his veins turned to ice. He knew Cailin had been targeted because of this very alliance. And now his father was demanding he use her life as the ink to sign the deal.

A guttural roar ripped from his throat. In a single, fluid motion, he drew his own weapon, the Glock a black extension of his rage, and pressed the muzzle firmly against Silas's forehead.

"I'll say it one more time," Kegan snarled, his voice shaking with fury. "Give me. The antidote."

Silas didn't even flinch. A small, cruel smile touched his lips. "Kill me, and she dies with me. The formula is in my head. And I will only give it to you in stages."

The words were a bucket of ice water.

“It’s a complex neurotoxin,” Silas explained calmly, as if discussing a business deal. “The antidote must be administered in three separate doses over seventy-two hours. One every eight hours. Any deviation, and her nervous system will collapse. I will give you the first dose. The rest... depend on your cooperation.”

It was a perfect trap. A leash with an eight-hour chain.

As Kegan stood there, his soul tearing itself apart, the study door burst open.

Mr. Stone stumbled in, his face sheet-white. “Sir! It’s Ms. Morton! Her condition is deteriorating rapidly!”

Kegan’s world shattered. He dropped his gun and sprinted from the room, a blur of motion, his heart pounding a frantic, terrified rhythm against his ribs.

He burst into the medical wing. The scene was chaos. Cailin was convulsing violently on the bed, her back arching, a thin trickle of bright red foam bubbling from her lips. The heart monitor was screaming, the numbers dropping like a stone.

“The toxin is attacking her respiratory center!” a doctor yelled over the alarms. “We’re losing her!”

Kegan fell to his knees beside the bed. He grabbed her hand. It was ice-cold, her skin clammy. He could feel the life draining out of her, slipping through his fingers like sand.

A shadow fell over him. Silas stood in the doorway, a ghost in a tailored suit. In his hand, he held a small glass vial filled with a pale blue liquid.

“Time is running out, Kegan,” Silas said, his voice a flat, inhuman thing. “Make your choice.”

Kegan looked from his father’s merciless face to Cailin’s. Her lips were turning a dusky shade of purple from lack of oxygen.

He felt something inside him break.

Slowly, he rose to his feet. He turned to face his father, his own face a mask of utter defeat.

Chapter 872:

“I’ll sign,” he rasped, the words tasting like ash and blood.

A flicker of triumph lit Silas’s cold eyes. He tossed the vial to Kegan.

Kegan didn't hesitate. He handed it to the doctor, who immediately drew the contents into a syringe and injected it into Cailin's IV line.

The effect was almost instantaneous. The violent convulsions ceased. Her body went limp. The frantic alarms on the monitor slowed, the numbers stabilizing into a weak but steady rhythm.

She was alive. For now.

Kegan felt the strength drain from his own body, leaving him hollowed out and empty. He walked back to the study like a man condemned, picked up a pen, and signed his name on the document that sold his soul.

The ink was barely dry before Silas moved. He had planned this too — every step of it. Within the hour, under the cover of the same storm that had swallowed the mountains, Silas's men transferred Cailin out of the medical wing. Kegan hadn't known. He'd been kept in the study, signing addendums, initialing clauses, a pen shoved in his hand by men who knew better than to let him breathe. By the time he'd fought his way back to the medical corridor, the bed was stripped bare. The monitors were dark. She was gone.

He'd found the helicopter later — or what was left of it. The side door had been torn from its hinges, the fuselage half-buried in the tree line at the edge of the compound. Someone had taken her. Someone had gotten there first, or someone on the inside had helped her out. Either way, she had vanished into the Adirondacks, and the clock on her next dose was still running.

Back in the present, in the cold, wet logging yard, Kegan finished his story. He closed his eyes, the pain of the memory raw on his face. "I traded my freedom," he said, his voice a hoarse whisper, "for eight hours of her life."

Hilliard listened, silent and still. For a fleeting moment, he understood the impossible choice this man had been forced to make. He understood the gilded cage Kegan was born into.

But the understanding was eclipsed by a cold, hard fury.

“And then you lost her,” Hilliard said, his voice dangerously quiet. “You handed her over to your father’s people, signed away your soul, and still managed to lose her.”

Kegan started to protest, to explain, but Hilliard cut him off, his gaze like a blade.

“When is the next dose due?”

“Tomorrow morning,” Kegan answered, his voice ragged. “Just before dawn.”

Hilliard glanced at his watch. They had less than six hours. Six hours to find her in the vast, unforgiving wilderness of the Adirondacks.

Or she would die. And this time, there would be no coming back.

The story continued, Kegan’s voice a low, pained monotone against the drumming of the rain. The flashback resumed in the sterile white quiet of the medical wing.

Chapter 873:

Kegan hadn't left her side since she'd been stabilized. He sat in a chair pulled up to her bed, using a warm, damp cloth to gently wipe the traces of blood from the corner of her mouth. Her breathing was even, the steady rise and fall of her chest a fragile miracle.

The door to the medical wing slid open with a soft hiss. A wave of expensive, cloying perfume — Chanel No. 5 — wafted into the room, an unwelcome intrusion.

Isadora Vance stood in the doorway. She was dressed in a pristine, cream-colored Chanel suit, a Hermès medical case clutched in her perfectly manicured hand. Her smile was a masterpiece of polite, calculated sympathy.

Kegan was on his feet in an instant, his body a physical barrier between her and Cailin's bed. He was a wolf guarding his wounded mate. "What are you doing here?" he growled.

Isadora didn't seem fazed by his hostility. She glided into the room, placing the expensive case on a sterile metal table. "I heard she was unwell," she said, her voice smooth as silk. "My father asked me to bring some of our family's proprietary analgesics and nutrient solutions. A gesture of goodwill."

She met his cold gaze without flinching. "I can't cure the poison Silas used. But I can make her remaining time... more comfortable." The words were laced with a subtle, proprietary venom. She is dying, and you are mine.

Kegan's hands clenched at his sides, the knuckles white. He knew she was telling the truth. The Vance family were pioneers in biotechnology; their palliative treatments were the best in the world.

Isadora's gaze flickered to the unconscious woman on the bed, a spark of cold, clinical curiosity in her eyes, mixed with a barely concealed contempt. Then she turned her attention back to Kegan, her expression softening.

"Kegan, I know you're worried. But tonight is the welcome dinner your father has arranged. The family elders will all be there to celebrate our... agreement."

She let the words hang in the air. "You just signed the contract. If you don't appear, it would be a public insult to my father. And to yours. That wouldn't be good for you. And it certainly wouldn't be good for... her."

It was a threat wrapped in velvet. A checkmate.

He was trapped. He couldn't leave Cailin, but if he angered Silas, the next dose of the antidote would never materialize.

As if reading his mind, Isadora offered a solution. "Don't worry," she said with a reassuring smile. "I'll leave my personal medical team here. They'll assist your doctors in caring for her. They're the best in the country. She'll be in excellent hands."

It was a brilliant move. An offer of help that was, in reality, an act of occupation. He couldn't refuse without causing a scene. He would be placing Cailin under the direct surveillance of the Vance family.

He looked into Isadora's seemingly sincere eyes and saw the cold, calculating mind of a beautiful serpent.

He had no choice. For the next dose, for the bigger picture, he had to play the part. He gave a single, curt nod.

Chapter 874:

He leaned over Cailin one last time, his lips brushing her temple. He turned to Mr. Stone. "No one performs any invasive procedures. No one. Not even Vance's people. Do you understand?"

Mr. Stone nodded grimly.

Kegan straightened his suit, smoothed his hair, and walked to the door where Isadora was waiting. He was the prodigal son, returning to the fold.

She looped her arm through his, her touch feeling like a brand. He could feel the rigid tension in his muscles.

"You've changed, Kegan," she whispered in his ear as they walked down the long, silent corridor toward the main house. "The man I remember would never have compromised for anyone."

He didn't answer. His silence was her victory.

The flashback ended. In the logging yard, Kegan slammed his fist into the trunk of a massive pine tree. Bark splintered, and blood welled from his scraped knuckles, mixing with the rain.

"I was gone for two hours!" he roared, his voice thick with self-loathing. "Two hours, for a goddamn dinner party!"

Hilliard's eyes narrowed, becoming hard and dangerous. "You're telling me you left her in the care of your enemies?"

"No," Kegan said, shaking his head, the pain in his eyes raw. "Isadora and her team were at the dinner. I left Cailin with the people I trusted most. Mr. Stone and my own personal guard."

"And they were moved," Hilliard finished for him, the pieces of the puzzle clicking into place.

Kegan nodded, his face a mask of pure hatred. "It was Damian. My brother. He used our father's authority. He issued an order to redeploy all security from the medical wing to the main house, citing a potential external threat. He stripped her of all protection."

Hilliard saw the whole elegant, brutal conspiracy. Silas forced Kegan to the table. Isadora kept him there. And Damian, the loyal jackal, moved in for the kill. It was a perfectly executed betrayal, carried out by the people Kegan was supposed to trust with his life.

Hilliard's phone vibrated in his pocket. A text from Julian.

Preliminary thermal scans show heavy vehicle tracks, fifteen miles east of your position. Edge of the state forest preserve.

Hilliard forwarded the coordinates to Kegan's phone.

"Get in the car," he ordered, his voice flat and devoid of emotion.

For the first time, the two wounded beasts climbed into the same vehicle, united by a single, burning purpose, and sped off into the dark, rain-swept forest.

The Escalade's powerful engine was a low growl as it devoured the muddy track leading deeper into the forest. Inside, the silence was thick and heavy, broken only by Kegan's ragged breathing as the flashback reached its brutal conclusion.

He had been on edge the entire dinner. He'd swallowed the tasteless food, endured the meaningless toasts from ancient family patriarchs, and smiled when Isadora's hand rested on his. But a cold, gnawing dread was coiling in his gut.

He made his excuses the moment he could, a curt nod to his father, and practically ran from the grand dining hall.

He sprinted down the long, empty corridors back to the medical wing, his heart hammering against his ribs.

Chapter 875:

The door was ajar.

The room was empty.

Cailin's bed was a mess of tangled sheets. The thermal blanket lay crumpled on the floor. The portable ECMO machine was gone. Mr. Stone was gone. Every single guard was gone.

A roar of pure, primal terror built in Kegan's chest. He stormed into the security monitoring room. The footage from the last thirty minutes had been wiped. A clean, professional erasure.

He felt the world tilt, a wave of nausea washing over him. He pulled out his phone, his fingers fumbling as he activated the secret GPS tracker he'd hidden inside the ECMO unit's casing.

A red dot blinked on the screen. It was moving. Fast. Heading north, away from the estate, toward the dense, black expanse of the Adirondack forest.

Kegan didn't think. He acted. He commandeered a black Range Rover from the motor pool, the tires screaming as he tore out of the estate, following the signal.

He caught up to it on a deserted dirt road at the edge of the forest. A black G-Wagon was parked haphazardly, its engine still running. His brother, Damian, was leaning against the hood, smoking a cigarette, the glowing red tip a malevolent eye in the darkness.

Kegan slammed on the brakes and leaped from the car, his eyes burning red with a murderous rage. "Where is she, Damian?"

Damian took a long, slow drag from his cigarette, a cruel, lazy smile playing on his lips. He exhaled a plume of smoke and gestured with his chin toward the impenetrable darkness of the woods.

"I put her where she belongs," he said, his voice laced with contempt. "Father said to take out the trash. So I did."

He flicked the cigarette butt into a puddle. "Don't worry, I left her little life-support toy with her. It should keep her breathing for another hour or two. Whether the wolves find her before you do... well, that's up to fate."

In that moment, the last thread of Kegan's sanity snapped.

He didn't scream. He didn't threaten. He moved.

He launched himself at his brother like a cannonball. The first punch shattered Damian's nose, the sound a wet, sickening crunch. The second sent two of his teeth skittering across the gravel.

Damian's bodyguards started to move, but Kegan shot them a look of such pure, demonic fury that they froze in place, paralyzed.

He grabbed Damian by his expensive cashmere sweater and slammed him onto the hood of the G-Wagon. He rained down blows, one after another, his fists pistons of pure, unadulterated rage, until his brother's handsome face was a ruined, bloody pulp.

He wasn't done. He grabbed Damian by the hair and dragged him off the car, pulling him into the forest, through the mud and thorns, Damian's body leaving a shallow trench in the wet earth.

He hauled his brother's limp, broken form to the edge of a shallow ravine and threw him in.

Chapter 876:

"You can wait for her here," Kegan rasped, his voice a low, terrifying thing. "Let's see who the wolves get first."

He turned his back on his brother's unconscious body and plunged into the darkness, screaming Cailin's name until his throat was raw.

The flashback ended. In the Escalade, Kegan's voice was a choked whisper. "I searched for three hours. Until the tracker signal just... stopped."

In the passenger seat, Hilliard said nothing. His right arm lay immobilized in its plaster cast against his torso, his left shoulder locked rigid in its brace. He could not turn to look at Kegan. He could barely draw a full breath without the fractured sternum punishing him for it. But he was listening — with the kind of absolute, predatory focus that had nothing to do with the body and everything to do with the mind.

“The battery died, or the unit was destroyed,” he said at last, his voice cold and analytical, each word measured against the pain of breathing.

“I was heading back to the logging yard to rally my men when you found me,” Kegan confirmed.

Kegan drove in silence for a moment, his knuckles white on the steering wheel. The SUV rounded a bend, its headlights cutting through the gloom. They had reached the spot from Julian’s satellite data. The tire tracks were deep in the mud, just as described.

Kegan killed the engine and stepped out. On the passenger side, he pulled open Hilliard’s door without a word and gripped the man’s good elbow, steadying him as he descended. Hilliard accepted the help without comment. Neither of them made it mean anything.

Kegan dropped to his knees, his eyes scanning the ground. His underworld upbringing had taught him things a boardroom never could. He was a natural tracker.

His fingers found something in the mud. A small, torn scrap of silver fabric. A piece of the thermal blanket.

And next to it, faint but unmistakable, was a boot print. It wasn’t his. It wasn’t Damian’s. It was larger, deeper, the tread that of a serious outdoorsman.

At the same moment, a sharp tone cut through the darkness. One of Kegan’s men — a shadow operative who had followed two car lengths behind in a separate vehicle — jogged forward, a military-grade thermal drone controller already in hand. He had been running support for the entire operation,

serving as Hilliard's extension in all the ways Hilliard's body currently refused to be. He held the screen toward them both.

"Heat signature," the operative said. "Two miles northwest. Small structure. Looks like a cabin."

Hilliard's eyes locked onto the screen. "Someone else found her first," he said.

Deep in the forest, the rain had softened to a fine mist. Moonlight struggled through the canopy of wet leaves, casting the forest floor in a patchwork of silver and black.

Chapter 877:

Rowan Vance moved through the woods with a quiet, practiced ease. He wore a waxed canvas hunting jacket and sturdy military-style boots, a high-powered rifle slung over his shoulder. At his side, his loyal hound — a powerfully built Rhodesian Ridgeback named Buck — trotted silently at his heel.

This was his ritual. His sanctuary. Three months ago, after the collapse of a business negotiation that had cost him everything he still cared about in the family empire, he had walked away from the boardrooms and the banquet halls and come here — to this vast, isolated estate deep in the Adirondacks that the Vance family had owned for generations but rarely used. He was not a recluse by nature. He was a man in deliberate exile, choosing silence over the particular cruelty of his own kin. The estate had no staff, no guests, no obligations. That was precisely the point.

Suddenly, Buck stopped. The dog let out a low, guttural growl, the hackles on its back rising. It stared intently at the base of a massive, ancient oak tree a few yards ahead.

Rowan's hand went to the grip of his rifle. He moved forward cautiously, his eyes scanning the shadows, expecting a wounded bear or a cornered coyote.

What he saw stopped his heart.

A woman.

She was curled in a hollow between the gnarled roots of the great tree, a thin, silver thermal blanket pulled over her. Her face was a ghostly white in the moonlight, her lips a shade of pale blue. Beside her, a strange, compact medical device hummed softly, a single red light blinking like a weak, fading heartbeat.

Rowan's first instinct was to turn and walk away. This was trouble. The kind of trouble he had spent three months trying to outrun. This was the outside world, bleeding into his sanctuary — and in his experience, the outside world never arrived without consequences attached.

He tugged on Buck's leash, ready to retreat into the shadows.

But then the woman made a sound. A soft, broken murmur rising from her unconscious state.

"Mom... Dad... don't go..."

The words were barely a whisper — the plea of a lost child, stripped of all pretense, filled with a desperate and heartbreaking vulnerability.

Rowan froze.

The sound did something to him he hadn't anticipated. He was not a sentimental man. The Vance family had seen to that efficiently enough over the years. But that whisper — small and unguarded and utterly without artifice — found a crack in the armor he hadn't known was still there.

He turned back.

He knelt beside her, his movements slow and deliberate. He brushed a strand of wet, dark hair from her forehead, revealing a face that was, even in its deathly pallor, arrestingly beautiful.

He glanced at the medical device. He didn't know precisely what it was, but the battery indicator was flashing red. Whatever it was doing for her, it was almost out of time.

He pressed two fingers to the side of her throat. Her pulse was faint, thready — a butterfly's wingbeat against his fingertips. Barely there. Receding.

He knew, with a cold and absolute certainty, that if he left her here, she would be dead before the mist lifted.

Chapter 878:

He scanned the surrounding woods. Who was she? How had she reached this part of the estate, miles from any road? She was dressed for neither hiking nor weather. He noticed the faint impression of a hospital bracelet line still visible on her wrist — a pale band of skin unmarked by sun, as though something had been removed recently, or lost in flight. This was not a lost tourist. Someone had been caring for her, medically, and recently. That someone was no longer here.

Buck nudged his hand, whining softly, pushing his cold nose into Rowan's palm with unusual urgency.

Rowan let out a long, slow breath. He was inviting a storm into his quiet harbor. He knew it with the same bone-deep certainty that had served him well in every boardroom he had ever entered and every one he had ever walked out of.

But he couldn't shake the sound of that whispered plea. Don't go.

He made his choice.

He carefully, gently lifted her into his arms. She was impossibly light — fragile in the way that frightened him, the way that meant the margin between living and not was measured in minutes rather than hours. With his free hand, he grabbed the heavy medical device, tucking it against his side and keeping it as level as he could manage.

"Looks like we have a guest tonight, Buck," he said quietly.

The dog fell into step beside him without hesitation.

Rowan turned and started the long walk back through the dark, mist-threaded forest toward the warm, distant light of the cabin — carrying the dying, unknown woman as carefully as he had ever carried anything in his life.

He did not yet know her name. He did not know that she had spent the past weeks at the center of a war his own family had quietly declared. He did not know that bringing her in from the cold would be the act that finally, irrevocably, drew the line between himself and everything the Vance name had come to represent.

In his arms, Cailin's brow furrowed — a flicker of struggle surfacing even through the depths of her unconsciousness, as though some part of her knew, even now, that something had shifted.

Rowan quickened his pace. The weight in his arms felt less like a body and more like a reckoning.

The warm, dry air of the cabin was a welcome shock after the damp chill of the forest. A fire crackled in the large stone hearth, casting dancing shadows across the log walls and worn leather furniture.

Preston laid Cailin gently on the bed in his own room, the soft flannel of the duvet a stark contrast to her deathly pale skin. He found the power port on the side of the humming medical device and, using a universal adapter, plugged it into the cabin's generator system. The frantic red blinking of the battery light turned to a steady, reassuring green. One crisis averted.

He began to carefully remove her wet outer layers to prevent hypothermia. As he unzipped her jacket, he saw it.

A fresh, brutally stitched wound on her abdomen. It was a knife wound, barely beginning to heal.

This wasn't an accident. She was a fugitive. Hunted. The trouble he had invited in was far more dangerous than he had imagined.

Chapter 879:

He hesitated, a cold wave of self-preservation washing over him. He could leave her here. Give her shelter, and then disappear back into his woods, pretend this never happened.

But as he watched her, he saw something else. A faint, dark, web-like pattern was beginning to appear on the skin of her neck, spreading like a black frost beneath the surface. Her breathing, even with the machine's help, was becoming shallower.

She was poisoned.

The realization hit him like a physical blow. She didn't need shelter; she needed an antidote. She needed a hospital.

He was at a crossroads. Taking her to a hospital meant records, questions. It meant exposing himself, shattering the anonymity he had so carefully cultivated for a decade. It meant re-engaging with a world he despised.

He walked to the window, staring out at the dark, silent trees, his own reflection a ghostly figure in the glass. He was at war with himself. The hermit versus the man he used to be.

The memory of his daughter's face, pale and still in a hospital bed, flashed in his mind.

Humanity won.

He walked to a heavy wooden chest in the corner of the room and pulled out an old, rugged satellite phone — his only link to the outside world. He dialed a number from memory.

"It's me," he said, his voice rough from disuse. "I have a female, mid-twenties. Unconscious. Apparent neurotoxin exposure. I'm bringing her to the hospital in Lake Placid. I need a private ICU room ready, and I need the best toxicologist on the East Coast on a plane. Now."

He ended the call without waiting for a reply. He wrapped Cailin tightly in a dry, woolen blanket, lifted her and the life-support unit once more, and carried her out to the garage.

Two miles away, Hilliard and Kegan were fighting their way through the dense undergrowth. The drone had given them a location, but the thick forest canopy was scrambling the thermal imaging, making it impossible to see inside the cabin. They were moving on foot, silent and cautious.

Kegan, moving with the instinct of a predator, found a new sign by a small, rushing creek. A patch of crushed ferns, and in the soft mud, the clear, deep impression of a boot print.

"Not Damian's," Kegan grunted. "This is a heavier man. And these are professional hiking boots."

Hilliard's face grew even darker. A third party was confirmed.

Just then, Julian's voice crackled urgently in Hilliard's earpiece. "Boss, we have a hit. An encrypted satellite phone just activated within a mile of your position. Thirty-second call. The signal was routed to a Dr. Alistair Finch, chief of staff at the Lake Placid Medical Center."

Hilliard and Kegan locked eyes. The same thought hit them both at the same instant.

Whoever took her is taking her to a hospital.

"Go!" Hilliard roared.

They abandoned the stealthy approach to the cabin and crashed back through the woods, running with a desperate, reckless speed toward the Escalade. They had to get to that hospital first.

Chapter 880:

At the same time, the powerful engine of Preston's Land Rover Defender roared to life. He navigated the rugged private road, his knuckles white on the steering wheel, and pulled onto the winding mountain highway that led to Lake Placid.

In the back, Cailin's breathing faltered. A new, more urgent alarm began to beep from the life-support machine.

In the Escalade, Hilliard had a satellite map of the region displayed on the dashboard screen, barking coordinates and alternate routes at Julian.

Kegan sat in the passenger seat, methodically checking the action on his pistol, his face a mask of cold fury. "Whoever it is," he said, his voice a low growl, "if they hurt her, I'll kill them."

Two vehicles, carrying three men bound by one woman's fate, were now racing through the dark Adirondack night. One was a race to save a life. The other, a race to claim it.

And both were converging on the same, unsuspecting hospital.

The night deepened, blanketing the Adirondack mountains in an unforgiving darkness. The search on the ground had stalled. Kegan sat hunched in the back of the lead vehicle, the convoy positioned on the outskirts of Lake Placid — a ring of silent, armored predators circling the small town. Every access road to the hospital was being monitored, but they didn't know what vehicle they were looking for, or who was driving it.

The temperature had dropped, and the air outside was sharp with the promise of frost.

Hundreds of miles away, in a private medical suite at Columbia Presbyterian, Hilliard sat propped against a bank of pillows, his right arm sealed in a thick plaster cast and his left shoulder locked in its heavy brace. A tactical tablet had been clamped to a swing-arm mount bolted to his bedside rail — the only concession the medical staff had been willing to make after he had threatened to discharge himself at two in the morning. His fractured sternum made every sharp breath a precise, catalogued misery, but he

had learned to breathe shallow and speak in the clipped, economical cadences of a man rationing his own pain.

“Julian,” he said into the comm unit resting against his jaw, “I want into that hospital’s security network up there. Facial recognition, license plate readers, patient intake logs. Everything. Now.”

On the screen mounted before him, a live feed from Kegan’s vehicle showed his brother-in-law pacing the narrow corridor between the seats like a caged tiger, his restless energy bleeding through the pixelated image. He kept checking his watch, the hours ticking down to the next critical dose of the antidote.

Hilliard watched him through the feed, his voice cold and devoid of pity. “Your pacing won’t help. If we don’t find her, will your father give you the next dose?”

Kegan froze. The unspoken answer hung between them across the encrypted line. No. The reality was a suffocating weight.

Miles away from the Adirondacks, on Long Island, the Sinclair estate waited in a silence of a different kind — the locked, breathless silence of Lockdown Protocol Omega.