

Second chance 991

Chapter 991:

Donovan's fists clenched so tightly his knuckles turned white. This was a kidnapping. A declaration of war.

The helicopter touched down. Donovan stormed out, his six armed bodyguards fanning out around him. They moved with military precision toward the elevator.

When the doors opened on the VIP floor, they were met by Ethan Cole. He stood alone, his hand raised in a polite but firm gesture.

"Mr. Van Doren," Ethan said, his voice calm. "Mr. Holloway is expecting you. Your team, however, will wait here."

Donovan's men drew their weapons. Hilliard's men, positioned discreetly down the hall, did the same. The corridor was suddenly electric with the threat of violence.

Donovan raised a hand, silencing his men. He knew a firefight here was suicide. He gave Ethan a look that could freeze fire and stepped out of the elevator alone.

He strode down the hall, his expensive shoes silent on the polished floor. He saw the two guards stationed outside Giselle's room. He tried the door. It was locked.

"Don't bother, Donovan."

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The voice came from the end of the hall. Donovan turned. Hilliard and Julian were standing in the doorway of the lounge, watching him. They looked like two predators who had just watched their prey walk into a trap.

Donovan's gaze swept over them, finally settling on Hilliard. "You've crossed a line, Holloway," he said, his voice like ice.

A cold smirk touched Hilliard's lips. "You and your daughter crossed it first."

Julian leaned against the doorframe, examining his fingernails. "Actually," he added, his voice deceptively casual, "your family has been crossing lines for over twenty years."

Donovan's eyes widened fractionally. He realized with a jolt that this wasn't just Hilliard. This was the Crofts, too. A united front.

He took a deep breath, forcing down the rage that threatened to choke him. He walked into the lounge.

“Alright,” he said, his voice a low growl. “Tell me what you want.”

Hilliard closed the door behind him, sealing the three men inside the powder keg.

Cailin drifted back to consciousness, pulled from a shallow, restless sleep by a series of muffled sounds. Footsteps in the hall. The low murmur of voices. The distant clang of a gurney.

She pressed the call button. One of Hilliard’s private nurses entered, her expression carefully neutral.

“What’s going on outside?” Cailin asked, her voice a dry whisper.

The nurse hesitated. “Mr. Holloway is just having a meeting, ma’am.”

Cailin didn’t press, but a knot of unease tightened in her stomach. Her instincts, honed by years of survival, were screaming that something was wrong.

Then she heard it. A loud crash from the room next door, like a glass being thrown against a wall. It was followed by a woman’s voice, shrill and furious.

Giselle.

“Get your hands off me!” Giselle shrieked at her guards. “You’re nothing but Hilliard’s dogs!”

There was a pained gasp, a grunt of agony as the poison twisted in her gut, but her voice returned, dripping with undiluted arrogance.

Chapter 992:

“Tell Hilliard to get in here! And where is my father? He’s supposed to be here!”

A man’s voice, low and bored, replied, “Mr. Van Doren is in a meeting.”

Giselle let out a high, contemptuous laugh. “A meeting? He’ll be tearing you all to pieces in an hour. Then he’ll carry me out of here like a princess.”

Cailin lay perfectly still, listening. Every word was a piece of a puzzle. She connected Giselle’s presence, her mention of her father, and the nurse’s lie about Hilliard’s “meeting.”

A stunning, terrifying picture began to form in her mind.

The door to her room opened. Hilliard walked in, a shadow of exhaustion under his eyes that his iron control couldn’t quite conceal.

He came to her bedside and adjusted her blanket, his touch surprisingly gentle. "Did she wake you?" he asked, his voice low.

Cailin ignored the question. She looked directly into his eyes. "You have her," she stated, her voice flat. "You brought her here."

Hilliard's hand stilled on the blanket. He knew better than to lie to her. He gave a slow, deliberate nod.

"And Donovan Van Doren is here, too," Cailin continued, her voice gaining strength. "You're negotiating with him."

A flicker of surprise crossed his face, quickly replaced by a wry, tired smile. "Your instincts are as sharp as ever."

He sat in the chair by her bed. "He's tougher than I anticipated," Hilliard admitted. "The talks have stalled. Julian is with him now, trying to wear him down."

Cailin's gaze drifted to the window, to the gray city skyline. "You're trading her life for my antidote." It wasn't a question.

He didn't answer. He didn't have to.

She turned her head back to him, her expression a complex mixture of awe and fear. "It's a hell of a gamble, Hilliard. You're betting that Donovan's love for his daughter is stronger than his obsession with his family's honor."

He reached for her hand. It was as cold as ice. "I didn't have a choice."

Cailin slowly, deliberately, pulled her hand away. She shook her head.

"Yes, you did," she whispered. "You just didn't see it."

He looked at her, confused.

Her gaze shifted toward the wall, in the direction of Giselle's room. A pale, cold smile touched her lips.

"You're betting on the wrong person," she said, her voice dropping to a near-whisper, each word precise and sharp. "You shouldn't be betting on Donovan's love. You should be betting on Giselle's selfishness."

Hilliard stared at her, the meaning of her words not yet registering.

Cailin closed her eyes, a general marshaling her forces for the final, decisive battle. She knew the key to this war wasn't in the lounge downstairs with the powerful men. It was in the room next door, with the arrogant, terrified woman being eaten alive by poison and fear.

When Hilliard re-entered the lounge, the air was thick with unspoken hostility. Donovan Van Doren stood staring out the window, his back rigid. Julian Croft was slowly, methodically polishing a pair of antique spectacles.

Chapter 993:

Nothing had changed. The stalemate was absolute.

Donovan turned, his face carved from granite. "My terms are unchanged. Release my daughter, and the antidote will be here within the hour."

Julian slipped the glasses on, his eyes magnified slightly. "With all due respect, Mr. Van Doren," he said, his voice lazy but edged with steel, "you are in no position to be making terms."

Hilliard sank into a leather armchair. Cailin's words echoed in his mind. You should be betting on Giselle's selfishness.

He looked at Donovan, truly looked at him, not as a rival CEO, but as a man. He was posturing as a devoted father, but at his core, he was a creature of commerce. A man who understood leverage and loss.

"The poison in Giselle's system is RK-7," Hilliard said, his voice quiet but cutting through the tension. "Regent's Kiss. You're familiar with it, I assume."

A muscle twitched in Donovan's jaw. He remained silent.

"My medical team estimates that for every hour that passes, she sustains irreversible neurological damage," Hilliard continued, his tone clinical. "In twenty-four hours, she'll be beyond saving."

Donovan's hands, hanging at his sides, clenched into fists. The veins on their backs stood out like cords.

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Julian added, his voice smooth as silk, "The process, of course, will be agonizing. Blindness first. Then the loss of speech. And finally, a complete psychotic break as her mind dissolves into endless hallucinations."

"Enough!" Donovan roared, slamming his hand down on the mahogany table.

He glared at Hilliard, his eyes burning. "Do you think you can threaten me into submission? I will sacrifice anything for the honor of the Van Doren name!"

Hilliard met his gaze and slowly shook his head. "I'm not threatening you. I'm stating facts."

He leaned back, a subtle shift in his posture. He was no longer a combatant. He was a consultant. "In fact," he said, "let's consider another option. Perhaps Giselle's death is the best outcome for both of us."

Donovan and Julian both stared at him, utterly baffled.

"She dies," Hilliard elaborated, ticking the points off on his fingers. "You're rid of an impulsive, liability of an heir. My wife's attempted murder is avenged. And as for the antidote, with the combined resources of the Holloway and Croft families, I'm confident we can synthesize a replacement eventually."

He spread his hands in a gesture of finality. "So, you see, there's no rush on my end. We can wait."

Donovan was speechless. He was a master of the boardroom, of hostile takeovers and brutal negotiations. He had never encountered a tactic like this. Hilliard was treating his daughter's life not as a tragedy, but as a line item on a balance sheet.

Julian watched Hilliard, a flicker of admiration in his eyes. The strategy had changed. The game was new.

Donovan stood up abruptly and began to pace, his mind a whirlwind of fury and a terrifying, cold logic. Hilliard was right. From a purely strategic standpoint...

Chapter 994:

Upstairs, Cailin had just ended a call with her friend Mia, asking for a small but crucial favor. She looked at her own pale reflection in the dark screen of her phone, took a deep breath, and pressed the nurse's call button.

When the nurse entered, Cailin's voice was weak, but her command was absolute. "I want to see Giselle Van Doren."

The nurse paled. "Ma'am, I can't. Mr. Holloway's orders are that no one—"

Cailin's eyes turned to ice. "Then go tell Mr. Holloway that if I don't see her, he will never get that antidote."

The sheer force of her will sent the nurse scurrying from the room.

A moment later, the door to the lounge downstairs was knocked. Ethan Cole leaned in, whispering urgently in Hilliard's ear.

Hilliard's expression shifted, a complex mix of alarm and frustration. He glanced at the tormented, pacing figure of Donovan Van Doren. He stood up and strode out of the room.

He had to see what Cailin was planning.

Hilliard burst into Cailin's room. "What the hell do you think you're doing?" he demanded, his voice a low, furious whisper.

Her face was as white as the hospital sheets, but her eyes burned with a cold, resolute fire. "Your way is too slow," she said. "I don't have time to wait."

She told him her plan. She wanted to speak with Giselle. Alone. She promised him she could make her talk.

He looked at her, at the fragile tremor in her hands, the dark circles under her eyes. "Absolutely not," he said. "It's too dangerous."

A humorless smile touched her lips. "I'm the only one who can do this," she insisted. "Because I can give Giselle the one thing she wants more than anything else."

Hilliard stared at her, uncomprehending. She didn't explain. She just held his gaze, her will an unbreakable force.

He was the first to look away. "Fine," he ground out. "But I'll be watching on a monitor from the next room. The second she lays a hand on you, my men are going in."

Cailin nodded. He left to make the arrangements.

Down in the lounge, Donovan's phone buzzed. It was Eleonora, her voice a frantic, tearful whisper, begging him to come home, claiming there was a crisis. He hung up, his stomach churning. He knew it was a ploy.

The door opened and Hilliard and Julian walked back in. Hilliard's face was grim.

He tossed a file onto the table in front of Donovan. It was a preliminary analysis of the data Ethan Cole had copied from the lab.

"Your daughter wasn't working alone, Donovan," Hilliard said, his voice flat.

Donovan opened the file. His eyes fell on a name he never expected to see.

Charla English.

The report was damning. Shipping manifests. Encrypted financial transfers. A clear, undeniable trail of chemical precursors moving from Giselle's lab to an offshore shell corporation controlled by the English Group.

Donovan's mind went blank. It made no sense. Why would his daughter, a Van Doren, ally herself with that disgraced, pathetic social climber?

“They were partners,” Hilliard said, his voice like a hammer blow. “One supplied the poison. The other provided the access. The target was my wife.”

Chapter 995:

“No,” Donovan choked out, shaking his head. “It’s impossible. You fabricated this.”

Julian leaned forward. “Fabricated?” he asked, his voice deceptively soft. “These are digital logs and bank records, Donovan. They’re admissible in federal court. I imagine the Van Doren family can’t afford charges of money laundering and the illegal transport of hazardous materials, can they?”

Donovan’s last line of defense crumbled. He sank back into his chair, the blood draining from his face.

He thought of Eleonora’s panicked phone call. A dreadful, sickening suspicion began to form.

His hand trembled as he dialed her number and put it on speaker.

“Eleonora,” he said, his voice tight, when she answered. “Do you know Charla English?”

There was a beat of silence on the other end. A fatal hesitation.

“No, darling, of course not,” she said, her voice high and flustered. “Why would you ask such a thing?”

The lie was so transparent, so pathetic, it hung in the air like a foul stench.

Donovan’s heart turned to lead. He ended the call and closed his eyes, the weight of his family’s treachery crushing him. He looked ten years older.

When he opened his eyes again, the ruthless CEO was gone. Only a desperate father remained.

“I’ll get you the antidote,” he said to Hilliard, his voice a hoarse whisper. “Just let my daughter go.”

Hilliard shook his head. “The antidote comes first. Once it’s been verified, then we can talk about Giselle.”

Donovan had no cards left to play. He stared at the tabletop, defeated.

“Alright,” he rasped.

Donovan pushed himself to his feet. He straightened his tie and smoothed the lapels of his suit, a man reclaiming a sliver of his shattered authority.

He looked Hilliard in the eye. "Six hours," he said, his voice low and steady. "I will deliver the antidote here myself."

As a gesture of good faith, he picked up his encrypted radio and spoke into it, ordering all his security personnel stationed around the hospital to stand down and withdraw immediately.

Hilliard exchanged a look with Julian, then gave a curt nod. The terms were accepted.

Donovan walked out of the lounge without another word, his back straight, his shoulders carrying an impossible weight.

After he was gone, Julian let out a low whistle. "That went smoother than I expected."

Hilliard's expression remained tense. He knew this was far from over.

Suddenly, a commotion erupted in the hallway. A woman screamed.

Hilliard and Julian rushed out of the lounge. The door to Giselle's room was wide open. A nurse was running out, her face white with panic. "She's coughing up blood!"

Hilliard sprinted to the doorway. Giselle was slumped over the side of her bed, her body wracked with violent, convulsive coughs. Bright red blood sprayed from her lips, staining the pristine white sheets.

Her body seized, her eyes rolling back in her head. The poison was accelerating.

Doctors and nurses swarmed into the room, pushing a crash cart.

Chapter 996:

Hilliard's face was a mask of grim fury. Their timeline had just been cut in half. He barked an order at Ethan Cole to double the watch on Giselle. He couldn't let her die. Not yet.

Meanwhile, Donovan's helicopter touched down on the manicured lawn of the Long Island estate. He strode into the main house. Eleonora was pacing in the grand foyer, her face a portrait of anxiety.

She rushed toward him. "Donovan! Is Giselle alright? What happened?"

He didn't answer. He just looked at her, his eyes as cold and dead as a winter sea.

The feigned concern on her face froze. She took an involuntary step back.

He grabbed her arm, his grip like iron. Without a word, he dragged her across the marble floor and into his study. He slammed the heavy door shut and turned the lock.

Then he shoved her away from him. She stumbled and fell to the plush carpet.

“Donovan!” she cried, looking up at him with wide, disbelieving eyes. He had never laid a hand on her before.

He stood over her, a figure of pure, righteous fury. “Tell me,” he snarled, his voice a low, terrifying rumble from the depths of his soul. “What is your deal with Charla English?”

“I don’t know what you’re talking about!” she sobbed, crawling toward him. “It’s a lie! Hilliard is framing us!”

A bitter, humorless laugh escaped his lips. He walked to his desk and pressed a hidden button on the intercom.

“Bring Dr. Finch to the study. Now.”

The color drained from Eleonora’s face. She knew what he was doing.

She scrambled across the floor and clutched at his leg, her tears now real. “Donovan, please, don’t. This is a family matter. We can’t let the staff see—”

He kicked her away with a look of utter disgust.

A few minutes later, there was a knock at the door. Two bodyguards escorted Dr. Alistair Finch into the room. The chemist's face was slick with sweat, his eyes wide with terror.

Dr. Finch stumbled into the study, his gaze darting from the furious, imposing figure of Donovan to the weeping, disheveled form of Eleonora on the floor. His knees felt weak.

Donovan ignored his wife completely. He strode to Finch and slapped a file against the chemist's chest. It was the toxicology report from Cailin's bloodwork.

"Tell me," Donovan said, his voice dangerously quiet, "if this is one of ours."

Finch's hands trembled as he took the report. He only needed to see the molecular diagram on the first page. His face went ashen.

"Yes," he whispered, his voice barely audible. "It's a variant of RK-7."

"And who else," Donovan pressed, his eyes boring into the terrified man, "is capable of creating this variant?"

Finch's terrified gaze flickered toward Eleonora. His lips moved, but no sound came out.

Donovan's patience snapped. He grabbed Finch by the collar of his lab coat and slammed him against a towering bookshelf. "Answer me!" he roared.

The chemist broke. "It was the madam!" he shrieked, his eyes squeezed shut. "Madam Van Doren ordered me to modify it! She said it was for an experiment!"

Chapter 997:

Eleonora let out a strangled cry and lunged at Finch, trying to silence him. A bodyguard stepped in her path, blocking her easily.

The truth was out. She was cornered.

Her strategy shifted in an instant. The fury vanished, replaced by a torrent of hysterical, theatrical tears. She collapsed back onto the floor, a broken, tragic figure.

"Yes, I did it!" she wailed. But it was a confession wrapped in a lie.

She claimed Charla English had come to her, blackmailing her with an old, dark family secret. She painted herself as a terrified mother, a helpless wife forced into an impossible choice.

“She made me give her the poison!” Eleonora sobbed. “She said she would ruin us, destroy everything we’ve built!”

She cast herself as a reluctant accomplice, a pawn in Charla’s wicked game, a woman who had made a terrible mistake out of fear.

Donovan listened to her performance, his face an unreadable mask. He knew she was lying. A woman who ran the family’s shadow operations would never be so easily manipulated by a girl like Charla.

But he didn’t have time. Giselle was dying.

And Eleonora’s story, however flawed, was an explanation. It gave him a villain to focus on, a narrative to cling to.

He crouched down in front of her and gripped her chin, forcing her to look at him.

“This is the last lie you will ever tell me,” he said, each word a chip of ice. “When this is over, you and I will have a reckoning.”

She saw the promise of absolute ruin in his eyes. Their marriage was over.

He stood and turned to the trembling Dr. Finch. "To the lab," he commanded. "Now. I want the antidote for RK-7."

Finch stammered, "The antidote, the synthesis is incredibly complex, and the base materials, they are exceedingly rare."

Donovan cut him off, his eyes wild with desperation. "I don't care what it takes! If Giselle dies, you and your entire family will be buried with her!"

The raw, brutal threat terrified Finch more than anything else. He scrambled out of the study and ran toward the basement laboratory, his life depending on it.

The study fell silent. Donovan walked to the bar and poured a glass of scotch. He downed it in one gulp, but the fire in his throat did nothing to warm the ice in his heart.

Dr. Finch worked with frantic, desperate precision. The sterile, white light of the underground lab reflected off the sheen of sweat on his forehead. Outside the thick glass wall of the clean room, Donovan stood watch, a silent, menacing specter.

Hours crawled by. Finally, Finch emerged, his face pale and drawn. In his trembling hand, he held a small, sealed vial containing a pale blue liquid.

"It's done," he said, his voice hoarse with exhaustion. "The antidote is ready."

A flicker of relief crossed Donovan's face. He reached for the vial.

Finch pulled it back. "But there's only one dose," he stammered. "The core stabilizing agent, our entire stock was only enough to synthesize a single vial."

Chapter 998:

Donovan's hand froze. He stared at the small bottle, his mind racing.

One dose.

He could only save one person. His daughter, Giselle. Or the woman Hilliard was fighting for, Cailin.

There was no choice to be made. He snatched the vial from Finch's hand and turned to leave.

Eleonora was standing in the doorway. She had heard everything.

"Thank God!" she cried, rushing forward and grabbing Donovan's arm. "We can go to the hospital now! We can save Giselle!"

She assumed he would use the antidote as a bargaining chip, a direct trade for their daughter's freedom.

But Donovan just gave her a cold, dead look. He placed the vial into a small, refrigerated briefcase and snapped it shut.

A knot of dread tightened in Eleonora's stomach. "You're not going to the hospital?"

"The antidote goes to Hilliard first," he said, his voice flat.

"Are you insane?" she shrieked. "What if he takes it and goes back on his word? Giselle will die!"

She pleaded with him, her voice rising hysterically. She suggested they use the family's private tactical team to storm the hospital and take Giselle by force. With their daughter secure, they could dictate the terms.

Donovan looked at his wife, at her wild eyes and desperate, grasping plans. He was filled with a profound sense of disgust.

"I will not bring further shame upon this family because of your foolishness," he said, his voice like ice. "I gave Hilliard my word. A deal is a deal."

Eleonora stared at him, aghast. She couldn't believe he was choosing to honor a deal with an enemy over a chance to save their child.

Donovan ignored her. He set the combination lock on the briefcase and turned to his chief of staff.

"I want a complete file on Cailin Morton," he ordered in a low voice. "Everything. From the day she was born. I want to know every connection she has to the Ashford family."

The assistant nodded and disappeared.

Eleonora watched her husband walk away, a wave of pure terror washing over her. He didn't believe her story. He was digging.

If he found out the truth about Cailin...

She couldn't let that happen. She couldn't wait. If her husband wouldn't act, she would find someone who would.

She ran to her suite and changed into a severe, black dress. She stormed out to the waiting line of cars.

"Take me to the Rhodes estate," she commanded the driver.

She was going to see her brother. The head of the Rhodes family, Sterling Rhodes.

The car swept through the imposing gates of the Rhodes estate. The architecture here was older, more severe than the opulent Van Doren mansion. It spoke of old money and unbreakable rules.

Chapter 999:

Eleonora was shown into a dark, oak-paneled study. Her brother, Sterling Rhodes, sat before a crackling fire, reading a file. He was a man in his early fifties, with a stillness about him that was more intimidating than any overt display of power. He glanced up at her tear-streaked, frantic face and merely raised an eyebrow.

The moment she saw him, Eleonora's composure shattered completely. She fell to her knees on the thick rug, sobbing out the story of Giselle's kidnapping, the poison, her impending death.

She painted Hilliard as a madman, Cailin as a homewrecker, a twisted, self-serving version of the truth. She begged Sterling to use the Rhodes family's power, to send his men to the hospital and take Giselle back by force.

Sterling listened to her entire hysterical performance without a single change in his expression. When she was finished, gasping for breath, he asked a simple, quiet question.

"Why was Giselle poisoned?"

Eleonora froze. She stammered, trying to launch into her fabricated story about Charla English's blackmail.

Sterling cut her off. He picked up a faxed document from the table beside him and tossed it onto the floor in front of her.

It was a corporate advisory notice from the Holloway Group's legal department, sent to all their major partners. It laid out, in cold, legal detail, the conspiracy between Giselle Van Doren and Charla English to murder Cailin Morton. It included key evidence.

Eleonora stared at the paper, a cold dread seeping into her bones. Hilliard was already moving, isolating them, cutting them off.

Sterling's voice was like the snap of winter ice. "You came here to ask me to commit the Rhodes family to a war against the Holloways and the Crofts. For a foolish girl who started a fight she couldn't win. For a murderer."

"She's your niece!" Eleonora cried. "She has Rhodes blood!"

The study door opened. A young woman in riding boots and a tailored jacket walked in. She had her father's sharp, intelligent eyes. It was his daughter, Lara Rhodes.

Lara glanced at her aunt on the floor, then addressed her father. "I just received an update. Uncle Donovan has agreed to hand over the antidote. But he's also launched a deep-level investigation into Cailin Morton's background."

Lara's words sent a fresh wave of panic through Eleonora.

Lara then turned her cool, assessing gaze on her aunt. A small, mocking smile played on her lips. "You had better pray Uncle Donovan doesn't find anything interesting, Aunt Eleonora. Or you'll lose more than just a daughter."

Eleonora turned back to her brother, her last hope.

Sterling rose from his chair and stood over her.

"Eleonora," he said, his voice soft but final. "Have you forgotten the first rule of this family?"

She stared up at him, her mind blank with despair.

Lara answered for him, her voice crisp and merciless. "We do not pay for messes we create."

Sterling looked down at his sister's broken form. "Your daughter made a mistake. It is her father's responsibility to clean it up. The Rhodes family will not interfere."

He paused, then delivered the final, killing blow. "That is a truth you should have understood the day you married into the Van Doren family."

Eleonora crumpled, all the fight, all the hope, draining out of her.

Chapter 1000:

Sterling gestured to the butler. "Show the madam out."

Two servants lifted Eleonora to her feet. She was a doll with its strings cut, a hollow shell. They half-carried, half-dragged her from the room.

After she was gone, Lara turned to her father. "Are we truly doing nothing?" she asked, her voice low.

Sterling stared into the fire, his eyes deep and thoughtful. "Let's see what Donovan finds first," he said. "If Cailin Morton is who I think she might be, this game is about to become far more interesting than any of us imagined."

Lara nodded, a flicker of her father's predatory light shining in her own eyes.

The heavy door of the waiting Bentley slammed shut with a solid, definitive thud, echoing the finality of Sterling's rejection. It was the sound of a vault being sealed, a tomb being closed. In that one instant, Eleonora was severed from the Rhodes family, from her prestige, and from every safety net she had ever relied upon.

She collapsed against the leather seat, her breath coming in ragged, shallow gasps. The silence of the car was oppressive, amplifying the ringing in her ears, the echo of her brother's voice telling her that the Rhodes family did not pay for messes they created.

The driver, a man who had served her for years, glanced at her in the rearview mirror. Her face was a ghostly white mask.

"Back to the Van Doren estate, Madam?" he asked, his voice carefully neutral.

Eleonora's body went rigid. The thought of returning to that house, of facing Donovan's cold, suspicious eyes, was suffocating. She knew she couldn't go back. Not like this. Not empty-handed.

A wave of nausea washed over her. The air in the car felt thick, unbreathable.

"Just drive," she whispered, her voice trembling. "Anywhere."

The car pulled away from the curb, its movement smooth and silent, melting into the encroaching twilight. Eleonora stared out the window, watching the grand, unforgiving estates of Long Island slide past. She had never felt so alone.

She pulled out her phone, her thumb hovering over the screen. She needed to call the hospital, to check on Giselle. But a paralyzing fear gripped her. She was terrified of what she might hear.

Her finger trembled, suspended over the contact for Giselle's lead physician.

Finally, the terror of not knowing became greater than the terror of knowing. Her finger tapped the screen.

The doctor's voice was grave. The news was bad. Worse than bad.

Giselle's organs were beginning to show signs of failure. The poison was winning. Time was running out.

Eleonora ended the call without a word. She clutched the phone so tightly her knuckles turned white. The smooth, cold glass felt like a weapon against her palm.

Despair was no longer a wave; it was an ocean, and she was drowning in it. Every conventional path was closed. Her husband. Her family. All doors had been slammed in her face.