

Second chance 961

Chapter 961:

She didn't get to the point. She never did. She began with a polite, almost gentle inquiry about his impending nuptials to Caspian Thorne.

Alistair felt a flash of irritation. "Aunt Eleonora," he said, his voice firm but respectful, "Caspian and I are friends. Nothing more. His heart belongs to someone else."

Eleonora's smile didn't falter, but her eyes grew cold. "Feelings can be cultivated, Alistair. A family alliance, however, must be absolute."

He refused to be drawn into the argument. "Why did you ask me here?"

She set her teacup down with a delicate click. The pleasantries were over. "I hear you've been consulting on a very particular patient at Mount Sinai."

Alistair's heart sank. Cailin. He kept his expression neutral. "I'm merely fulfilling my duties as a physician, Aunt."

"Duties?" Eleonora let out a soft, dismissive laugh. "Your first duty is to the Van Doren family. That woman, Cailin Morton, is a problem."

She rose and glided to the window, her back to him. Her voice, when she spoke again, was stripped of all warmth. "I need you to cease all treatment."

Alistair shot to his feet, horrified. "I can't do that! I'm a doctor! I took the Hippocratic Oath!"

Eleonora turned slowly, a look of pitying disdain on her perfect face. "Oaths are for children, Alistair. Don't be so naive. In our world, the only things that are eternal are power and blood."

She walked toward him, her voice dropping to a low, threatening whisper. "Do you have any idea why Hilliard Holloway and Kegan Aguirre are on the verge of war with our family? All for her. She is a liability. Her very existence threatens us all."

He was stunned by her cold-blooded calculus. "She's a patient! She's dying!"

A flicker of satisfaction crossed Eleonora's face. "Then let her die. Quickly. It would be better for everyone."

She added, as if offering a sweet dessert, "Once she is gone, your wedding to Caspian can proceed without complication, and our family will be free of this unfortunate entanglement."

Alistair looked at his aunt's beautiful, venomous face and felt a wave of profound revulsion. He thought of Cailin, lying in that hospital bed, so weak yet so determined to protect others, even with her dying breaths. Her courage had shamed him. It had also, to his own surprise, inspired him.

A strength he didn't know he possessed rose up inside him.

He looked directly into Eleonora's cold eyes. His voice was not loud, but it was perfectly steady.

"No."

For the first time, Eleonora's smile vanished. Her eyes narrowed. "What did you say?"

Alistair repeated the word, slowly, deliberately. "I said, no. I will not abandon my patient. I will not trade a human life for so-called family interests."

He saw the fury contorting her features and pressed on. "And I'm warning you, Aunt. You are playing with fire." He summoned a name from the family's dark past, a name whispered in corridors but never spoken aloud. "Have you forgotten how Miss Holloway died? The family's schemes have a way of consuming the schemers."

Chapter 962:

The color drained from Eleonora's face. The name had struck a nerve, a deep, primal fear.

Alistair said nothing more. He gave a short, formal bow, turned, and walked out of the room. He felt lighter than he had in years, as if a heavy, invisible chain had just been broken.

Eleonora stood alone in the silent tea room, watching him go. Her eyes were filled with a cold, murderous rage.

She picked up her phone and dialed a number.

“Activate the backup plan,” she commanded, her voice like ice. “Since the doctor won’t cooperate, we’ll have to use a more direct approach.”

Moments after Alistair’s defiant exit, the tea room door creaked open. Giselle Van Doren poked her head in, a tentative, pleasing smile on her face.

She saw her mother’s thunderous expression and trod carefully. “Mother? Did Alistair upset you again?”

Eleonora didn’t answer. She took a sip of her now-cold tea, the gesture a small, controlled act to quell her fury. Giselle moved behind her, her fingers beginning to expertly knead the tension from her mother’s shoulders.

“I saw Hilliard Holloway in the news today,” Giselle mentioned, her tone carefully casual. “He looked so haggard.”

At the mention of his name, a dreamy, obsessive light flickered in Giselle’s eyes.

Eleonora caught it instantly. She put down her cup and turned to study her daughter’s face.

Giselle felt a little unnerved by the intensity of her mother's scrutiny, but she couldn't stop herself. "To think he would stand against his own family, all for Cailin Morton. It's so compelling."

Eleonora stared at the infatuation shining in her daughter's eyes, and a cold, brilliant idea began to form. This was not a problem. This was an opportunity. A perfect, pliable new pawn had just presented itself.

She took her daughter's hand, pulling her down to sit beside her. Her voice, when she spoke, was softer and more conspiratorial than Giselle had ever heard it.

"You like him, don't you?"

Giselle's cheeks flushed. She gave a shy, almost girlish nod, admitting she'd been smitten with Hilliard since the first time she saw him at a gala years ago.

Eleonora smiled, a calculated, encouraging expression. "Then you should have him. A Van Doren woman gets what she wants."

"But he only has eyes for Cailin Morton," Giselle lamented.

Eleonora let out a delicate, contemptuous snort. "Cailin Morton? A dying woman. Men don't want ghosts, darling. They want a vibrant, powerful partner to stand beside them."

She began her work, skillfully weaving a narrative that elevated Giselle's schoolgirl crush into a matter of dynastic honor.

"Did you know, Giselle," Eleonora said, her voice laced with a sense of grand, tragic destiny, "that Cailin's mother, that woman Genevieve, nearly stole a man who belonged to our family?"

She spun a half-true tale, painting Genevieve as a conniving social climber. Giselle listened, utterly captivated, unaware that she was being systematically brainwashed.

Chapter 963:

"And now, history is repeating itself," Eleonora said, her grip tightening on her daughter's hand. "This is fate, Giselle. It is you against Cailin, a battle for a great man, just like your mothers before you."

The words landed perfectly, stroking Giselle's vanity and her competitive spirit. Her infatuation was no longer just a crush; it was a war. A noble crusade.

Her eyes hardened with a newfound resolve. "Mother, I know what I have to do."

Eleonora watched the fire she had lit in her daughter's eyes and felt a grim satisfaction. The pawn was activated.

“There is an important business gala next week,” she suggested. “Hilliard will be there. That will be your stage.”

Giselle nodded eagerly, her mind already racing, planning her dress, her words, her conquest.

She stood, full of a new, intoxicating confidence. “You just wait, Mother. I will make Hilliard Holloway forget Cailin Morton ever existed.”

She swept out of the room, her steps light with ambition and delusion.

Eleonora watched her go, her expression like that of a master craftsman admiring a beautiful, but ultimately disposable, tool she was about to use. It didn’t matter if Giselle won Hilliard’s heart. All that mattered was that she got close enough to deliver the real message. The real poison.

The grand ballroom of The Pierre hotel buzzed with the low hum of power. Hilliard Holloway and Kegan Aguirre entered separately, but their near-simultaneous arrival sent a ripple of speculation through the assembled titans of finance and industry.

They kept a careful, deliberate distance from each other, two predators circling the same territory. The gossip was immediate: had the two giants forged a secret truce over the Cailin Morton affair?

Hilliard’s face was a mask of cold indifference. He ignored the whispers, his eyes scanning the room with a singular, hidden purpose. Kegan looked merely bored, radiating an impatient energy that suggested he was only there as a favor. A very dangerous favor.

Across the room, Giselle Van Doren moved like a ruby-red butterfly, her gown a slash of vibrant color in a sea of black tuxedos. Her eyes were locked on one man.

She saw her opportunity when Hilliard stood alone at the bar, a glass of whiskey in his hand. She glided toward him, her smile a perfect blend of confidence and sweetness.

“Mr. Holloway,” she purred. “I didn’t expect to see you here.”

Hilliard turned slowly. He registered who she was, and a flicker of something cold and calculating passed through his eyes, so quickly it was imperceptible. His public face was one of weary detachment. He gave a curt nod, a clear dismissal.

The coolness only fueled her desire to conquer him.

“I heard about Cailin, Miss Morton,” she said, her tone dripping with faux concern. “I do hope she makes a swift recovery.”

She deliberately used the name “Morton,” a subtle test.

At the mention of Cailin’s name, a flash of genuine pain crossed Hilliard’s face. He let her see it for a fraction of a second before it was replaced by a carefully constructed mask of icy disgust. It was a masterful performance.

Chapter 964:

He took a sip of his whiskey. "The affairs of my ex-wife," he said, his voice laced with a cold, dismissive contempt, "are no longer my concern."

Ex-wife.

The words hit Giselle with the force of a physical blow. A jolt of pure, unadulterated joy shot through her. She struggled to keep the triumphant grin off her face. She had assumed they were merely estranged. This was a definitive, final severing.

And the sheer disdain in his voice, it was perfect. He sounded like a man eager to erase a stain from his past.

Her heart hammered with excitement. His love for Cailin hadn't just faded; it had curdled into hate. This was her moment.

She immediately changed tactics, pivoting from Cailin to a recent, high-profile merger, showcasing her business acumen. Hilliard responded with clipped, distracted answers, his gaze sweeping the room, checking exits, noting security placements.

Giselle misinterpreted his distraction as intrigue. She leaned in closer, her voice dropping to a conspiratorial whisper, suggesting the Van Doren family could be a powerful ally in the deal.

That got his attention. He finally looked at her, his eyes holding a flicker of a businessman's appraisal. "The Van Dorens don't offer help for free."

"Of course not," she replied smoothly, her eyes gleaming. "But for a future ally, we can be very generous." She loaded the word "ally" with meaning.

Hilliard looked at her, at the smug, self-satisfied certainty on her face. He felt nothing but a cold, clinical emptiness. He was simply following the script.

He raised his glass in a mock toast. "Perhaps."

The noncommittal word was all the encouragement she needed. To her, it was a green light.

She watched him turn and walk away, his broad back a symbol of her impending victory. She clenched her fist, a thrill of triumph shooting through her. Tonight, she would take this to the next level.

Giselle watched Hilliard move through the crowd, a king in his court, surrounded by lesser moguls. She knew a simple conversation wouldn't be enough to pry him away. She needed a pretext.

She intercepted him as he was concluding a conversation, her smile bright and disarming.

"Mr. Holloway," she said, her voice a low, intimate murmur. "Regarding our earlier discussion, I have some more specific ideas. Could we perhaps speak somewhere more private?"

Hilliard's eyes met hers. He glanced around at the crowded room, then gave a curt, almost reluctant, nod. He followed her out of the ballroom to a quiet, secluded terrace overlooking the city.

The night air was cool. Giselle shivered theatrically, wrapping her arms around herself. Hilliard made no move to offer his jacket. He simply stood there, his expression unreadable, waiting.

"I know that earning the trust of the Holloway Group requires a significant gesture of goodwill," she began, getting straight to the point.

She reached into her small, jewel-encrusted clutch and produced a cashier's check. She held it out to him.

Hilliard glanced down. The amount was for one million dollars.

Chapter 965:

He raised an eyebrow, a flicker of amusement in his cold eyes. "And what is this? The Van Doren family's idea of a down payment?"

Giselle shook her head, her smile turning sultry. "No. This is my personal information fee for you."

She leaned closer, the scent of her expensive perfume enveloping him. "I know you despise Cailin Morton. And I happen to know a few secrets that could ruin her permanently. All I ask in return is one pleasant evening together. And those secrets are yours."

A wave of revulsion washed over Hilliard, so strong he could taste it. But his face showed only a flicker of interest. He didn't take the check.

"One million?" he asked, his voice laced with a faint, dismissive arrogance. "You think information on my family is worth so little?"

His response threw her for a loop, but she recovered quickly. A slow, triumphant smile spread across her face.

Just as she was about to raise the stakes, her ankle seemed to give way. With a small, helpless cry, she stumbled, her body falling limply against his.

Hilliard caught her instinctively, his hands steady on her arms. The strong scent of champagne and whiskey washed over him.

"I'm so sorry," she slurred, her head lolling against his chest, her eyes half-closed and unfocused. "I think I've had too much to drink."

The performance began. She was the helpless, intoxicated beauty, a damsel in distress.

Hilliard knew the play. He stood there, solid and unmoving, letting her act out her scene.

Her fingers clutched at the lapel of his tuxedo. "Hilliard," she whispered, her voice husky. "Please, take me home? My suite is just upstairs."

Her fingertips traced a slow, deliberate path down his chest. The invitation was unmistakable.

He looked down at her, at the fake vulnerability in her eyes, and felt a cold, contemptuous smile touch his own lips, hidden in the shadows of the terrace.

"Are you sure, Miss Van Doren?" he asked, his voice a low rumble.

She nodded vigorously, pressing herself against him.

A few guests had noticed the drama unfolding on the terrace and were now watching with undisguised curiosity. The time was right. To refuse now would be to tip his hand.

He let out a sigh of feigned reluctance, the perfect picture of a gentleman trapped by circumstance. He lifted one of her arms, draping it over his shoulders.

He half-carried, half-supported her as they walked back through the edge of the ballroom toward the private VIP elevators.

As they walked, she whispered in his ear, her breath warm against his skin. "My room key, it's in my clutch."

A flicker of icy, murderous intent passed through Hilliard's eyes, but his voice was smooth as silk.

"I know."

They stepped into the elevator. The polished brass doors slid shut, sealing them in, away from the prying eyes of the world.

Hilliard swiped the key card, and the door to the presidential suite swung open. He guided Giselle to the sprawling sofa in the living area and let her go.

Chapter 966:

He straightened up, his intention to leave clear, but she was faster. Her hand shot out, grabbing his silk tie and yanking him down with surprising strength.

He stumbled forward, off-balance, his face just inches from hers.

The drunken haze was gone from her eyes. They were sharp, clear, and filled with a raw, predatory hunger. She tilted her head up, her lips parting, aiming for his.

At the last possible second, Hilliard turned his head. Her kiss landed wetly on his cheek.

His eyes, when they met hers, were as cold as a winter sky. He unwound her fingers from his tie with effortless strength and stood up, creating a chasm of space between them.

Giselle's lips were still parted in a failed kiss. A flash of annoyance crossed her face, but she quickly masked it with a playful pout. He was just being difficult, she thought. The idea only excited her more.

She rose from the sofa, her movements a slow, deliberate sway, and closed the distance between them. Her arms wrapped around his neck.

"Hilliard," she purred, her voice a sticky, sweet poison. "Don't be shy. We're both adults here."

Her hand began to slide down his chest, her fingers fumbling with the top button of his tuxedo jacket.

He caught her wrist. His grip wasn't painful, but it was absolute, an iron band she could not move against.

"Miss Van Doren," he said, his voice utterly flat. "I believe you've misunderstood the situation."

She let out a throaty laugh. “Misunderstood? I don’t think so. You came up here with me, didn’t you?”

Her free hand went for his belt buckle.

That was the end of his patience.

He shoved her. Not a gentle push, but a hard, decisive thrust that sent her stumbling backward. She crashed into the arm of the sofa with a sharp cry of pain. The seductive smile was finally wiped from her face.

She stared at him, her expression a mixture of shock and outrage. “What is the meaning of this?”

Hilliard calmly straightened his tie, his eyes filled with a profound, bone-deep disgust. “I have no interest in you. A man can only be burned so badly once.”

Giselle stared, then let out a sharp, incredulous laugh. “Burned? By that dying wreck, Cailin Morton? You called her your ex-wife not two hours ago and looked glad to be free!”

A dangerous light entered Hilliard’s eyes. He began to walk toward her, slowly, deliberately.

She backed away, her bravado crumbling under the weight of his silent menace, until her back hit the cold glass of the floor-to-ceiling window.

"I suggest," Hilliard said, his voice a low, terrifying whisper, "you never mention her name to me again."

The truth finally dawned on her. She had miscalculated. Horribly. But her pride wouldn't let her fold.

"Then why did you come up here?" she demanded, her voice shrill. "Don't tell me you weren't interested in my offer!"

Hilliard smiled. It was the most terrifying expression she had ever seen. It held no warmth, no humor, only the cold, dead certainty of a predator that had cornered its prey.

Chapter 967:

"I have no interest in your secrets," he murmured, leaning in close. "But I am very interested in your suite."

Before she could process the meaning of his words, her world dissolved.

He moved with the speed of a striking snake. A white handkerchief, smelling faintly of chloroform, was pressed firmly over her mouth and nose.

She let out a single, muffled grunt of protest. Her body went limp. Her consciousness evaporated into blackness.

Hilliard caught her before she hit the floor and unceremoniously dumped her back onto the sofa. He looked down at her unconscious form, his eyes as cold and empty as if he were looking at a piece of furniture.

Hilliard stared down at Giselle's unconscious form on the sofa, his expression unreadable. He felt nothing. No satisfaction, no anger, just the cold, quiet hum of a machine executing its function. He pulled a small, high-tech toolkit from the inner pocket of his tuxedo and slipped on a pair of thin latex gloves.

He moved through the opulent suite with a chilling, systematic precision. He was a ghost in the machine, planting his seeds of surveillance. A microscopic lens, no bigger than a pinhead, was secreted into the ornate frame of a landscape painting. A listening device was tucked into the grille of an air-conditioning vent. His movements were fluid and economical, born of a world where paranoia was a survival trait. He placed the most advanced, highest-resolution devices near her desk and nightstand, anticipating late-night calls and frantic note-taking.

When he was finished, he paused to check Giselle's pulse. It was steady. Deeply unconscious, but stable.

He began to stage the scene. He arranged her limbs into the awkward, sprawled position of someone who had passed out from alcohol. He slipped off her designer heels and tossed them carelessly onto the floor. For the final touch, he opened a bottle of champagne from the minibar and poured a small amount onto the expensive rug near the sofa, creating the perfect illusion of a drunken, messy night.

He wiped down every surface he might have touched, erasing his presence from the room. Then, as silently as he had entered, he let himself out, the door clicking softly shut behind him.

He walked to the elevator, his face a blank mask. He pulled out his phone and sent a single, encrypted message to Kegan.

Done.

At that same moment, miles away at Mount Sinai Hospital, Silas Croft sat by Cailin's bedside. His stern, powerful face was a maelstrom of conflicting emotions: grief, rage, and a dawning, unfamiliar tenderness.

Cailin's eyelids fluttered open. She had been drifting in a shallow, restless sleep. She saw the imposing, unfamiliar old man sitting by her bed and her body tensed, her eyes sharp with alarm.

Julian Croft, standing silently behind the chair, stepped forward. "Cailin," he said, his voice gentle. "This is Mr. Silas Croft."

The name registered, a faint echo from a life that felt like it belonged to someone else, but she couldn't place it.

Chapter 968:

Silas leaned forward. His voice was rough with an emotion she couldn't identify. "Your mother, her name was Genevieve, wasn't it?"

The question struck Cailin like a physical blow. She had never told anyone her mother's real name. It was a secret she held close, a sacred relic.

“Who are you?” she demanded, her voice a raw whisper.

Tears welled in the old man’s fierce eyes. His voice broke as he delivered the impossible truth.

“I am your grandfather.”

The world tilted on its axis. Cailin’s mind went white with shock, unable to process the information. Grandfather? It was a word from a storybook, not her life.

Silas saw the disbelief and confusion on her face. He didn’t press. He simply began to talk, his deep voice filling the sterile room with the ghosts of the past. He spoke of a brave, rebellious girl named Genevieve. He spoke of his own decades-long, agonizing search for the truth.

Cailin listened, her defenses slowly lowering. The vague, dreamlike memories she had of her mother began to sharpen, to gain color and substance in the old man’s telling. When he spoke of the Ashford family’s betrayal, a hot, bright anger flared in her chest.

But when he said the word “poison,” her body went rigid.

Silas saw her reaction. He saw the way her breath hitched, the sudden, stark terror in her eyes. He looked at her pale, almost translucent skin, at the shallow rise and fall of her chest. The symptoms matched, with horrifying precision, the descriptions in the confidential toxicology report he had obtained on Genevieve’s death years ago.

A terrible, sickening certainty crashed down on him.

He closed his eyes, the pain of the realization a fresh, gaping wound. "The Van Dorens," he whispered, the words a statement, not a question. "They did the same thing to you."

Cailin's control finally shattered. The tears she had held back for so long broke free, a silent, scalding torrent for her mother's stolen life, and for her own.

Silas reached out, his large, wrinkled hand covering her small, cold one. His grip was surprisingly gentle, but his voice was filled with the strength of forged steel.

"Don't be afraid, child," he said, his voice thick with unshed tears. "Grandfather is here. And this time, I will not let them win."

He told her everything, the full, monstrous truth of how the Ashfords and the Van Dorens had conspired to murder her mother.

The final piece of the puzzle slammed into place. Cailin's body began to shake violently, a storm of grief and hatred so powerful it felt like it would tear her apart.

The truth was a poison of its own, coursing through Cailin's veins, more potent than any chemical. Her mother hadn't just died. She had been murdered. Systematically, cruelly, by the people Cailin had once called family, at the behest of the man who was her biological father.

A wave of nausea, so intense it made her vision swim, rose in her throat. She ripped her hand away from Silas's grasp as if she'd been burned.

Chapter 969:

Her breathing grew ragged, shallow. A wild, desperate fire ignited in her eyes, a conflagration of grief and pure, unadulterated hatred.

"Van Doren," she rasped, the name a curse on her lips. "I have to ask him why."

The thought of revenge, of a final confrontation, was a jolt of adrenaline that momentarily overrode the pain and weakness in her body. She fumbled with the thin hospital blanket, her fingers clumsy and weak, trying to push it away, to get up.

Silas and Julian moved at once, their hands gently but firmly pressing on her shoulders, holding her down.

"Cailin, calm down," Silas said, his voice a low, commanding rumble, laced with concern. "You can't go anywhere."

Her body, already pushed to its limits, betrayed her. She managed to lift her head an inch off the pillow before a spasm of pain shot through her, and she collapsed back, gasping. But the fire in her eyes didn't dim. It burned brighter, the furious, desperate glare of a wounded lioness.

“Let me go!” The words were a hoarse, broken cry. “He killed my mother! I can’t just lie here!”

The betrayal was a separate, twisting knife. The man she had called father. The man who had raised her, who had told her stories about her “mother,” all of it a lie. A carefully constructed cage to keep her ignorant, to keep her compliant.

“He lied to me,” she screamed, the sound tearing at her raw throat. “All of them! They all lied to me!”

Silas pulled her into his arms, a clumsy, unpracticed embrace. He held her tight as she thrashed against him, her fists beating weakly against his chest. He let her scream, let her rage, let her pour out the decades of poison she had unknowingly carried. His own heart felt as if it were being torn in two. He understood this helpless fury. It had been his constant companion for half his life.

He held her until her strength gave out, until the screams subsided into ragged, exhausted sobs. Only then did he speak.

“I know you want revenge,” he said, his voice deep and steady. “I want it more than you can possibly imagine. But not like this. And not alone.”

Julian added his voice, calm and rational. “Cailin, the Van Doren estate is a fortress. To go there now would be suicide.”

Silas gently pushed her back against the pillows, forcing her to look at him. “Revenge,” he said, his eyes boring into hers, “is a game of chess, Cailin. Not a desperate, final charge.”

He saw the wildness in her eyes begin to recede, replaced by a flicker of dawning, cold logic.

"I swear to you," he vowed, his voice resonating with absolute conviction, "I will make him pay. I will make the entire Van Doren family pay in blood for what they did to my daughter."

His words were a powerful sedative, calming the storm inside her. The fight drained out of her, leaving her limp and trembling with exhaustion in his arms.

Chapter 970:

She knew they were right. In her current state, she could barely sit up. What could she possibly do against a dynasty?

She looked up at this man, this stranger who was her grandfather, and for the first time, felt a flicker of something other than grief and rage. A fragile, desperate sense of connection.

"What do we do?" she whispered, her voice hoarse.

Silas saw the change in her eyes. The fire was still there, but it was no longer a wildfire. It was a controlled, contained flame, burning with a cold, clear purpose. He knew she was with him.

A grim, sad smile touched his lips. "First," he said, "you live. You get strong."

He squeezed her hand. "I will move heaven and earth. I will bring in every top specialist on the planet. I will spend every last dollar of the Croft fortune to find a cure for you."

He leaned in closer, his eyes glinting with a hard, ruthless light.

"And then," he promised, "together, we will write the plan. And step by step, piece by piece, we will burn their world to the ground."

Cailin looked at him, at the absolute certainty in his face. And for the first time since she had woken up in this nightmare, she felt a sliver of something that wasn't despair.

She nodded.

A seed of purpose had been planted in the barren wasteland of her grief. She would see Donovan Van Doren on his knees. And for that, she had to live.

The storm of emotion had passed, leaving behind a strange, desolate calm. Cailin lay back against the pillows, her expression now a carefully constructed mask of weary acceptance. Her eyes, however, were deep and unreadable, hiding a universe of secrets.

Silas, seeing her apparent compliance, felt a wave of relief. He reiterated his promise, his voice filled with a grandfather's fierce determination. He would find a cure. He would save her.

Cailin just nodded, her throat too tight to speak. She couldn't tell him. She couldn't watch the hope die in his eyes, not when it had just been born. So she played her part. She changed the subject, asking him to tell her more about Genevieve, about the mother she had never really known.

He spoke for hours, his deep voice painting pictures of a vibrant, rebellious young woman. For a brief, bittersweet time, they were not a dying woman and a vengeful patriarch. They were just a grandfather and a granddaughter, connected over a shared, tragic love.

But even as she listened, a cold, relentless clock was ticking in the back of Cailin's mind. She was a woman on borrowed time, and she had to use every second of it before Silas discovered the truth.

Miles away, in a suite at The Pierre, the first rays of dawn pierced through the floor-to-ceiling windows. Giselle Van Doren groaned, a sharp, stabbing pain lancing through her skull. She slowly, painfully, opened her eyes.