

Second chance 901

Chapter 901:

At the last possible second, as Peggy's hands were inches from her chest, Cailin used her shattered ankle as a painful, grinding pivot. She spun sideways.

It was a move of impossible grace and precision, a bullfighter's veronica executed on the precipice of death. It took everything she had left.

Peggy, propelled by her own murderous momentum, shot past her.

Her scream was not one of rage, but of pure, abject terror as she flew over the edge where Cailin had just been standing. Her hands clawed at the empty air.

Cailin turned, her body trembling, and saw only the back of Peggy's head disappearing into the darkness.

A few seconds later, a sickening, final thud echoed up from the ground below.

Then, silence.

The tension that had held Cailin together, the adrenaline and the will to survive, snapped. Her legs gave out from under her. She crumpled to the cold, gritty surface of the roof.

The poison, the wounds, the blood loss, the sheer, crushing exhaustion, it all came crashing down on her at once. She couldn't move a finger.

She lay there, staring up at the cold, indifferent stars, her consciousness fraying at the edges.

She thought of Aron, of Davy, of Elia. Their faces swam in her mind. Live, a voice inside her whispered. You have to live.

She heard footsteps. Heavy, frantic, pounding up the old wooden stairs.

It's over, she thought. The guards are here to finish the job. She closed her eyes, too tired to even feel fear anymore.

But the voice she heard was not a stranger's. It was the one voice in the world that was etched into her very soul, a voice choked with a terror that mirrored her own.

"Cailin!"

Hilliard burst onto the rooftop. He saw the empty space, the stillness, and then he saw her, a small, crumpled heap on the ground. For a horrifying second, he thought he was too late.

He was across the roof in three strides, falling to his knees beside her. His hands, large and trembling, hovered over her, afraid to touch, afraid of what he might find. He gently felt for the pulse in her neck.

It was there. Faint. Thready. But it was there.

Cailin felt a warmth on her skin, a hand, shaking, brushing the hair from her face. She forced her heavy eyelids open.

She saw his face, his eyes red-rimmed and wild with a panic she had never seen in him before.

A weak, ironic smile touched her lips. Her voice was a bare whisper.

“You’re... late.”

And then the darkness she had been fighting for so long finally claimed her. She slipped under.

“No!” Hilliard’s voice was a raw, animal roar of grief and denial. “No, Cailin, don’t you dare!”

He gathered her into his arms, his movements impossibly gentle. He held her as if she were made of spun glass, the most precious, fragile thing in his entire universe.

He carried her down the stairs, his own injuries forgotten. As he emerged from the ruined villa, Kegan was there, his face a grim mask, his own team fanning out behind him.

Chapter 902:

The two men locked eyes for a split second over Cailin's unconscious form. There was no rivalry now. Only a shared, desperate goal.

Hilliard didn't break stride. He carried Cailin directly to the waiting medical helicopter, its blades already spinning.

Kegan didn't try to stop him. He turned to his men, his voice cold and hard as steel.

"Secure this entire area," he commanded. "I want every man wearing a Van Doren uniform found. I want them alive. For now."

The hunt was over. The war was just beginning.

Inside the medical helicopter, the air was thick with the scent of antiseptic and the urgent, quiet hum of machinery. A medic was cutting away Cailin's tattered gown, exposing the bruises and cuts that marred her pale skin. Another was inserting an IV line into her arm.

Hilliard sat beside her, his large frame crammed into the small space. He held her free hand, his thumb gently stroking her cold fingers. His eyes never left her face.

He watched the medic clean the grime from her cheek, revealing the delicate, familiar curve of her jaw. He used his own thumb to gently wipe away a smudge of dirt near her temple. His touch was so tender, so full of a reverence he had never known he possessed.

"Sir," the lead medic said, his voice low and professional. "Multiple contusions, lacerations. Severe sprain to the left ankle. The primary concerns are the abdominal stab wound, which appears to be infected, and the unknown toxin."

Hilliard listened, his face hardening with every word. The air around him grew cold, a palpable aura of rage that seemed to drop the temperature in the small cabin by several degrees.

He leaned down, his lips brushing against her forehead. Her skin was cool, almost clammy.

"I'm sorry," he whispered, the words meant for her alone. "I swear to you, Cailin. I will never let anyone hurt you again."

Miles away, at the Vance estate, the storm had arrived.

Isadora sat in her drawing room, a glass of vintage Bordeaux in her hand, waiting for the call confirming Cailin Morton's death.

Instead, her head of security burst into the room, his face the color of ash.

“Ma’am,” he stammered. “There’s a problem. Peggy Vance... she’s dead. She fell from the roof of the old villa.”

Isadora’s hand tightened on her glass.

“And Cailin Morton?” she asked, her voice dangerously calm.

“Gone,” the man choked out. “Holloway and Aguirre... their teams converged on the location. They have her.”

The wine glass slipped from Isadora’s fingers, shattering on the marble floor. The dark red liquid spread across the white rug like a pool of blood.

It wasn’t Peggy’s death that shocked her. It was that Cailin, after everything, was still alive. She had underestimated the woman’s resilience. A fatal mistake.

“Our men on site have been captured,” the security chief added, his voice trembling. “And the estate... we’re surrounded. All communications, inbound and outbound, have been severed. We’re cut off.”

Chapter 903:

For the first time in a very long time, Isadora felt a flicker of genuine fear. But she stamped it out instantly. Panic was a luxury she could not afford.

“Clean up everything,” she commanded, her voice regaining its icy composure. “Destroy all records of Peggy’s presence here. Prepare a statement. We know nothing.”

Her daughter, Giselle, appeared at the top of the stairs, her face pale with fright. “Mother? What’s happening? The staff are panicking.”

“It’s just a business dispute, darling,” Isadora said soothingly. “A misunderstanding. Go back to your room.”

Just as she was calming her daughter, the sound of a powerful engine echoed from the driveway. A black Bentley Mulsanne was pulling up to the main gate, only to be blocked by a line of Kegan’s armored SUVs.

Her husband, Cornelius Vance, was home.

Cornelius stepped out of the car, his face a thundercloud of fury. He saw the armed men, the blockade, the siege of his own home.

“What in God’s name is going on?” he roared at the gatehouse guard through the intercom.

Before the guard could answer, Kegan Aguirre stepped out from between two SUVs. He walked directly up to the gate, his face a mask of cold, controlled fury.

“Cornelius,” Kegan said, his voice devoid of any respect. “I suggest you ask your wife what she’s been doing while you were away.”

“You dare to come to my home and make threats, boy?” Cornelius thundered, his face flushing with rage.

Kegan just smiled, a cold, predatory baring of teeth. He snapped his fingers. Two of his men dragged a bruised and terrified figure forward and shoved him against the bars of the gate.

It was Isadora’s head of security.

Cornelius recognized him instantly. His eyes narrowed.

“This man,” Kegan said, his voice dangerously soft, “has just confessed to kidnapping and attempting to murder my fiancée, Cailin Morton. He says he was acting on orders. Your wife’s orders.”

The accusation hung in the air, heavy and poisonous.

Cornelius stared at his terrified employee, then back at Kegan. He was a man used to being in control, and his world was spinning out of it.

“That is my man,” Cornelius said, his voice now low and hard. “If he has something to say, he will say it to me.”

“He’s not going anywhere,” Kegan shot back.

The two men, the old patriarch and the young wolf, stood locked in a battle of wills at the gates of the besieged mansion.

Cornelius realized this was no longer about family drama or business alliances. This was an accusation that could shatter his family, his legacy. He took a deep, steadying breath, forcing down his pride and his rage.

“If what you say is true,” he said, his voice resonating with the authority of a lifetime of command, “you will have your justice. I give you my word. But you will withdraw your men now, and you will give me time to uncover the truth.”

The storm had breached the walls. And it was about to tear the House of Vance apart from the inside.

Chapter 904:

“I’m not going anywhere,” Kegan snarled, his hand resting on the butt of his gun. “I don’t trust your ‘internal investigations,’ Cornelius. I want the house searched, and I want your wife. Now.”

The insult was too much. Cornelius’s face hardened into a mask of cold fury. “You have made a grave error, young man,” he said, his voice dropping to a dangerous whisper. He gave a subtle nod to his own

security chief, who began issuing quiet commands into his radio. The guards inside the estate began to move, taking up defensive positions.

Kegan's men mirrored the action, raising their rifles. The night filled with the soft, deadly clicks of safeties being disengaged. Dozens of red laser dots danced across chests and foreheads. The air crackled, a single word away from a bloodbath.

A piercing squeal of tires cut through the tension.

A black, armored SUV bearing the Aguirre family crest skidded to a halt directly between the two factions.

The door opened, and Caleb Aguirre stepped out.

He was Kegan's older brother, but they were night and day. Where Kegan was a wildfire, Caleb was the deep, cold ocean. He moved with an unhurried grace that radiated absolute power. He ignored the dozens of guns pointed in his direction as if they were toys.

First, his cool, assessing gaze fell on Kegan. It was a look of quiet, unquestionable authority. Kegan's explosive rage faltered, his posture deflating slightly under his brother's silent command.

Then Caleb turned to Cornelius, inclining his head in a gesture of formal respect. "Cornelius. My apologies for my brother's... enthusiasm. He is emotional. May I have a word?"

Inside a hastily erected negotiation tent, the air was thick with tension. "Is your family declaring war on mine over a woman, Caleb?" Cornelius demanded, his voice tight with outrage.

Caleb calmly took a seat. "That 'woman,' Cornelius, is Cailin Morton. Or, as she will soon be known, Cailin Sinclair. She is Sebastian Sinclair's granddaughter. The sole heiress. Attacking her is not a personal matter. It is an act of war against two dynasties."

The color drained from Cornelius's face. The name Sinclair changed everything. This was no longer a messy affair to be swept under the rug. This was a potential cataclysm.

As Cornelius processed the horrifying new reality, Caleb played his trump card. He had the captured security chief brought into the tent.

Caleb didn't threaten the man. He made him an offer.

"You have two options," Caleb said, his voice calm and reasonable. "You can remain loyal to the woman who used you and left you for dead, and face the consequences. Or you can tell the truth. If you do, the Sinclair family will provide you with a new identity, a new life, anywhere in the world. Your family will be protected and provided for, for the rest of their lives."

It was a lifeline. An escape from certain death. The security chief's loyalty, already fractured, shattered completely.

Chapter 905:

He fell to his knees, not daring to look at Cornelius. In a choked, terrified voice, he confessed everything. The order from Mrs. Isadora Van Doren. The plan to transfer Cailin to the secret room. The instruction to hand her over to Peggy Vance for “disposal.”

The truth, stark and undeniable, filled the tent.

Cornelius sat in stunned silence. His fists were clenched so tightly his knuckles were white. The look in his eyes shifted from disbelief to a burning rage, and finally settled into a cold, bottomless disappointment.

Caleb watched him, knowing he had won. He stood up. “We trust you will handle your family affairs with the necessary discretion, Cornelius.”

He paused at the tent’s exit. “However, my brother, and the Sinclair family, require satisfaction. And more importantly,” his voice dropped, becoming hard as steel, “Cailin Morton requires the antidote. You have three days. Deliver the antidote and clean your house. Or the next time we come, we will not be stopping at the gate.”

Cornelius gave a slow, heavy nod. The deal was struck.

Caleb found Kegan pacing like a caged wolf. “It’s done,” Caleb said, stopping his brother with a hand on his shoulder. “The fuse is lit. He will detonate the bomb himself. Forcing our way in now only gives them a common enemy. We need him to turn on her.”

“Cailin doesn’t have time for your games!” Kegan snarled.

"The antidote, Kegan," Caleb said, his voice sharp. "That is the only thing that matters. Without it, we lose. She loses."

The mention of the antidote, of Cailin's life hanging in the balance, finally broke through Kegan's rage. He took a ragged breath, the fight going out of him, replaced by a cold, gnawing fear. With a gesture of supreme effort, he gave the signal to withdraw.

The black SUVs began to pull back, melting into the night like a receding tide.

From her window in the main house, Isadora watched them go. A slow, triumphant smile spread across her face. She had weathered the storm. She had won.

She had no idea that downstairs, in his dark, silent study, her husband was not with her. He was with his most trusted "fixer."

"I want her watched," Cornelius commanded, his voice a low, dead monotone. "Twenty-four hours a day. Every call, every text, every financial transaction. Cut off all her external communications without my express approval. I want to know everything she has done for the past six months."

The fixer nodded and disappeared.

Cornelius slammed the base of his heavy cane onto the hardwood floor. The sharp crack echoed in the empty room.

The internal audit had begun. His wife was now a prisoner in her own home, and she didn't even know it.

In the back of the retreating SUV, Kegan stared at the distant lights of the estate, his eyes still burning.

"She will destroy herself," Caleb said calmly. "The truth is a poison of its own."

"Cailin is running out of time," Kegan said, his voice raw with worry.

Chapter 906:

"I know," Caleb replied, his own face grim. "Our networks are already searching for the formula's origin. We will find another way. But until we do, every single person in that house is a potential key. And we will turn them all."

Kegan slammed his fist against the armored glass of the car window. A spiderweb of cracks appeared, but the glass held. The impotent violence did nothing to quell the fire in his gut.

Caleb, sitting opposite him, said nothing. He simply opened a small refrigerator built into the console and handed his brother a bottle of cold water.

"Why did you stop me?" Kegan demanded, his voice a low growl. "I should have burned that house to the ground."

“And then what?” Caleb asked calmly. “You would have forced Cornelius to defend his wife, to defend his family’s honor. You would have united them against us. And Cailin would have died while you were playing soldier.”

He let the words sink in. “This way, Cornelius is our weapon. He will tear his own family apart to find the truth, because his pride demands it. And in the chaos, we will get the antidote.”

Kegan took a long drink of water, the cold liquid doing little to soothe his frustration. He knew his brother was right. It was a smarter play. A colder one. But waiting was torture.

In his study at the Van Doren estate, Cornelius lit a thick cigar, the smoke curling around his head in the darkness. He had given his fixer one order: find everything. He needed to know the full extent of his wife’s betrayal. The shame was a physical weight, pressing down on him. The honor of his house had been stained, not by an external enemy, but from within.

The silent, internal war had begun.

At Mount Sinai Hospital in New York, the only war was the quiet, desperate one being waged inside Cailin’s body.

Her eyelids fluttered. The world swam back into focus, a blurry landscape of white ceilings and beeping machines. The first thing she saw was Hilliard.

He was asleep in a chair by her bed, his head slumped forward, his face etched with an exhaustion so profound it looked like a form of death. His expensive suit was rumpled and stained. He looked broken.

She made a small sound, a dry catch in her throat.

His eyes snapped open instantly, as if he had been waiting for that one sound. He saw she was awake, and a look of such immense, raw relief washed over his face that it momentarily stunned her.

“Cailin,” he breathed, surging forward, his hand finding hers. His touch was warm, his grip gentle.

Her memory was a fog. The roof. The fall. Peggy.

“Peggy?” she whispered, her voice a dry rasp.

“It’s over,” Hilliard said, his voice thick with emotion. “She’s gone. You’re safe.”

Safe. The word echoed in her mind. A wave of profound relief washed over her, and with it, a crushing exhaustion. The pain in her body, which had been a distant roar, came rushing back. The world dissolved into blackness again as she slipped back into unconsciousness.

“Doctor!” Hilliard’s panicked voice was the last thing she heard.

Chapter 907:

He had the doctors run every test again. An hour later, the head of toxicology called Hilliard into his office. The air was heavy, funereal.

The doctor, a kind-faced man with weary eyes, slid a file across his polished desk. "Mr. Holloway," he began, his voice grave. "The good news is that Ms. Morton's physical injuries, while severe, are treatable. The stab wound is clean, the fractures will heal. With time, she can make a full physical recovery."

Hilliard held his breath, waiting for the other shoe to drop.

"However," the doctor continued, tapping the toxicology report, "the poison... it's unlike anything we've ever seen. It's a highly sophisticated, custom-designed neurotoxin. A cocktail of synthetic compounds and rare biological agents."

A cold dread began to creep up Hilliard's spine. "Can you cure it?" he asked, his voice tight.

The doctor was silent for a long moment. He looked Hilliard directly in the eye.

Then he slowly, regretfully, shook his head.

"No," he said, the word landing with the finality of a coffin lid closing. "We can't. Our analysis shows it's designed to create cascading, irreversible cell death in the nervous system. There is no existing antidote. There is no treatment."

Hilliard felt the world tilt on its axis. He gripped the arms of his chair to keep from falling. "What are you saying?"

The doctor's voice was gentle, but his words were brutal. "Mr. Holloway, I am so sorry. Medically speaking, this poison is a death sentence. We can manage her pain. We can keep her comfortable. But we can't stop it. The damage is done, and it will continue until... until her systems fail completely."

He paused, taking a deep breath. "She doesn't have much time left."

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The words didn't just hit Hilliard. They passed through him, leaving a hollow, frozen void where his heart had been. The sounds of the hospital, the city, the world, it all faded away into a dull, roaring silence. All he could hear was that one terrible phrase, echoing in the ruins of his mind. Not much time left.

He didn't remember leaving the office. He found himself standing outside Cailin's ICU room, looking at her through the glass.

She was sleeping peacefully now, the pain medication having smoothed the lines of tension from her face. A faint touch of color had returned to her cheeks. She looked almost healthy. Almost beautiful.

A fierce, desperate love, more painful and powerful than anything he had ever felt, seized him.

He could not tell her.

He could not let her spend her last days, her last hours, living in the shadow of her own death. He would not let her final moments be filled with fear and despair.

He would bear this knowledge alone. He would carry this secret for her.

He would smile for her. He would lie to her. He would build a beautiful, fragile world for her to live in, for as long as she had left.

Chapter 908:

And in the secret, dark corners of his own soul, he would rage against the dying of the light. He would hunt for a miracle. He would tear the world apart to find a cure that didn't exist.

He would not let her die. He refused.

The first sliver of dawn cut through the blinds, striping the sterile white room with gray.

Hilliard hadn't slept.

He sat motionless in the uncomfortable visitor's chair, his large frame a study in tension. He held Cailin's hand, her fingers unnaturally cold against his skin.

The doctor's words echoed in the silent room, a relentless, punishing loop.

There is no existing antidote.

A death sentence.

Not much time left.

Each phrase was a physical blow, leaving him hollowed out. A raw, helpless rage burned in the pit of his stomach, a fire with nothing to consume but himself. He stared at her face, pale against the pillow, the faint rise and fall of her chest the only proof that she was still here.

He had to build a wall around her. A fortress of lies to keep the truth at bay.

He forced his features to relax, schooling them into a mask of weary concern. He practiced a smile in his mind, something gentle, reassuring. It felt like trying to bend steel with his bare hands.

Her eyelashes fluttered.

A soft, almost inaudible groan escaped her lips.

Hilliard's heart leaped into his throat, a frantic, painful hammering against his ribs. He leaned closer, his grip on her hand tightening instinctively.

"Cailin?"

Her eyes slowly opened, unfocused at first, then gradually sharpening on his face. The confusion in them was a fresh stab of pain.

"I... how long was I asleep?" she asked, her voice a dry, raspy whisper.

"Not long, Sleeping Beauty," he said, forcing a lightness he didn't feel. He reached out with his free hand, his fingers brushing a strand of hair from her forehead. The gesture felt clumsy, foreign. "You just needed the rest."

She blinked, trying to process. "The... the villa..."

"It's over," he said quickly, cutting off the memory. "You're safe now. You had a severe infection from the stab wound. It got pretty bad for a while, but the doctors have it under control."

He chose his words with surgical precision. Infection. Complications. He built the lie brick by brick, creating a plausible, non-fatal reality. He spoke of a “rare bacterial strain,” a story that sounded serious enough to justify her presence in the ICU but offered a clear path to recovery.

He never once said the word “poison.”

Cailin listened, her brow furrowed. She tried to shift, to sit up, but a sharp, searing pain in her abdomen made her gasp and fall back against the pillows.

“Easy,” Hilliard soothed, his hand pressing gently on her shoulder. “You had major surgery. You need to stay still.”

She wanted to touch the wound, to feel the bandages, but as she tried to lift her right hand, a new and different kind of alarm shot through her.

Her fingers wouldn’t obey.

Chapter 909:

She stared at her hand, lying limp on the white sheet. A strange, profound numbness radiated from her fingertips up to her wrist. It felt like it was encased in a thick, frozen glove.

Panic, cold and sharp, flared in her eyes. She looked at Hilliard, her voice trembling. “My hand... Hilliard, what’s wrong with my hand?”

His heart clenched. This was the first sign. The beginning of the end. But his face remained a mask of calm reassurance. He took her numb hand in both of his, chafing it gently as if he could rub the life back into it.

“It’s temporary nerve damage,” he said, his voice steady, his gaze unwavering. “The doctors said it’s common after a surgery this invasive. The way you were lying, the stress on your body... it can cause this.”

He squeezed her fingers. “They said with physical therapy, you’ll get the feeling back in a few weeks. I promise.”

Cailin tried to flex her fingers again. Nothing. The disconnect between her brain and her body was terrifying. The numbness wasn’t on the surface; it felt deep, in the bone, a chilling premonition of paralysis.

She stared into his eyes, searching for the truth. His gaze was so steady, so full of convincing concern. But she saw it. Just for a fraction of a second, a flicker of something else in their depths. A raw, bottomless agony that he couldn’t quite hide.

She knew that look. It was the same look he had when he was protecting his company, his family, his secrets.

He was lying to her.

A cold dread, colder than the numbness in her hand, seeped into her heart. He was trying to protect her, which meant the truth was far worse than a simple infection.

She stopped asking questions.

She let out a soft sigh and nodded, letting her eyelids droop. "Okay," she whispered. "I'm... I'm tired."

Hilliard thought she believed him. He felt a wave of relief so profound it almost made him dizzy. "Good," he said softly. "Get some more sleep. I'll be right here."

He watched as she closed her eyes and her breathing evened out.

He didn't know that behind those closed lids, her mind was wide awake, racing, trapped in a cage of fear. She could feel it. Something was wrong inside her, something that had nothing to do with a knife.

The door to the room burst open and Kegan Aguirre stormed in, bringing a gust of cold air and raw energy with him. He saw Cailin, seemingly asleep, and his frantic expression softened with a flicker of relief. Then his gaze landed on Hilliard, and his eyes hardened with urgent demand.

"What's the official word from toxicology?" Kegan demanded, his voice a low growl. "Did they identify the poison?"

Hilliard put a finger to his lips, his eyes darting toward Cailin. He stood up and gestured for Kegan to follow him out into the hallway, not wanting to risk waking her or letting her hear the fatal truth.

In the corridor, the fluorescent lights hummed overhead. "What did the doctors say?" Kegan pressed, his voice tight with controlled fury. "Can they synthesize a cure?"

Chapter 910:

Hilliard leaned against the wall, the sleepless night weighing on him. "They can't," he said, the words tasting like ash. "It's a custom-designed neurotoxin. The hospital has no antidote, and they say the damage is irreversible."

Kegan swore viciously under his breath, his fists clenching until his knuckles turned white. "Then I'll get it from Cornelius. I'll tear his life apart until he hands over the formula."

"Do what you have to." Hilliard looked Kegan directly in the eye. "But in that room, the story is severe complications from the stab wound. A rare infection. That's what I told her, and she believes it. She can't handle the truth right now. We need to keep her calm and hopeful. I need you to go along with this. Don't scare her."

Kegan stared back, his eyes narrowed with grief and helpless rage. He hated lying to her, but he saw the unyielding resolve in Hilliard's expression. For Cailin's sake, he gave a curt, reluctant nod.

Back in the room, Cailin waited until their footsteps faded. She slowly opened her eyes. With her good left hand, she reached for the phone Hilliard had left on the bedside table.

Her fingers trembled as she unlocked it and opened the browser.

She typed in the search bar, her heart pounding with each letter.

Numbness in hand after stab wound.

The results populated the screen. Medical journals, forums, articles. She scrolled past the expected entries about nerve damage and circulation issues.

Then she saw the other words. The ones that made the air freeze in her lungs.

Neurotoxin.

Irreversible cellular damage.

Symptoms of paralysis.

The phone slipped from her grasp, her left hand now shaking as uncontrollably as her right.

“Control yourself,” Hilliard said in the hallway, his voice low and hard. “Until she is strong enough, we present a united front. The official story is that everything is under control. Do you understand?”

Kegan’s jaw was tight, his fists clenched at his sides. The urge to smash something, or someone, was a physical ache. But he looked through the glass at Cailin’s still form and forced the rage down. For her.

“My brother spoke to Cornelius Vance,” Kegan said, his voice a strained rasp. “Caleb put the fear of God into him. He promised to deliver the antidote within three days.”

Hilliard’s expression didn’t change, but inside, a cold, bitter amusement stirred. An antidote. It was the perfect lie for the Vances to tell. A way to buy time, to cover their tracks. He knew there was no antidote.

But he didn’t tell Kegan that. Kegan’s false hope was a tool.

“Good,” Hilliard said, his tone flat. “Then your brother needs to keep the pressure on. Every minute of every day.” He was using Kegan as a battering ram against the Vance family’s walls.

His own phone buzzed. It was his Chief of Staff, Jackson Reynolds. Hilliard turned away from Kegan, his voice instantly shifting from personal crisis to corporate command.

“The acquisition of Sterling-Tech is approved,” he said, his words sharp and decisive. “Authorize the wire transfer. I want it closed by noon.” He was remotely green-lighting a multi-billion-dollar deal from a hospital corridor, his focus absolute.