

Second chance 951

Chapter 951:

There was a long pause on the other end of the line. Eleonora's voice, when it came, was like ice. "Feelings are not evidence, Giselle. And acting on paranoia is how we lose. Right now, Tiffany is a loose end that has conveniently tied itself. We have no reason to believe he knows anything. She was a weak link, and she broke. That is the official story, and that is what we will believe until we have concrete proof to the contrary. Do you understand?"

"Yes, Mother," Giselle replied, the words tasting like ash in her mouth.

"Good," Eleonora said, her tone final. "Let the fool rest. Our plans continue. We remain in the shadows, and he remains in the dark."

The forensics report lay on Giselle's desk, its conclusion mocking her. The video file was clean. Perfect. Not a pixel out of place. It was a dead end, and it made the hairs on her arms stand up.

The absolute certainty of the report, the total lack of evidence, only deepened her fear. It was like knowing a shark was circling in the water beneath you. You couldn't see it, but you knew it was there. Watching. Waiting.

Following her mother's orders, she did nothing. She went about her days, attending charity luncheons and gallery openings, a perfect porcelain doll of a smile fixed on her face. But she doubled her personal security detail and never went anywhere alone.

A few days later, Cailin sat in a wheelchair in the hospital's sun-drenched garden. Mia sat on a bench beside her, reading a magazine.

Seraphina's daily treatments were working. The creeping numbness had been held at bay. The pain was manageable. It was a fragile, temporary truce, and Cailin knew it. She could feel the poison deep inside her, a coiled serpent, waiting. But for now, there was sun on her face and the scent of chrysanthemums in the air.

She felt a strange sense of peace. The peace that comes after the battle is lost, when there is nothing left to do but wait for the end.

She saw him approaching from a distance. Hilliard. He was holding a soft, gray cashmere blanket.

He had kept his word, staying away from her room. But she knew he was always close. A ghost in the hallways. A shadow just out of sight.

He stopped behind her wheelchair, his intention clear. He was going to place the blanket over her legs.

She felt his presence before he touched her, a change in the air, a familiar weight. Her body went rigid.

"Don't touch me," she said. The words were quiet, but they cut through the air like shards of ice.

Hilliard's hand froze in mid-air. The pain on his face was so raw, so naked, it was almost indecent.

"It's getting cold," he said, his voice a low, rough whisper. "You'll catch a chill."

"That's not your concern," she replied, her voice flat, devoid of any emotion. She didn't turn to look at him. She couldn't. If she saw his face, her resolve might break.

"Mia," she said. "Push me back inside."

Mia shot Hilliard a look of profound sympathy, but she did as her friend asked.

Chapter 952:

Hilliard stood alone in the garden, the sunlight warming his shoulders but offering no comfort. He held the useless blanket in his hands, watching her back as she disappeared into the building. He didn't understand. He had brought her hope, a path to recovery. Why was she pushing him away with such final, brutal determination?

Back in the room, Cailin's mask of calm dissolved. She sagged against the pillows, a wave of exhaustion washing over her. Every time she pushed him away, it felt like she was driving a knife into her own heart.

"Why, Cailin?" Mia asked softly, her voice filled with a gentle frustration. "Why are you torturing yourself like this? And him?"

Cailin closed her eyes. "It's the only way," she whispered. "It's the only way to make sure that when I'm gone... he won't hurt as much."

Before Mia could argue, Cailin's encrypted satellite phone buzzed on the nightstand. She picked it up. It was Kegan.

His voice was subdued. He apologized for his behavior in the room the other day, for his outburst. Cailin accepted his apology quietly, her tone polite but distant.

As she was ending the call, Mia's personal phone rang. She glanced at the caller ID, and a strange expression flickered across her face.

"Sorry," she murmured to Cailin. "I have to take this."

She stepped out onto the small balcony, closing the glass door behind her.

The name on her screen was Ethan Caldwell.

Hilliard stood in the corridor, leaning against the wall opposite Cailin's room. He had been there for hours, a silent, unmoving sentinel. He watched the nurses come and go. He watched Mia come and go. The door was a barrier he could not breach.

His phone vibrated. A new encrypted message from Jackson Reynolds. He opened it. The message was short, but its weight was immense.

Silas Croft confirms. Eleonora and Giselle Van Doren are the masterminds. Tiffany Reed's confession is corroborated.

A cold, lethal light flared in Hilliard's eyes. He typed a single word in reply.

Prepare.

He slipped the phone back into his pocket and resumed his vigil, but now his waiting had a purpose. A target.

The elevator doors swished open, and Seraphina Morrow stepped out, her medical case in hand. She was on her way to perform Cailin's daily treatment. She saw Hilliard and gave him a curt, professional nod.

He pushed himself off the wall, blocking her path.

"Is she really getting better?" he asked, his voice low and raw.

Seraphina looked at his bloodshot eyes, at the deep lines of exhaustion etched around his mouth. A flicker of something that might have been pity crossed her face, but it was gone as quickly as it appeared. She remembered her promise to Cailin.

“The treatment is proceeding as planned,” she said, her tone clinical and detached. “But recovery will take time. Her system is extremely weak. It is vital that she remain calm.”

It was an answer that gave nothing away, a perfect blend of hope and caution. It was enough to explain Cailin’s behavior.

Hilliard accepted it, though a knot of unease remained in his gut. He stepped aside, and Seraphina entered the room.

Chapter 953:

He watched the door close. Then he turned and strode toward the elevator, his movements sharp and decisive. His patience was at an end. It was time to act.

The air in the subterranean cigar lounge was thick with the smell of expensive smoke and old leather. Kegan Aguirre sat alone in a deep armchair, the ashtray on the table beside him overflowing.

He had been waiting. Since Cailin had dismissed him, he had been adrift, caught between wounded pride and a desperate, gnawing worry for her.

The door opened and Hilliard walked in. He tossed a thin file onto the table in front of Kegan.

Kegan picked it up. He saw the names, Eleonora and Giselle. He saw the financial records linking them to Tiffany Reed, to the assassin. A dark fire ignited in his eyes. He slammed the file down on the table.

Hilliard sank into the armchair opposite him.

"I need your help," he said, the words direct, without preamble.

Kegan let out a short, harsh laugh. "Since when does a Holloway need help from an Aguirre?"

Hilliard ignored the taunt. "This isn't about our families," he said, his voice flat. "This is for Cailin. They have to pay."

At the mention of her name, the sarcasm vanished from Kegan's face. He was all business.

"A full-scale war would be too messy," Hilliard said. "It would destabilize the market. It would drag on for years." He leaned forward, his eyes glinting in the dim light. His voice dropped to a low, lethal whisper.

"But we can fight them on their own terms."

He paused, letting the weight of his next words sink in.

“They used poison. We will return poison.”

Kegan looked at Hilliard. He saw the pure, unadulterated vengeance burning in his rival’s eyes. And in that moment, he knew that this man, his enemy, was also his most perfect ally.

A dangerous understanding passed between the two men in the smoky room. A truce born of shared purpose.

Hilliard spread a detailed map of Manhattan’s Upper East Side on the table. He tapped a location with his finger. “A restaurant. Giselle dines here with her friends every Tuesday night.”

“Security is heavy,” Kegan countered, his mind already working through the logistics. “She never eats the food. Only drinks bottled water that she brings herself.”

A cold, predatory smile touched Hilliard’s lips. “The water is in the bottle. But the bottle is made in a factory.”

Kegan understood immediately. His network was vast. It could trace the supply chain of that specific brand of water back to its source.

“I don’t want her dead,” Hilliard said, his voice a low growl. “I want what’s in Cailin’s veins to be in hers. I want Eleonora to have to beg us for the antidote.”

The sheer, calculated cruelty of the plan sent a chill down even Kegan's spine. It was a strategy of psychological warfare, designed to inflict the same agonizing helplessness they were all feeling.

He nodded. "My people can have it in place within twenty-four hours."

Hilliard stood, the meeting concluded. He was about to leave when Kegan's voice stopped him.

"Holloway."

Hilliard turned.

Chapter 954:

"What she said... about me..." Kegan's voice was rough. "Was it real?"

Hilliard was silent for a long moment. "It doesn't matter right now," he said finally, his tone a mixture of pain and resolve. "Get her well. Then let her choose. Until then, our only job is to kill all the snakes in her garden."

It was the only answer Kegan needed.

Hilliard left the club, a sense of grim, focused purpose settling over him for the first time in days.

The afternoon sun streamed through the tall windows of the Ashford family's drawing room, illuminating the dust motes dancing in the air. Beatrice Ashford, the family matriarch, presided over afternoon tea with her daughters-in-law and granddaughters. The conversation was light, a gentle murmur of charity galas and upcoming equestrian events.

The butler entered, his usual unflappable composure replaced by a pale, nervous tension.

"Madam," he whispered to Beatrice, "a Mr. Silas Croft is here. He does not have an appointment."

The delicate porcelain teacup in Beatrice's hand rattled against its saucer. Her polite smile froze on her face.

The name. Silas Croft. It was a ghost from a past she had worked for decades to bury.

The other women in the room exchanged confused glances, the name meaning nothing to them.

"Show him in," Beatrice said, her voice strained.

A moment later, he entered. He was an old man, with a shock of silver hair, but he moved with the predatory grace of a wolf. He was tall and broad-shouldered, his presence so powerful it seemed to suck the air out of the room. A younger, equally grim-faced man, Julian, followed a step behind him.

Beatrice rose, her society smile firmly back in place. "Silas. What a delightful surprise."

He ignored her pleasantry, his sharp, intelligent eyes sweeping over the room, cataloging every face.

"I'm not here for tea, Beatrice," he said, his voice a deep, resonant boom that made the crystal on the table tremble.

He paused, letting the silence stretch, his gaze finally locking onto hers.

"I am here," he declared, each word a hammer blow, "to demand justice for my daughter. Genevieve Croft."

The younger women stared, bewildered.

And the color drained completely from Beatrice Ashford's face, leaving it as white and brittle as old paper.

Beatrice Ashford's hand trembled so violently that tea sloshed over the rim of her cup, staining the pristine white tablecloth.

Her son, Garrett, immediately jumped to his feet, attempting to smooth over the sudden, shocking rupture in their placid afternoon. “Mr. Croft, I believe you must be mistaken,” he said with a forced, placating smile. “There is no one by that name in our family.”

His daughter, Nina, quickly chimed in. “Yes, perhaps you have the wrong address?”

Silas Croft let out a short, sharp bark of a laugh. It was a sound utterly devoid of humor. He didn’t even glance at the younger generation. His eyes, like twin daggers, remained fixed on Beatrice.

Chapter 955:

“Are you going to continue this charade, Beatrice?” he asked, his voice dripping with contempt. “Or did you think I would come here empty-handed?”

His assistant, Julian, stepped forward and placed a slim tablet on the coffee table, the screen angled toward the matriarch.

The first image was a notarized birth certificate. The name was stark and clear: Genevieve Croft.

Julian swiped a finger across the screen. The next document was a legal petition for a name change. Genevieve Croft to Jennifer Ashford. The petitioner was Beatrice’s own son, the late Warren Ashford.

The smiles vanished from the faces of Garrett and Nina, replaced by dawning horror.

Beatrice stared at the screen, her face the color of chalk. She couldn't speak.

"My daughter," Silas's voice boomed, echoing like a judge's gavel, "married your son. And then she died. Now you are going to tell me how."

Beatrice's lips moved, but only a faint whisper emerged. "It was an accident... an illness..."

CRACK.

Silas slammed his open palm down on the mahogany table with such force that the teacups jumped. The women screamed.

"An accident?" he roared, his face a mask of pure fury. "Do you have any idea what I have been doing for the past several years?"

Julian swiped the screen again. This time it showed a series of transaction records from a private Swiss bank. A week before Jennifer's death, a seven-figure sum had been transferred from Warren Ashford's account to an untraceable offshore shell corporation.

A corporation owned by a man known in certain circles as a specialist in resolving... delicate family problems. An assassin.

“Now,” Silas said, his voice dropping to a lethal, icy calm, “do you still want to tell me it was an accident?”

The room was utterly silent, save for the sound of Beatrice’s ragged, panicked breathing.

Garrett Ashford stared at the damning evidence, cold sweat trickling down his temples. He knew. This was the end of their world.

Silas stood to his full, imposing height, looking down at the woman who had collapsed back into the sofa.

“Starting tomorrow,” he announced, “the Croft Group will begin a hostile short-selling campaign against all Ashford holdings.”

He let the threat hang in the air.

“I will make you worthless on Wall Street. I will ensure every business partner you have abandons you. I will make the name ‘Ashford’ a synonym for disgrace and murder.”

Each word was a nail being hammered into the family’s coffin.

Nina finally broke, her face crumpling as she began to sob uncontrollably.

Garrett's legs felt weak. He turned to his mother, his voice a desperate plea. "Mother, for God's sake, just tell him the truth!"

Beatrice looked at the terrified faces of her son and granddaughters. She looked at the implacable, vengeful face of Silas Croft.

She knew the secret she had guarded for decades could no longer be contained. A violent, uncontrollable tremor began to shake her entire body.

Beatrice Ashford lifted her head. Her eyes were wide with a mixture of terror and resignation. When she spoke, her voice was dry and brittle, like rustling dead leaves.

Chapter 956:

"Yes," she admitted. "Jennifer Ashford... was Genevieve Croft."

A flicker of pain crossed Silas's face, but it was quickly consumed by the cold fire of his rage.

"It was Warren," Beatrice continued, her voice a monotone whisper. "My son. He insisted she change her name. He wanted to cut her off from you, from her past. He was... possessive."

"I don't care about your son's pathetic insecurities," Silas cut in, his voice a low growl. "Tell me who killed her."

Beatrice's body trembled more violently. She squeezed her eyes shut, as if the memory itself was a physical assault.

"It was Warren," she whispered, the words so shocking they seemed to suck all the air from the room. "My son. He poisoned her."

Even the sobbing Nina went silent, her breath catching in her throat.

Beatrice explained. Warren had discovered that Genevieve was planning to leave him. To take their young daughter, Cailin, and return to the Croft family. In a fit of jealous, controlling rage, he had started putting a slow-acting, untraceable poison in the tea she drank every morning.

"By the time we realized what was happening, it was too late," Beatrice said, tears finally streaming down her pale cheeks. "For the sake of the family's reputation... we told everyone she died of a sudden illness."

Silas listened to this monstrous confession, his body trembling with an almost uncontrollable rage. His only child. Tortured to death by a madman, while his entire family stood by and watched, and then covered it up.

He strode across the room until he was looming over Beatrice. "Where is he?" he bit out, each word dripping with venom. "Where is Warren?"

“He’s dead,” Beatrice sobbed. “He died in a car accident, not long after she passed.”

The answer was a blow. The target of his decades-long hunt was gone, beyond his reach. A wave of dizziness washed over him, the rage having nowhere to go.

He steadied himself, a terrible, low laugh rumbling in his chest.

“He’s dead?” he repeated softly. “And you thought that was the end of it?”

He spun around, his arm sweeping out to point at every single member of the Ashford family cowering in the room.

“You are all murderers!” he roared. “Every one of you! You killed my daughter with your silence and your lies!”

He turned to his assistant. “Julian. Launch everything. I want the Ashford name erased from New York.”

Garrett fell to his knees, babbling pleas for mercy. Silas didn’t even look at him.

His gaze returned to Beatrice, and a new, even more terrible suspicion began to form in his mind. A suspicion born from their capacity for monstrous deception.

He stared at her, his eyes so intense they felt like a physical weight, pinning her to the sofa.

“A family,” he began, his voice dangerously quiet, “that would watch their son poison his wife...”

He took a step closer.

“A family that would cover up a murder to protect its good name...”

Chapter 957:

His voice dropped to a lethal whisper.

“Tell me, Beatrice. The girl you handed over to the Holloways. Cailin Morton. Is she really my daughter’s child?”

Beatrice’s pupils contracted into pinpricks. A new, more profound terror than anything she had yet shown flashed across her face.

The question hung in the air, heavy and suffocating as a shroud.

“Is she really my daughter’s child?”

Beatrice Ashford's face, moments before a carefully constructed mask of aristocratic composure, shattered. The blood drained from her cheeks, leaving behind a waxy, translucent pallor. Her body began to shake, a fine, uncontrollable tremor that started in her fingertips and radiated inward.

The delicate porcelain teacup she was holding rattled against its saucer, a frantic, tiny sound in the dead silence of the room. Then it slipped from her grasp.

It didn't shatter with a sharp crack. It hit the thick Persian rug with a dull, sickening thud, the sound of something precious and hollow breaking apart. A dark stain of Earl Grey bled into the cream-colored wool, like a spreading wound.

Garrett Ashford lunged forward, his voice trembling as he tried to shield his mother from the onslaught. "This is absurd! Of course Cailin is one of us!"

Silas Croft's gaze flickered to him, as cold and dismissive as if swatting away an insect.

"I wasn't asking you."

He took a single step forward. The sheer force of his presence was a physical blow. Beatrice shrank back into the depths of the silk sofa, a choked, whimpering sound escaping her throat. It was the sound of a cornered animal.

Silas turned his head slightly, his eyes meeting those of his grim-faced assistant.

“Julian,” he commanded, his voice leaving no room for argument. “Get them out. This is a conversation for adults.”

Julian moved with quiet, unnerving efficiency. He approached Garrett and the still-sobbing Nina, his expression polite but his eyes as hard as polished stone. “Mr. Ashford, Miss Ashford. If you would please come with me.”

Garrett opened his mouth to protest, to argue, to defend the crumbling fortress of his family’s honor. But he saw the look in Julian’s eyes, a flat, unemotional warning that promised consequences he couldn’t begin to imagine, and the fight went out of him. He numbly helped his weeping daughter to her feet and allowed Julian to escort them from the room.

The heavy oak door clicked shut, sealing Silas and Beatrice in the opulent prison of the drawing room. The silence that descended was absolute, broken only by Beatrice’s ragged, shallow breaths.

Her psychological dam, built over decades of secrets and lies, was cracking under the immense pressure. Tears began to stream down her face, silent at first, then punctuated by broken, gasping sobs.

“It’s not... it’s not what you think,” she stammered, the words nonsensical, a desperate Hail Mary.

Chapter 958:

Silas remained unmoved. He walked to the armchair opposite her and sat down, his posture ramrod straight. He didn’t speak. He simply watched her, his face a mask of cold patience. He was a judge waiting for the inevitable confession before passing sentence.

"I will not repeat myself, Beatrice," Silas finally said, his voice dropping to a lethal, quiet register. "The child you pawned off to the Holloways. Cailin. Answer the question."

Beatrice looked at him, at the unyielding fury in his eyes, and knew there was no escape. The excuse she had perfected for decades, the one about Warren's jealousy, was no longer enough to shield the deeper, darker truth.

"We... we had no choice!" she suddenly wailed, her voice echoing in the silent room. "The family was facing a terrible financial crisis! We were on the verge of bankruptcy! We needed..."

A low, contemptuous sound escaped Silas's throat. It was barely a laugh, more like the grate of stone on stone. He rose from his chair, his eyes blazing with a fury that seemed to scorch the very air.

"A financial crisis?" he roared, the sound vibrating through the room. "So you covered up my daughter's murder, gave away a child, and traded her bloodline for money?"

The raw violence in his voice silenced her. She stared at him, her mouth open, realizing the catastrophic mistake she had just made.

He stalked toward her, his large frame seeming to fill the room, to block out the light. He leaned down, his face just inches from hers, his voice dropping to a low, menacing whisper that was more terrifying than his roar.

“That’s still not all of it, is it, Beatrice?”

He straightened up, his shadow falling over her. He repeated the question that had started it all, the question that held the key to the final, darkest secret.

“Cailin. Who is she?”

Beatrice looked up at his merciless face and knew she was at the end of the road. There was nowhere left to run. She closed her eyes, a final, shuddering sob escaping her.

“I... I was forced,” she wept, the confession now a desperate, unraveling plea. “The child... the poison... it wasn’t just Warren’s idea. We made an enemy. A family we couldn’t afford to cross.”

The information landed, and Silas’s pupils contracted. He sensed the shape of the truth was far larger and more monstrous than he had ever imagined.

Beatrice, on the verge of a complete breakdown, finally admitted it.

“We were coerced... The family that forced our hand... their power... it could even rival yours.”

Chapter 959:

“A family that could rival the Crofts.”

The words hung in the air, charged and dangerous. Silas Croft's mind, a razor-sharp instrument honed by decades of corporate warfare, instantly began cycling through the handful of dynasties that fit the description. The Vanderbilts? The Rockefellers? Old money, but their power had waned.

His eyes narrowed to icy slits. "Who?" he demanded. The single word was not a question; it was a command.

Beatrice shook her head frantically, her hands flying to her mouth as if to physically stop the name from escaping. "I can't say. They'll kill us. They'll kill my entire family."

A humorless, cruel smile touched Silas's lips. "If you don't say," he replied, his voice chillingly calm, "I will kill your entire family."

He pulled out his phone, his thumb hovering over the contact for his chief of staff, the man who could initiate the financial annihilation he had promised.

That simple, deliberate movement was the final straw.

"Van Doren!" Beatrice shrieked, the name tearing from her throat like a physical object. "It was the Van Doren family!"

Silas's thumb froze. The name was a surprise. He had been expecting a rival from Wall Street, not a ghost from a much older, bloodier war.

The confession, now that the dam was broken, poured out of Beatrice in a frantic, incoherent flood. Years ago, her son Warren, in his reckless ambition, had entered into a secret partnership with Donovan Van Doren. A deal that went sour. Warren, in his arrogance, had betrayed the agreement, costing the Van Doren family a fortune and, more importantly, their pride.

Donovan's revenge had been swift and absolute. He hadn't destroyed the Ashfords. He had enslaved them, turning them into puppets.

"Poisoning Genevieve," Beatrice trembled, her voice barely a whisper. "It was Donovan's order. He said it was to ensure that a Croft, that your bloodline, would never escape his grasp and return to you with secrets."

The room seemed to tilt. Silas felt a wave of dizziness, a profound, sickening vertigo. His daughter's death wasn't just a domestic tragedy fueled by a madman's jealousy. She was a casualty of war, a sacrifice on the altar of a corporate blood feud.

He forced himself to breathe, to think. His mind, even in its grief, was a ruthlessly logical machine. He seized on the flaw in her story, the one piece that didn't fit.

"You said he wanted to ensure my bloodline wouldn't escape," Silas said, his voice like the scrape of steel on ice. "But Cailin did. She was left behind. She survived. Why?"

A new, more profound terror twisted Beatrice's features. She knew the final, most protected secret was about to be ripped from her. She closed her eyes, as if to block out the sight of his face when he heard it.

“Because Cailin,” she said, her voice so faint it was barely audible, “isn’t an Ashford. She was never Warren’s daughter.”

Chapter 960:

The sentence struck Silas with the force of a physical blow. He froze, his mind going completely, utterly blank.

Beatrice, seeing his stunned expression, continued, the cruel truth now her only currency. “Genevieve, when she came to us, she was already carrying another man’s child.”

Warren, she explained, had been so obsessed with Genevieve that he had agreed to raise the child as his own. He saw it as the ultimate leverage, a way to bind her to him forever.

“So Donovan Van Doren let her live,” Beatrice whispered. “He knew. Cailin carried no Ashford blood. And more importantly, she carried no Croft blood.”

In Silas’s mind, a thousand disparate pieces of a puzzle he hadn’t even known he was solving began to slam together with violent force. Genevieve’s desperation before she ran away from home. The cryptic, repeated mention of a mysterious “D” in her diaries. And now, the name Donovan Van Doren.

A terrible, yet logically perfect, inference began to form, an answer to a question he had never dared to ask.

He thought of Cailin. Her eyes. The fierce, unyielding resilience that had always seemed so out of place in the vapid, brittle world of the Ashfords.

A tremor started in his own body, not of rage, but of a heartbreaking, decades-late discovery.

He looked at Beatrice, a deeper, darker suspicion blooming in his mind, but he didn't voice it. He didn't need to. He needed to confirm the ghastly theory himself.

Beatrice had collapsed, a spent force, curled into a ball on the sofa, her mind shattered by the weight of her full confession.

Silas staggered back a step, his hand finding the wall to steady himself. The inference, the sheer, tragic horror of it, had broken through his iron control.

His daughter had fallen in love with the son of his family's mortal enemy.

His granddaughter, the only living piece of his Genevieve, was the blood of the man he hated most in the world.

He squeezed his eyes shut, a raw, guttural sound of pure agony escaping his throat. Hearing the noise, Julian burst back into the room, rushing to his side, his hand on his employer's arm to steady the trembling man.

Silas opened his eyes. The confusion was gone. The pain was still there, a white-hot core of it, but it was now encased in something harder, colder, and more resolute than ever before.

He looked at Julian, his voice a low, urgent command.

“Find Cailin. Now. I have to see her.”

While Silas Croft’s private jet was thundering toward New York, the architects of his misery were enjoying a quiet afternoon.

Dr. Alistair Finch walked into his aunt’s favorite tea room with a knot of anxiety tightening in his stomach. The air smelled of expensive white tea and simmering tension. Eleonora Van Doren sat in a plush velvet armchair, the picture of relaxed elegance. Alistair knew that the more relaxed she appeared, the more serious the situation was.