

Second chance 981

Chapter 981:

A sound cut through the rush of the water. The crunch of expensive leather shoes on the gravel path.

Cailin lifted her head.

Through the shimmering mist of the fountain, a man was walking toward her. He wore a dark grey, impeccably tailored suit. His face was a mask of power and quiet authority.

It was the same face from the photograph in the dossier.

Donovan Van Doren.

The sound of the fountain seemed to muffle the rest of the world. Donovan Van Doren stopped a few feet from Cailin's bench. He took a cigar from his coat, his movements unhurried and precise, and lit it with a heavy, gold lighter.

The small flame illuminated the harsh, aristocratic lines of his face. The set of his jaw, the arch of his brow, they were a cruel, distorted mirror of her own.

Cailin stared, her stomach churning with a toxic cocktail of hatred and a horrifying sense of connection. Her fingernails dug into the palms of her hands, the sharp pain a welcome anchor in the swirling chaos of her mind.

Donovan sensed her stare. He turned his head, a slight frown creasing his brow as he took in the pale, disheveled woman on the bench. His eyes, cold and assessing, swept over her. He saw a nobody, another anonymous face in a city full of them, perhaps looking for a handout or a connection. He dismissed her, turning to walk away.

“Donovan Van Doren.”

The words were quiet, but they cut through the air like shards of ice. She had spoken his name without deference, without title, her voice dripping with a contempt so profound it was almost a physical force.

He stopped. He turned back slowly, his eyes narrowing with a dangerous curiosity. Very few people in New York dared to address him with such familiarity. Certainly not a woman who looked as if a strong breeze could knock her over.

He took a long, slow draw from his cigar. “Do I know you?” he asked, his voice a low, dismissive rumble.

The question landed like a punch to her gut. She struggled to her feet. Her legs were shaking, but she forced her spine to go rigid, meeting his arrogant gaze without flinching.

A small, bitter laugh escaped her lips. “Of course not. A king on his throne doesn’t notice the ants he crushes underfoot.”

Donovan's expression hardened. The air crackled with a sudden tension. He did not like being spoken to this way. He did not like losing control of a situation. He was about to signal for his security detail, hidden discreetly nearby.

But then Cailin took a shaky step forward. The wind caught the hem of her trench coat, and for a split second, he saw the pale blue cotton of a hospital gown underneath.

Chapter 982:

His eyes flickered from the gown back to her face, and that was when it hit him. A strange, jarring sense of familiarity. It wasn't just a resemblance. It was in the stubborn set of her jaw, the defiant fire in her eyes. Eyes that were hauntingly, painfully familiar. Eyes that reminded him of someone he had tried to forget for decades.

The hand holding the cigar paused mid-air. The order for security died on his lips.

"Who are you?" he demanded, his voice no longer dismissive, but sharp, urgent.

Cailin saw the flicker of confusion in his eyes and felt a dark, twisted satisfaction.

She didn't answer his question. Instead, she asked one of her own, her voice trembling with suppressed rage. "Do you remember her? The woman you threw away? The one you left to rot in the Ashford family twenty-five years ago?"

The color drained from Donovan's face. The cigar slipped from his suddenly numb fingers, falling to the gravel path. That secret was a locked, buried vault in the deepest part of his soul.

"What do you know about that?" he snarled, taking a threatening step toward her.

Cailin didn't back down. Her eyes, now shimmering with unshed tears, held his. "I know that she's dead," she said, each word a perfectly aimed dagger. "She died alone. In despair. From poison."

The words struck him with the force of a physical blow. He staggered, his powerful frame swaying for a moment. His face was a mask of shock and a deep, complex pain.

He lunged forward, his hand reaching for her, needing to know more, needing to understand.

Cailin flinched away from his touch as if he were a leper. The sudden movement, combined with her own weakness, sent her tumbling to the ground. The sharp gravel of the path bit into her palms, drawing blood.

She looked up at him, at the hand he had extended to help her, and her face contorted with pure, undiluted loathing.

"Don't touch me!" she shrieked, the sound raw and wounded.

His hand froze in mid-air. He stared down at the bleeding, broken woman on the ground, his mind reeling.

Suddenly, the quiet garden was filled with the sound of running feet. Two men in dark suits materialized, flanking Donovan, their bodies forming a protective barrier. The moment was shattered. The raw, fragile connection was severed.

Eleonora turned from the bar, a heavy crystal tumbler in each hand. The amber liquid swirled, catching the light. Her smile was a masterpiece of social grace, betraying nothing of the lethal intent behind it.

She crossed the room, her movements fluid and elegant, and extended one of the glasses toward Silas. "Donovan was saving this Macallan for a special occasion," she said, her voice a warm, inviting murmur. "But I'm sure he wouldn't mind."

Silas's eyes were cold and hard. He didn't move to take the glass.

The silence stretched, thick and suffocating. Eleonora's arm remained outstretched, her smile beginning to feel brittle at the edges.

Silas was a man who had survived decades of corporate warfare, a world where smiles concealed daggers. He had an animal instinct for danger. He noticed the faint, almost imperceptible tightness in her grip, the way her knuckles were white against the crystal.

Chapter 983:

A slow, chilling smile of his own touched his lips. "I don't think I'll be drinking anything in this house, Eleonora."

Her heart gave a single, hard jolt, but her expression remained one of polite confusion. "Don't be silly, Silas. What are you afraid of?" To prove her point, she took a delicate sip from her own glass.

It didn't work. Silas leaned forward, his large frame casting a shadow over her. The sheer force of his presence was a physical weight.

"Don't think for a second," he said, his voice a low, brutal growl, "that what you did to Genevieve will stay buried forever."

At the mention of the name, Eleonora's pupils contracted. It was a flicker, a micro-expression of guilt and fear, but Silas saw it. It was all the confirmation he needed.

His hand shot out, not to take the glass, but to slap it from her grasp.

The heavy tumbler fell to the thick Persian rug with a muffled thud. The poisoned whiskey soaked into the expensive wool, disappearing almost instantly.

Eleonora gasped and stumbled back, her face a mask of shock and fury. Her plan had failed.

Silas looked down at her, his face a grim mask. “I’m going to take everything from you,” he promised, his voice cold and final. “I will see you rot in a prison cell for what you did to my daughter.”

He turned his back on her and strode toward the door. Van Doren security moved to block his path, but Silas’s own team materialized, weapons drawn. A tense, silent standoff filled the grand foyer.

Eleonora, standing over the dark, damp spot on her priceless rug, made a split-second calculation. A shootout in her home would bring the FBI, the media, a level of scrutiny she could not afford.

“Let him go,” she snapped, her voice tight with rage.

The guards parted. Silas didn’t look back. He walked out of the mansion, a king leaving a conquered territory.

The moment the massive front door slammed shut, Eleonora’s carefully constructed composure shattered. She let out a scream of pure, animalistic fury and hurled her own glass against the wall. Crystal fragments rained down on the marble floor.

Her phone rang, the shrill sound cutting through her rage. It was Donovan’s chief of staff.

“Mrs. Van Doren,” the man said, his voice tight with an urgency she didn’t understand. “Mr. Van Doren has just ordered a full, top-priority investigation into a woman he met at the hospital. A woman named Cailin Morton.”

The world fell out from under Eleonora's feet.

Donovan had met her. He was investigating her.

She closed her eyes, a wave of cold, absolute terror washing over her. The bomb she had spent more than two decades trying to defuse was not only active, its timer had just hit zero.

Eleonora's fingers tightened on the phone until her knuckles were white. She forced herself to breathe, to think through the blinding panic.

Chapter 984:

"Intercept it," she commanded, her voice a low, vicious hiss. "Use our entire network. I want every piece of data on Cailin Morton altered or erased. Her medical files, her birth certificate. Create a new identity, a new history. Now."

She hung up and began to pace the parlor, the sharp click of her heels a frantic, desperate rhythm. Data wasn't enough. She had to eliminate the source. She pulled out a different phone, a burner, and dialed the encrypted number for her most trusted asset. A cleaner.

"I have a new target," she said, her voice devoid of all emotion. "Her name is Cailin Morton. I want her gone. Permanently."

While Eleonora scrambled to contain a firestorm, her daughter was blissfully unaware, living out a fantasy.

In a Michelin-starred restaurant in midtown Manhattan, Giselle Van Doren sat across from Hilliard Holloway. She wore a stunning, backless evening gown, the picture of seductive elegance.

She raised her wine glass, her eyes fixed on Hilliard. "To new partnerships," she purred.

Hilliard met her gaze and lifted his own glass, his expression unreadable. He felt like he was observing a specimen under glass.

Eager to prove her value, Giselle leaned forward conspiratorially. "You know," she said, her voice a low whisper, "my family maintains a private research facility, right here in the city. The security is tighter than the Pentagon. It's where we keep our most valuable compounds."

Hilliard's heart gave a single, hard beat. He set his glass down, affecting an air of mild interest. "Is that so?"

He let a hint of disbelief color his tone. "Forgive my skepticism, Giselle, but I've heard such boasts before. They rarely live up to the hype."

The bait was perfectly cast. Giselle's competitive nature flared. The idea that he might think she was exaggerating, that he might see her as anything less than a key player, was intolerable.

"I could show you," she blurted out, the words tumbling out before she could stop them. "Tonight. After dinner. I'll prove it to you."

A flicker of a smile, cold and sharp as a razor, touched Hilliard's lips. It was gone in an instant. This was the moment he had engineered.

He pretended to consider it, then gave a reluctant sigh. "Very well. If you insist."

He stood and held her chair for her, the perfect gentleman.

They walked out of the restaurant and into the cool night air. Hilliard's armored SUV was waiting. As they slid into the plush leather interior, Giselle continued to chatter, describing the lab's state-of-the-art equipment.

Hilliard listened with half an ear, his other hand, hidden from her view, activating a signal jammer and a micro-GPS tracker on his phone. He was preparing the battlefield.

Back on Long Island, Eleonora had just ended her call with the assassin. The butler rushed into the parlor, his face pale with alarm.

"Madam," he stammered. "Mr. Van Doren's car has just passed through the main gate. He's home."

Eleonora's blood ran cold. Her eyes shot to the Persian rug, to the dark, damp patch where the poisoned whiskey had spilled.

If Donovan smelled it, if his damned hunting dogs detected the chemical trace.

Chapter 985:

She lunged toward the bar, grabbing a thick linen napkin. Forgetting all her grace and dignity, she dropped to her knees and began scrubbing frantically at the stain.

She could hear the heavy tread of his footsteps in the main hall, the murmur of his voice. He was getting closer.

The doorknob to the parlor began to turn.

Eleonora froze, the damp, poisoned cloth clutched in her hand, her heart hammering against her ribs like a trapped bird.

The heavy oak door swung open. Donovan strode in, bringing a chill of the night air with him.

In a single, fluid motion, Eleonora shoved the damp napkin deep into the crevice of a sofa cushion and rose to her feet, a practiced smile pasted on her lips.

“Darling,” she said, her voice a little too bright. “You’re back early. I thought you were in the city.”

Donovan didn't look at her. His brow was furrowed, his mind clearly elsewhere. "The meeting was shorter than expected," he grunted, walking past her to the bar.

Eleonora's heart pounded. Her eyes were glued to the damp spot on the rug, which seemed to glow like a beacon in the dim light.

A sleek, black Doberman trotted into the room after Donovan. The dog went straight to the stain. It sniffed once, twice, then let out a low, confused whine, its front paw scratching at the wool fibers.

Donovan stopped pouring his drink. He turned, his sharp gaze following the dog's attention.

"What's this?" he asked, his voice edged with annoyance. "What's wrong with the dog?"

Eleonora's palms were slick with sweat. "Oh, nothing, darling," she said, forcing a light, dismissive laugh. "I was clumsy earlier. Spilled some of the new floral cleaner. It must have a strange scent."

Donovan stared at her for a long, silent moment. His eyes were like drills, seeming to pierce right through her carefully constructed facade. She felt her smile begin to tremble.

But his mind was still consumed by the woman in the garden, by the ghost of Genevieve. He waved a dismissive hand at the dog. "Leave it."

Eleonora let out a breath she didn't realize she'd been holding. She had survived. Barely.

Miles away, deep beneath the streets of Manhattan, Hilliard and Giselle stood before a heavy alloy door. An iris scanner glowed red.

Giselle leaned forward, a smug smile on her face. The scanner flashed green. With a hiss of decompressed air, the massive doors slid apart.

A blast of sterile, white light flooded the corridor, illuminating Hilliard's grim, determined face. He stepped across the threshold, into the heart of the Van Doren empire.

The laboratory was a maze of gleaming steel pipes and pressurized glass chambers. Technicians in white clean-suits moved like ghosts through the sterile environment.

Giselle clung to his arm, her voice a proud murmur as she pointed out various pieces of multi-million-dollar equipment. Hilliard said nothing, his eyes scanning, recording, mapping every security camera, every keycard access point, every potential blind spot.

She led him to the deepest part of the facility, a central, temperature-controlled vault. Inside, behind reinforced glass, were racks of vials containing brightly colored liquids.

Chapter 986:

Hilliard's eyes found it immediately. A small, unassuming bottle filled with a dark purple fluid. The label was simple: RK-7.

Regent's Kiss.

He pointed to it, his voice a low, appreciative murmur. "That one. It looks significant. Is that your masterpiece?"

Giselle beamed, her ego swelling. "It is," she boasted, her voice dropping to a conspiratorial whisper. "It can induce complete cardiac and neurological collapse. Untraceable. The perfect weapon."

A wave of pure, murderous rage washed over Hilliard, so cold and intense it almost made him dizzy. He had found it. The source. The poison that was killing Cailin.

Giselle turned to a nearby technician, demanding a data slate to show Hilliard the compound's molecular structure.

In that brief moment of distraction, Hilliard's hand moved. He pressed a tiny, magnetic device, no bigger than a grain of rice, onto the underside of the main control panel's data port.

A silent, invisible Trojan horse. It began to slice through the system's firewalls, its sole purpose to locate and download the formula for the antidote.

Suddenly, the world exploded into noise and red light.

The lab's highest-level security sirens began to shriek, a deafening, piercing wail. Red alarm lights flashed, plunging the sterile white room into a pulsating, hellish crimson. Heavy steel blast doors slammed down over every exit, sealing the lab like a tomb.

Giselle spun around, her face a mask of confusion and terror.

Hilliard didn't move. He stood before the glass vault, his hands in his pockets, his expression as cold and calm as the grave. He was trapped.

Giselle slammed her palms against the thick alloy of the blast door. The metal didn't even vibrate. It was like hitting the side of a mountain.

"What's happening?" she shrieked, her voice thin and sharp against the deafening siren. "Why is everything locked down?"

The technicians around them were frozen, their faces pale masks of terror under the pulsating red lights.

Hilliard didn't answer. He remained entirely unfazed by the chaos unfolding around him, his dark silhouette stark against the flashing crimson. Rather than a trapped prisoner, he looked more like a connoisseur admiring a rare vintage as his gaze lingered on the RK-7.

His calm was monstrous. It was a deep, unnatural stillness in the heart of a hurricane, and it terrified Giselle more than the blaring alarms.

“Hilliard, do something!” she screamed, turning on him.

His attention shifted at a glacial pace. As he finally met her panicked stare, his eyes reflected the strobing light like cold, empty voids.

He lifted his left wrist. His movements were unhurried, almost lazy. He pressed his thumb against a custom-made cufflink on his shirt sleeve. There was a faint, inaudible click.

Instantly, the world went silent.

The piercing shriek of the sirens cut off. The pulsating red lights died, plunging the lab back into its sterile, white glow. The only sound was the low hum of the ventilation system.

The blast doors, however, remained shut.

Chapter 987:

Giselle stared, her mouth agape. On the main control panel, the screen flickered and a new line of text appeared in stark, green letters: ADMINISTRATIVE CONTROL TRANSFERRED.

She spun back to Hilliard, her mind struggling to process what had just happened. “What did you do?”

He had used a Trojan horse, a silent digital predator he'd planted moments ago. It hadn't just shut down the alarm. It had reversed the lockdown, seizing control of the entire system, locking Giselle out of her own fortress.

He was now the warden.

"You saw what I did," Hilliard said, his voice quiet but carrying across the now-silent lab. He was still looking at the vial of RK-7.

Giselle's fear curdled into a knot of disbelief and rage. "My security system, you hijacked my system!"

"Your system?" Hilliard finally turned to face her fully. A faint, contemptuous smile touched his lips. "It seems to be my system now."

She lunged for the control panel, her fingers flying across the touchscreen, trying to input override codes. Access Denied. Access Denied. A new message flashed on the screen: EXTERNAL PROTOCOL OVERRIDE IN EFFECT.

She was locked out. Completely.

Hilliard walked slowly toward her, his footsteps echoing in the vast, sterile space. He stopped beside her, his gaze fixed on the vial of dark purple liquid.

"This is it, isn't it?" he asked, his tone conversational, almost academic. "The thing you used on Cailin Morton."

The blood drained from Giselle's face. "I don't know what you're talking about."

A low, humorless laugh rumbled in his chest. "Don't you? Tiffany Reed was surprisingly talkative once she realized the alternative."

His words hit her like a physical blow. Tiffany had cracked. It was over. A thought, sharp and cold, pierced through her panic. Eleonora. Her mother would be investigating him by now. He had to be working on a deadline.

She drew herself up, clinging to the last shreds of her arrogance. "So what? You have no proof."

Hilliard walked over to a nearby lab table and picked up an empty syringe, turning it over in his gloved fingers. He seemed to be admiring the craftsmanship.

"I've been reading your research," he said, his tone shifting to one of intellectual curiosity. "RK-7. It's impressive. But I have a theory."

He looked at her, his eyes narrowed thoughtfully. "I think it has a flaw. A compound this complex, it's likely unstable. It probably wouldn't be effective against certain genetic sequences."

It was a direct assault on her pride, on the one thing she held sacred: her genius.

"You're wrong," she snapped, her voice sharp with indignation. "It's perfect. It's lethal to any human subject."

Hilliard raised an eyebrow. "Any subject? Really?" he mused, his voice laced with a goading disbelief. "Including its creator?"

He took a step closer. "Perhaps you carry a natural immunity. Or maybe," he added, his voice dropping to a conspiratorial whisper, "you've already prepared an antidote for yourself. Just in case."

Chapter 988:

That was it. The insult was too great. The suggestion that her perfect creation was flawed, or that she was too cowardly to trust it, was more than her ego could bear.

"I'll prove it to you," she snarled.

She strode to the RK-7 storage cabinet, her movements jerky with fury. She bypassed the security with a rapid sequence of codes, her professional pride overriding all caution. The reinforced door hissed open.

She retrieved a micro-pipette containing the deep purple fluid. Her face was flushed, her eyes shining with a feverish, pathological zeal.

“One drop,” she declared, holding the pipette up to the light. “Just one drop is all it will take to prove its absolute efficacy. And I have more than enough time to administer the antidote before the effects are irreversible.”

Hilliard simply watched her, his expression unreadable. He made a small, elegant gesture with his hand. “Be my guest.”

Giselle grabbed a sealed bottle of expensive mineral water from a small refrigerator. She twisted the cap and, with a flourish, squeezed a single, perfect purple drop into the clear water. It dissolved instantly, leaving the water as pure and transparent as before.

She held the bottle up, a silent, triumphant toast to him. A challenge.

Then, she tilted her head back and drank it all in one long, decisive swallow. She slammed the empty bottle down on the lab table with a clatter, a victorious smirk spreading across her face.

Hilliard’s mask finally fell away. The expression that replaced it was one of cold, bone-chilling pity.

“Your mother never told you, did she, Giselle?” he said, his voice terrifyingly calm. “The only antidote for RK-7 is another poison. A counter-agent.”

Her victorious smirk froze. She stared at him, uncomprehending.

“And that counter-agent,” Hilliard continued, his voice dropping to a whisper, “is currently flowing through Cailin Morton’s veins, keeping her heart beating for a few more precious days.”

Giselle’s pupils shrank to pinpricks. The horrific truth of his trap slammed into her. Her face went from flushed pink to a waxy, corpse-like white.

She spun around and clawed at the refrigerated cabinet where the real antidote was kept. She tore the door open.

It was empty.

A violent, searing pain ripped through her abdomen. She doubled over, a strangled gasp tearing from her throat.

She looked up at him, her eyes wide with terror and disbelief. Her lips trembled. “You set me up.”

Hilliard walked over to her, looming over her crumpled form. His voice was quiet, but it was the cruelest sound she had ever heard.

“Welcome to Cailin’s world.”

Behind him, the massive blast doors began to rise with a low, grinding hiss, revealing the cold, impassive faces of Kegan Aguirre's security team.

The pain was a living thing, a hot coil twisting in her gut. Giselle curled into a ball on the cold, sterile floor, each breath a ragged, shallow gasp. She looked up at Hilliard, at the man who stood over her like a marble statue, and the last piece of the puzzle clicked into place.

Chapter 989:

His hatred for Cailin. The public dismissal. The coldness at the party. It was all a performance. A perfectly executed, monstrous lie designed for one purpose: to lure her into this tomb.

He wasn't trying to replace Cailin. He was avenging her.

Desperation, raw and primal, clawed at her. Her fingers fumbled at the hem of her expensive gown, searching for the small, hard nub sewn into the silk lining. It wasn't part of the lab's security. It was her personal panic button, a direct line to her father's private network. A last resort.

With the last of her strength, she pressed it.

A silent, encrypted signal shot out from the lab, carrying her precise GPS coordinates and her rapidly failing biometric data.

Hilliard saw the small, spastic movement of her hand. He did nothing to stop it. He simply watched, his face a blank mask.

A triumphant, ugly sneer twisted Giselle's lips as she gasped for air. "Too late," she rasped, the words catching in her throat. "My father's security, they'll be here in five minutes."

Hilliard crouched down, bringing his face close to hers. His voice was a cold whisper against her ear. "I'm counting on them to come."

The sneer on her face froze, melting into confusion and a new, deeper horror. He wasn't running. He wasn't afraid.

He stood up, turning to the security captain who now stood at the ready. "Ethan," Hilliard said, his voice calm and clear. "Take her. I want her at Mount Sinai. In the room next to Cailin Morton's."

Two of the security men moved forward, their faces impassive. They hauled Giselle roughly to her feet. The sudden movement sent another wave of agony through her.

"You're insane!" she shrieked, her body thrashing weakly in their grip. "I'll kill you! I'll kill you both!"

Hilliard ignored her, calmly adjusting the cuff of his shirt. He turned back to Ethan Cole. "Lock this place down. Copy every byte of data on their servers. Anyone tries to get in before you're done, you have my authorization to use lethal force."

“Yes, sir,” Ethan said with a curt nod. A team of technicians swarmed into the lab, connecting drives and tapping into the mainframe.

Giselle was being dragged toward the now-open blast doors. She twisted her head, her eyes wild with fear and a desperate need to understand.

“Why?” she croaked, her voice raw. “You could have just taken the antidote. Why are you doing this?”

Hilliard finally looked at her again. There was no anger in his eyes, no satisfaction. Only a vast, dead emptiness.

“Because I don’t just want the antidote,” he said, his voice flat and devoid of emotion. “I want the entire Van Doren family to publicly confess for what they did to my wife.”

The sheer, terrifying scale of his ambition silenced her. The fight went out of her. She went limp in the guards’ arms as they dragged her out of the lab and into the waiting darkness of an SUV.

The vehicle sped away, disappearing into the labyrinth of the city.

Hilliard stood alone in the now-quiet laboratory. He took out a satellite phone and dialed a number.

Chapter 990:

Julian Croft answered on the first ring.

“The fish is in the net,” Hilliard said, his voice low. “Prepare to receive Donovan Van Doren.”

He ended the call without waiting for a reply. He looked around at the racks of deadly poisons, at the gleaming, sterile equipment that had created the weapon that was killing Cailin. A flicker of profound weariness crossed his face.

He turned and walked out. In the corridor, Ethan reported that the data transfer would take another ten minutes.

Hilliard nodded. “When it’s done, send a copy to Silas Croft. Then get out.”

He didn’t wait. He walked to the elevator, a solitary figure moving through the controlled chaos. He needed to get back to the hospital. He needed to be with her.

The elevator doors slid shut, sealing him off from the darkness he had just unleashed.

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At that same moment, on a sprawling estate in Long Island, a high-priority alert shrieked from Donovan Van Doren's phone. The screen glowed with a single, terrifying message: Giselle's life signs were in catastrophic decline.

The black SUV screeched to a halt at the private VIP entrance of Mount Sinai Hospital. The doors flew open before the vehicle had fully stopped. Two of Hilliard's men lifted a moaning, semi-conscious Giselle onto a waiting gurney and rushed her inside.

The entire floor had been cleared. Hilliard's private medical team stood ready, their faces grim.

Giselle was wheeled into a prepared room. Monitors were attached, IV lines inserted. The room filled with the steady, rhythmic beeping of her life signs.

Hilliard stood in the doorway, a cold, detached observer. "Keep her alive," he told the lead doctor. "But don't cure her."

The doctors exchanged uneasy glances but nodded in compliance. They began administering basic life support, nothing more.

Hilliard turned and walked to Cailin's room. He paused at the door, looking through the glass window at her still, pale form. His jaw tightened.

His phone vibrated. A text from Ethan Cole: Data copied. We are evacuating the premises.

Acknowledged, Hilliard typed back. He then walked to the lounge at the end of the hall, which had been converted into his temporary war room.

Just as he reached the door, the elevator at the far end of the corridor chimed softly. The doors slid open, and Julian Croft strolled out, a lazy, unconcerned smile on his face.

Two of his aides followed, quickly setting up encrypted communication arrays in the lounge.

Julian walked over to Hilliard, handing him a cup of black coffee. "You've had a busy night," he remarked, his tone light.

Hilliard ignored the pleasantries. His eyes were like chips of flint. "Where is he?"

Julian glanced at a tablet. "Donovan's helicopter is three minutes from the rooftop helipad."

Aboard that helicopter, Donovan Van Doren's face was a thundercloud. His chief of staff was giving him a hurried briefing. Giselle's signal originated from this floor of Mount Sinai. The entire level was on lockdown, controlled by Hilliard Holloway's private security.