

## Second chance 881

### Chapter 881:

Every exterior gate had been sealed. The perimeter security detail had been doubled, then doubled again. Maya Foster had carried out Hilliard's orders to the letter: the children were here, inside these walls, under the protection of a full Sinclair security rotation, and no one — not a florist, not a delivery driver, certainly not a Holloway — had been permitted through the front gate since the lockdown began.

The opulent warmth of the Sinclair manor felt strangely muted and somber tonight. Aron, Davy, and Elia had been quiet since Maya had picked them up from school. They were huddled in the children's playroom, the colorful, cheerful space feeling hollow in the absence of their mother.

The whispers had already started among the staff. The news of Cailin's attack had spread like a virus, mutating with each telling.

A young maid named Annie, her heart soured by jealousy of the attention Cailin and her children received, saw her chance.

She entered the playroom carrying a tray with milk and cookies, her face arranged in an expression of exaggerated, theatrical sadness. "Oh, you poor, poor dears..."

Elia looked up from her doll, her small face clouded with worry. "Annie? When is Mommy coming home?"

Annie knelt, squeezing out a few crocodile tears. "Miss Morton... oh, honey, she might not be coming back. I heard... I heard she passed away on the way to the hospital."

The color drained from Elia's face. The doll slipped from her fingers and fell to the plush carpet with a soft thud. Tears welled in her big, dark eyes.

Davy leaped to his feet, his small body trembling with rage. He looked like a cornered wolf cub. "You're a liar!" he screamed, his voice high and shrill. "My mommy doesn't die!"

Annie feigned being startled, pressing a hand to her chest. "But it's what all the adults downstairs are saying," she continued, twisting the knife. "Mr. Holloway has already gone to make... arrangements."

A heartbroken wail tore from Elia's throat. Davy grabbed a heavy toy truck, his arm cocked back, ready to throw it at the maid's head.

The room was about to explode into chaos.

But then Aron, who had been sitting silently at his desk, stood up.

"Stop it."

His voice was not loud, but it was filled with an icy, adult authority that cut through the hysteria, stunning everyone into silence.

He walked to his sobbing sister and put a protective arm around her shoulders. Then he turned his cold, unnervingly calm eyes on Annie.

"My mother is not dead," Aron said, each word precise and deliberate.

He looked at Davy and Elia, his expression softening slightly, becoming that of a leader, a general rallying his troops. "Dad told me this morning before he left. Mom was hurt. Badly. She's at a special hospital, far away, getting fixed."

He didn't hide the danger, but he reframed it. "Dad and Uncle Kegan are with her. They're getting the best doctors in the world. Our job isn't to cry. Our job is to be brave, and wait for them to bring her home."

His composure was infectious. Elia's wails subsided into hiccuping sobs. Davy lowered the toy truck.

Aron helped his sister to her feet, wiping her tears with his thumb. Then he walked right up to the stunned maid and looked up at her, his small frame radiating an immense, intimidating power.

Chapter 882:

"If you ever speak a single lie to my brother and sister again," Aron said, his eyes a perfect, chilling replica of his father's, "I will have you removed from this house and make sure you never work in this city again."

Annie stared, speechless, terrified by the cold promise in a seven-year-old's eyes.

In the hallway, the head butler and Maya Foster had witnessed the entire exchange.

Maya moved swiftly, stepping into the room and taking Annie firmly by the arm. "You're done for the evening," she said, her voice pleasant and absolutely final. "Collect your things."

She marched the maid toward the door, then paused at the threshold and looked back at Aron. The boy had already returned to his desk. He sat with his spine straight, one arm still loosely around Elia's shoulders, his face calm and remote — a small figure holding the room together by sheer force of will.

Maya had worked for Hilliard Holloway for eleven years. She had watched him build an empire from controlled fury and iron composure. She had seen that same expression on his face a hundred times.

She had never expected to see it on a seven-year-old.

She pulled the door quietly shut behind her. The report she would send to Hilliard tonight would include a full account of Annie's conduct and a recommendation for immediate termination. But she would also include something else — a single line she suspected would mean more to him, in that sterile hospital room with his arms in casts and his wife missing in the Adirondacks, than anything else she could offer him tonight.

Your son held the line.

The butler's voice, sharp and laced with a fury rarely heard, echoed from down the hall as he fired Annie on the spot. "Pack your things. You have five minutes before security escorts you from the property."

Aron paid it no mind. He led his younger siblings back into his bedroom, closing the door firmly, creating a small, safe island in the sea of adult chaos.

Elia was still sniffing, her small shoulders shaking. Davy stood with his fists clenched, his face a thunderous mask of anger.

Aron walked to his bookshelf and took down a large, detailed globe of the Earth. He placed it on the floor in front of them.

He spun the globe slowly, then pointed to New York. "This is us," he said. Then his finger traced a path across the Atlantic. "And this is where Mommy is. She's like an astronaut who got sick on a mission. They had to take her to a special space station hospital to get better."

He was translating the terrifying adult world into a language they could understand, a story they could survive.

"It's a very dangerous mission," he admitted, his face serious. "Mommy is hurting, and Dad and Uncle Kegan are fighting the bad guys to get the magic medicine. They are working very, very hard."

He looked at them, his gaze intense. "That's why we can't cry and scream like we were just now. When we do that, it creates static. It messes up Dad's communicator, so he can't hear his orders. We would be helping the enemy."

Did you know that the life you're living today is the result of whether or not you've guarded your heart?

God gives us this counsel in His Word: Above all else, guard your heart, for it sets the course of your life.  
(Proverbs 4:23)

Why should I guard my heart? And what would I need to guard it from? God has given us a heart worth taking care of—a heart that has to be guarded from the things that pull us away from Him and from His truth. If the heart is what sets the course of my life, am I going to let it steer me while it's clouded with anger and resentment? With guilt and fear? With envy and comparison? With deception and false hope?

Guard your heart. Keep it in Jesus Christ, and He will keep your life.

Chapter 883:

Davy's eyes widened, the concept clicking into place. "So... if we make trouble, we're bad soldiers?"

"Exactly," Aron confirmed with a solemn nod. "We are the soldiers left at the base. Our mission is to protect the fort. We have to eat our dinner, go to bed on time, and not cause any trouble for the grown-ups. That's how we help Mommy and Daddy win the war."

Elia wiped a tear from her cheek with the back of her hand. "Being good is how we fight?" she whispered.

Aron gently stroked her hair. “It’s the best way.”

Davy and Elia looked at each other, a new, shared understanding passing between them. They both nodded, their small faces set with a grim, determined purpose. They were soldiers now.

Outside the door, Gregg Holloway leaned against the wall, his eyes closed. He had heard every word.

He was shaken to his core. A seven-year-old boy had just single-handedly managed a crisis that would have sent most adults into a tailspin, using a metaphor of such profound, gentle strength.

He thought of his own long-held image of Cailin Morton: a gold-digger, an unstable woman who had abandoned her family, a mother who would supposedly kill her own child.

But the boy in that room — the boy with more courage, empathy, and leadership than most men Gregg knew — could not have come from such a woman. A mother who could raise a son like that... she had to be extraordinary.

A wave of deep, unfamiliar shame washed over him. He remembered Cailin’s fierce, protective eyes in the courtroom. He remembered the reports of how she had shielded Elia from the boiling coffee, taking the burns herself.

For the first time, Gregg Holloway wondered if he — if his entire family — had been wrong about her from the very beginning.

Inside the room, the three children were wrapped in a tight hug, a small, unbreakable unit.

Gregg turned and walked silently down the hall to his study. He felt old, and tired, and deeply, profoundly mistaken.

He picked up the phone and dialed the number for the Holloway Group's chief legal counsel.

"This is Gregg Holloway," he said, his voice firm. "I want you to immediately halt any and all negative press campaigns related to Ms. Cailin Morton. Furthermore, I want you to facilitate a ten-million-dollar donation from my personal accounts to Mount Sinai Hospital."

He paused, taking a deep breath. "The donation is to establish a new fund. Name it The Cailin Morton Pediatric Critical Care Fund."

He hung up the phone and stared out the window into the gathering dusk. For the first time, he found himself genuinely praying that the woman he had despised for five years would survive. The Holloway family didn't need another socialite like Charla. It needed a queen. It needed the mother of a king like Aron.

Back in the bedroom, long after his siblings had fallen into an exhausted sleep, Aron quietly opened his laptop.

Chapter 884:

Bypassing the manor's formidable firewalls with practiced ease, he began to hack into the traffic camera and satellite surveillance systems of upstate New York.

He was a soldier, and he was beginning his own mission. He was going to find his mother.

After dropping Cailin at the Lake Placid Medical Center, ensuring she was admitted as a Jane Doe with no identifying paperwork, Preston drove back to his sprawling, secluded villa on the shores of the lake. He was bone-tired, the adrenaline of the night leaving him feeling hollowed out and raw.

He walked through the front door, expecting the familiar silence of his empty home. Instead, he was met with the sight of his sister-in-law, Eleonora — the formidable wife of his brother, Nikolai — and his niece, Isadora, sitting by the crackling fire in the great room.

“Eleonora,” he said, surprise momentarily breaking through his exhaustion. “What are you doing here? I thought you were in Palm Beach.”

Eleonora looked up from her book, her expression as cool and elegant as ever. “Isadora wanted to do some skiing before the season ends,” she explained, her voice smooth and measured. “We decided on a whim.”

Preston knew there was no such thing as a whim with the matriarch of the Vance family. He had abandoned the vipers’ nest of his family’s business years ago to escape her and Nikolai’s ruthless machinations. Her sudden appearance in his sanctuary was undoubtedly a calculated move, though for what purpose, he couldn’t immediately guess.

“Uncle Preston!” Isadora, a vibrant, energetic seventeen-year-old, jumped up and threw her arms around him. “I missed you! And I have to tell you something, it’s a huge secret. I think... I think I’m in love.”

Preston managed a tired smile, allowing his niece to pull him down onto the plush sofa. It warmed him slightly; he had always harbored a quiet grief for the daughter he had lost before she could ever call him 'Dad', and Isadora's affection was a small comfort. "Oh? And who is the unfortunate young man?"

Isadora blushed, launching into a breathless description. "He's older. And he works for the Holloway Group. He's brilliant, and so handsome, but very serious, almost sad..."

Preston listened with half an ear, his mind still back at the hospital, on the pale, unconscious woman whose life he had just irrevocably tied to his own.

Eleonora noticed his distraction. She set her teacup down with a soft click. "You look exhausted, darling," she observed, her eyes sharp and analytical. "And is that blood on your jacket sleeve?"

Preston's heart gave a hard jolt. He glanced down. A small, dark smear stained the cuff of his hunting jacket. Cailin's blood.

"A hunting accident," he lied, the words feeling clumsy in his mouth. "Clipped a deer on the road back. Had to... put it out of its misery."

Chapter 885:

Eleonora smiled, a small, tight curve of her lips that didn't reach her eyes. "How unfortunate." She didn't press the issue, but he saw the flicker of suspicion in her gaze. She knew him too well. Preston Vance was a healer at heart, a man who couldn't bear to see anything suffer — a perceived weakness that made him an outcast from the family empire.

Isadora, oblivious to the undercurrent of tension, tugged on his arm, begging him to take her shopping in town the next day. To avoid further questions, he agreed immediately. He needed to put distance between himself and the hospital, to erase his involvement completely.

He excused himself, claiming he needed a shower, and retreated to his study. He quickly sent a text to his private physician: Wipe everything. No trace of my involvement. She is a ghost.

In the living room, Eleonora watched him go, her expression unreadable. She turned to her personal assistant, who had been standing silently by the door. She had orchestrated the neurotoxin hit with the Aguirres, fully expecting Damian to have left Cailin dead in these very woods. Preston's bloodied sleeve and sudden nervousness were too coincidental.

"Check the local hospital," she murmured, her voice cold and precise. "See if my bleeding-heart brother-in-law dropped off a Jane Doe tonight suffering from a certain neurotoxin."

The assistant nodded and melted back into the shadows.

Isadora chattered on about her crush, her youthful excitement filling the quiet room.

Eleonora sipped her tea, her mind cold and clear. Her brother-in-law was a creature of habit, of rigid, self-imposed isolation. If he had stumbled upon her target and interfered with the assassination, he would pay the price.

A few minutes later, the assistant returned, bending to whisper in Eleonora's ear.

Eleonora's placid expression didn't change, but her fingers tightened on the delicate porcelain of her teacup.

The report was concise. The hospital's ICU had indeed admitted an unidentified female suffering from an advanced neurotoxin. Her condition was critical. More interesting, however, was the digital chatter. The hospital's network was under a massive, sustained cyber-assault from servers traced back to both the Holloway Group and the Sinclair conglomerate. They were looking for someone.

Eleonora already knew Cailin was Seraphina Sinclair's daughter, and that the Holloways were fiercely protecting her. The frantic digital assault only confirmed that the hounds were desperately searching for their precious asset.

She stood up, her movements graceful and deliberate. "Isadora, darling," she said, her voice bright. "A change of plans for tomorrow. Instead of shopping, I think we'll pay a visit to the hospital. A little charity work is always good for the soul."

Isadora looked confused but nodded obediently.

Eleonora walked to the large window overlooking the moonlit, ice-covered lake. A slow, cold smile spread across her face.

If Cailin Morton thought she had cheated death, she was sorely mistaken. Preston's interference was a nuisance, but it wouldn't change the outcome. Cailin Morton could not be allowed to live. Eleonora would simply have to finish the extermination herself.

The next morning, the Lake Placid Medical Center, usually a quiet, orderly place, was thrown into a state of flustered deference. Eleonora Vance, flanked by her daughter Isadora and a retinue of stone-faced bodyguards, swept into the lobby like visiting royalty.

Chapter 886:

The hospital administrator, a nervous man with a perpetually sweaty brow, greeted them personally, gushing about the Vance family's long history of generous donations.

Eleonora smiled graciously, cutting through his flattery with surgical precision. "I was so distressed to hear about the unidentified young woman who was brought in last night," she said, her voice dripping with practiced compassion. "It is our family's duty to care for those who cannot care for themselves. I would like to see her, to ensure she is receiving the best possible care."

The administrator, eager to please, immediately led them to the top-floor ICU.

They stopped outside a large glass window. Inside the room, a lone figure lay motionless in the bed, a pale ghost in a web of tubes and wires. The rhythmic beep of the monitors was the only sign of the life hanging in the balance.

Eleonora did not need a second glance.

The face was gaunt, drained of all color, ravaged by whatever ordeal had brought her here. But the architecture of it — the jaw, the cheekbones, the particular set of the brow — Eleonora would have known them in a darkened room. She had stood close enough to this woman to feel the warmth

radiating off her skin. She had wrapped her fingers around that pale wrist in the powder room of the Plaza and watched those eyes go wide with fear.

Cailin Morton.

Seraphina Sinclair's daughter.

She had known, of course. Ashely had told her everything. Wept it out, actually, between ragged, pathetic sobs — the ruby bracelet, the Sinclair name, the whole ugly inheritance of it. Eleonora had ordered the hit on this woman already knowing exactly whose blood ran through her veins.

And yet, seeing her here — broken, unconscious, utterly at Eleonora's mercy — something shifted in the calculus. The plan had been clean and distant. This was something else entirely.

Isadora leaned toward the glass, her expression caught between recognition and confusion. "Mother," she said quietly, "isn't that Kegan's fiancée? The woman from the Pulitzer Fountain proposal? The papers have been running photographs all week."

Eleonora did not look at her daughter. Her eyes remained fixed on the figure in the bed.

"Yes," she said simply. "It is."

A cold, terrible understanding had long since dawned in Eleonora's mind — she had set this in motion knowing full well who she was hunting. What struck her now, standing in this fluorescent corridor with the smell of antiseptic in the air, was how perfectly fortune had delivered the girl into her hands. And with that recognition came another, darker realization: Preston. He must have recognized her too. That's why he saved her. Not out of mercy, but out of some lingering loyalty — or fear — bound up in the history between their families. The thought was a double-edged knife of betrayal.

Eleonora's expression remained the mask of the benevolent matriarch, smooth and impenetrable. She turned to the hospital administrator.

Chapter 887:

"This poor dear," she said, her voice soft and full of concern. "It seems she is a friend of our associate, Mr. Aguirre. We simply cannot allow her to languish here. We will take full responsibility for her care."

She made a grand, generous offer. "I will arrange for her to be transferred immediately to our private medical facility in Florida. She will have the best specialists in the world attending to her."

The administrator, overwhelmed by this display of magnanimity, agreed without hesitation and rushed off to begin the paperwork.

Eleonora led Isadora away from the ICU, her composure absolute, her eyes as hard and cold as the frozen lake outside.

She paused in the empty corridor and spoke to her head of security, her voice a low, venomous whisper.

“Once the transfer is approved, you will not take her to Florida.”

The bodyguard inclined his head, listening intently.

“Find a place,” Eleonora commanded, her voice soft as silk but laced with poison. “A secure location. Off the books. Once she is there, you will disconnect the life support. Give her nothing but water and morphine. I want Seraphina Sinclair’s daughter to die slowly, awake and in pain, paying for the sins of her mother.”

It would be a slow, silent execution. A ghost, erased from the world, just as Seraphina had been.

The bodyguard nodded once and moved off to carry out his orders.

Miles away, in the dense woods outside of town, Hilliard and Kegan’s search team combed the terrain in methodical sweeps. The snowfall had erased most traces, but Julian’s team had been running a parallel track — pulling cell tower pings, cross-referencing hospital admission logs for any Jane Doe with trauma consistent with cold exposure and cardiac arrest.

Minutes later, Julian’s voice crackled in Hilliard’s ear, sharp with victory.

“Got her. A Jane Doe was brought into Lake Placid Medical Center last night — no ID, critical condition, admitted through the ER around 0300. Vitals match. Timeline matches. That’s her, boss.”

They finally had her location. But they had no idea that their prey was about to be moved from a hospital bed into a coffin. They were already too late.

Eleonora's head of security adjusted the forged hospital ID clipped to his lapel. His hand rested on the doorknob of the ICU nurses' station. He just needed to get past them, access the room, and the transfer would be complete. A clean, silent extraction.

He never got the chance to turn the knob.

The hospital's main entrance exploded inward.

Not with a bang, but with the silent, overwhelming force of organized violence. A phalanx of men in black tactical gear, their movements fluid and economical, fanned out across the lobby. They didn't draw weapons, but the heavy plates of their body armor and the cold professionalism in their eyes were more intimidating than any gun.

Seconds later, a second wave hit from the west entrance. Another team, wearing different gear but moving with the same deadly precision.

Hilliard Holloway's men and Kegan Aguirre's mercenaries had arrived at the exact same moment.

Chapter 888:

The two teams froze, recognizing each other as apex predators in the same jungle. A tense, silent standoff filled the sterile lobby, a breath held before a war.

In the upstairs corridor, the security chief's earpiece crackled with a panicked report from the lobby.

"Abort," he whispered into his cufflink microphone. "The package is compromised. Holloway and Aguirre are here."

He didn't wait for a reply. He melted back into the shadows of a service alcove, becoming just another visitor, his mission dissolving like smoke.

Hilliard and Kegan burst from separate elevators almost simultaneously, their faces masks of raw fury. They met outside the ICU, their personal bodyguards forming a tight, hostile circle. They were about to clash when a third group of men, bearing the subtle insignia of the Sinclair conglomerate, stepped forward to block the door.

A three-way standoff. Three private armies in a hospital corridor, all focused on one room.

"She's my wife," Hilliard snarled, his voice a low growl.

"She's my fiancée," Kegan shot back, his hand already moving toward the pistol holstered under his jacket.

"She is a Sinclair," a calm voice cut in, as Silas Sinclair stepped between them. "And no one is going in that room."

Just as the tension was about to snap, the main elevator chimed softly.

The doors slid open to reveal not more soldiers, but a team of men in impeccably tailored suits. They moved with the unhurried confidence of those who wield power not with guns, but with paper.

The lead lawyer, a man with silver hair and cold eyes, stepped forward. He addressed the three warring factions as if they were unruly children.

“Gentlemen. I am Mr. Davenport, representing the Vance family legal counsel.”

He gestured to an aide, who stepped forward and presented a crisp document to Hilliard, Kegan, and Silas.

“This is a court-signed emergency medical transfer authorization,” Davenport announced, his voice smooth and final. “It grants the Vance family foundation temporary medical guardianship over the patient, Jane Doe, currently in this room.”

Hilliard’s eyes scanned the paper, his mind refusing to process the legalese. He saw the judge’s signature. He saw the official court seal.

Then he saw the signature at the bottom of the authorization request. It was from the patriarch of the Aguirre family.

Kegan stared at it, his face contorting in disbelief and rage. “My father... he wouldn’t.”

“On the contrary,” Davenport said smoothly. “As the father of the patient’s legal fiancé, he has the standing to act in her best interest. The family has decided that Ms. Morton’s care will be transferred to a private Vance clinic in Florida, which houses one of the world’s leading toxicology labs.”

Hilliard shoved the paper at his own lawyer, who had just arrived, breathless. “Verify this. Now.”

While the lawyers huddled, their phones pressed to their ears in frantic calls, Hilliard tried to call Kegan. The line was dead. A powerful signal jammer had turned the entire floor into a digital black hole.

A moment later, his lawyer looked up, his face pale. “It’s ironclad, Hilliard. It’s legal. There’s nothing we can do.”

Chapter 889:

The words hit Hilliard like a physical blow. Checkmate.

As if on cue, a new team emerged from the service elevator. They were dressed in sterile blue scrubs, pushing a sealed, high-tech medical transport bed. They moved with quiet, professional efficiency, ignoring the armed standoff completely. They were the Vance medical team.

They entered the ICU.

Hilliard pressed his face against the glass, his breath fogging the pane. He watched, helpless, as they expertly disconnected Cailin from the hospital's machines and connected her to the portable life-support unit on the transport bed.

He saw her pale face, serene and still, as they lowered a clear, sealed canopy over her.

She was being put in a box. Right in front of him.

A primal roar of fury tore from his throat. He lunged forward and snatched the authorization copy from his lawyer's hand, ripping it to shreds.

"Get Isadora Vance down here!" he bellowed. "I want to hear it from her!"

Davenport didn't even flinch. He calmly picked a piece of shredded paper from his sleeve. "Mrs. Vance is at her home in Palm Beach and has no knowledge of these arrangements," he said, his voice a placid lake of lies. "This is a matter handled entirely by the family's philanthropic foundation."

A perfect, beautiful, untouchable lie. An overt conspiracy played out in the open, wrapped in the unimpeachable armor of the law. Hilliard knew it was utter garbage. The Florida clinic and the Palm Beach alibi were nothing but a legal smokescreen to blindside them. His scouts had confirmed Eleonora and Isadora's presence in Lake Placid just hours ago, and he knew damn well about the family's fortified winter estate less than ten miles from this very hospital. Isadora was keeping her prize close.

The ICU doors opened. The medical team wheeled Cailin out.

She passed right by him. So close. He could have reached out and touched the cold plastic of her enclosure. He could smell the antiseptic, the faint, clinical scent of her impending death. But he couldn't touch her.

His phone suddenly buzzed in his hand. The jamming signal had been momentarily dropped. It was Kegan.

"They're taking her," Hilliard said, his voice hollow.

He heard Kegan's voice on the other end, no longer human, but the raw, guttural snarl of a cornered animal. "Stop them, Hilliard! I don't care how, stop them!"

But it was too late. The medical team was already loading her into a large, private elevator designated for rooftop access.

Hilliard sprinted for the stairwell, taking the steps three at a time, his lungs burning. He burst onto the rooftop landing just as the blades of a sleek, black medical helicopter began to spin, kicking up a furious downdraft.

He saw her, a formless shape inside the transport unit, being loaded aboard.

He ran.

The helicopter lifted off. The roar of the engines was deafening. The powerful wash from the rotors pushed him back.

Chapter 890:

He stood there, watching the red and white lights of the helicopter lift into the night sky. But they didn't head south toward Florida. Instead, the aircraft banked sharply, its trajectory locked directly toward the mountains — toward the Vance estate. The legal document was a complete decoy.

He was alone on the roof.

He turned and slammed his fist into the concrete parapet. Once. Twice. A third time. He didn't feel the pain, didn't notice the skin splitting over his knuckles, didn't see the blood that dripped onto the gritty surface of the roof.

He only felt a powerlessness so absolute, so profound, it felt like drowning.

The door to the rooftop burst open again. Kegan stood there, his chest heaving, his face a mask of disbelief and rage.

The two men, mortal enemies, stood facing each other on the empty, windswept roof, united by a single, crushing truth. They had both lost her.

“We go to the estate,” Hilliard said, his voice raspy, broken. “Now.”

Kegan nodded, his eyes burning with a cold, murderous fire.

They would get her back. Or they would burn the Vance dynasty to the ground.

Less than ten miles away, in a sumptuously decorated drawing room of the Vance family’s Lake Placid winter estate, Isadora Vance watched a high-resolution security feed on a large screen.

She had slipped out of the medical center the moment Eleonora had been distracted by the administrator. While her mother had coldly ordered a silent execution, Isadora had quietly intercepted the security chief and countermanded the directive. A dead girl was merely revenge; a living hostage with Sinclair blood was unparalleled leverage. After a swift drive back to her own stronghold and a deliberately misleading flight plan filed for Florida, the board was now entirely hers to play.

She saw the helicopter land. She saw Cailin’s transport unit being wheeled not into a clinic, but into a soundproofed, hidden room in the estate’s east wing.

The room was soft, padded, and comfortable. It had been prepared weeks ago, not for Cailin, but for another woman. A woman Isadora had just moved from a secure psychiatric facility to a guesthouse on the property.

A pawn. A weapon.

Peggy Vance.

Isadora took a slow, deliberate sip of her wine. A triumphant smile touched her lips.

Outside the main gates of the local Vance estate, a convoy of black SUVs screeched to a halt. Hilliard and Kegan got out. A uniformed guard informed them that Mrs. Vance was not accepting visitors.

Kegan didn't even reply. He turned to his head of security. "Ram the gate."

The estate's formidable defense systems came to life. Automated turrets emerged from the manicured lawns. The wrought-iron gates hummed with a high-voltage charge.

Just as the lead SUV revved its engine, the gates swung open.

Isadora Vance stood there, bathed in the soft light of the entryway, the picture of grace and composure. A silk robe was draped over her shoulders, a masterful costume change designed to sell the illusion that she had been resting here all night. Her expression was one of polite confusion.

"Hilliard? Kegan? What on earth is the meaning of this?"

Hilliard strode forward, his voice tight with barely controlled violence. "Where is she, Isadora? Where is Cailin?"

