

Second chance 111

Chapter 111:

It was a betrayal of a strange, twisted kind. Hilliard had pressed a twenty-million-dollar stone into her hand, told her to hide it, and was now allowing Charla to parade around with a counterfeit while the world believed he loved her enough to buy her a kingdom. He was protecting Charla's ego. Or perhaps his own reputation.

Across the street, Charla looked up from her phone. Her gaze found Cailin in the window.

Her eyes narrowed. She said something to her assistant, then marched across the street, dodging a yellow taxi that honked aggressively. She pushed the café door open — the bell jingling cheerfully, entirely at odds with the venom on her face — and crossed directly to Cailin's table.

"Enjoying the view of a future Holloway wife?" Charla smirked, reaching up to touch the necklace, making certain Cailin saw it.

"It looks heavy," Cailin said dryly, without rising. "Glass usually is."

Charla flushed a deep, ugly red. "It's a flawless diamond! Hilliard paid twenty million for it — you were there, you watched him bid!"

"If you say so," Cailin took another sip of her coffee.

Charla leaned in, lowering her voice. “He told me about the child in the park. Your friend’s little girl? Or is she yours? I know you’re hiding something, Cali.”

“Careful, Charla,” Cailin said, smiling without warmth. “Stress causes wrinkles. And Hilliard hates imperfections.”

Charla opened her mouth to fire back — but the sound of a powerful engine pulled up to the curb outside. Hilliard’s Maybach.

He stepped out, wearing sunglasses, his expression unreadable. He saw the two women through the window.

He walked in. The café went quiet. Hilliard Holloway had a particular talent for draining the oxygen from a room.

His gaze moved to Charla first, then dropped to the necklace. He saw the way the light caught it — flat, without depth. He knew it was a fake.

Then he looked at Cailin. He saw the knowledge in her eyes. She knew that he knew.

“Charla, get in the car,” Hilliard said. His voice was cold and tired in equal measure.

“Look, darling!” Charla seized his arm, beaming. “I was just showing Cailin your gift! She’s absolutely green with envy!”

Hilliard didn’t correct her. He couldn’t. If he said it was a fake, he would have to explain where the real one was — sitting in a safe in Brooklyn, belonging to his ex-wife. He was trapped inside his own web.

“Get. In,” he repeated, spacing the words deliberately.

Charla pouted but obeyed, flouncing out through the door.

Hilliard didn’t follow immediately. He paused at Cailin’s table and leaned down, one hand resting on the back of her chair.

“It’s a fake,” he whispered. The words were for her alone.

“I know,” Cailin whispered back, not looking at him. “But you still let her wear your name.”

Hilliard flinched. The accusation found its mark. He saw himself clearly for a moment — a man held hostage by appearances, paying a high price for the privilege.

“Enjoy your coffee,” he said stiffly.

He walked out, got into the car with the woman wearing the glass necklace, and drove away.

Chapter 112:

Cailin touched her purse, where the key to her safe was hidden. She understood then that Charla was dangerous not because she was clever, but because she was desperate. And desperation made people dig until they found something they couldn't unsee.

Suitcases lay open on the living room floor of the Brooklyn apartment, gaping like hungry mouths. Cailin moved between them with frantic purpose, throwing in clothes — Aron's hoodies, Davy's sneakers, Elia's favorite dresses.

"I'm taking the kids to Zurich tonight," Cailin said, her voice tight with panic. "I can't do the dinner. It's a trap."

Ashely was sitting on the sofa, watching her. "Running makes you look guilty, Cailin. If you skip the dinner after I invited him, he raids the house. He's already suspicious."

"Staying gets my children discovered." Cailin zipped a bag shut with a vicious sound. "He saw Elia. He heard her call me Mommy. One more slip and it's over."

"We have the dinner tonight," Ashely insisted. "We act normal. We show him I'm the mom. We bore him to death. Then he leaves."

Cailin paused. She looked at the packed bags, then at the clock. Ashely was right. Flight was an admission of guilt.

“Fine,” Cailin sighed, sinking onto the floor. “But I need to call him first. Test the waters. Maybe I can cancel — say I’m sick.”

She picked up her phone and dialed Hilliard’s private line. It was a number only five people had.

In the Holloway Tower, at the top floor office, Hilliard was in the boardroom reviewing merger documents with a team of lawyers. His phone sat on the desk of his private office down the hall.

Charla was there, waiting for him. His assistant had stepped out briefly to retrieve a file, leaving Charla alone with an unsupervised window she had no intention of wasting. Bored, she wandered. She snooped.

The phone on the mahogany desk lit up and buzzed.

Caller ID: Cali.

Charla froze. She stared at the screen as jealousy — hot and corrosive — flared in her chest. Why was the auctioneer calling his private line?

She reached out. Her manicured fingers hovered over the screen for just a moment before she swiped to answer.

“Hello?” Her voice was sugary sweet, but her eyes were venomous.

On the other end, Cailin stiffened. She recognized the voice instantly. “Charla?”

“Why are you calling my fiancé, you trashy auctioneer?” Charla hissed, dropping the sweetness entirely. “Do you have no shame?”

“Put Hilliard on. It’s business,” Cailin said coldly, her grip on the phone tightening until her knuckles turned white.

“He’s in the shower,” Charla lied, her voice dropping to a suggestive purr. She leaned back in Hilliard’s chair and spun it slowly. “We’re busy. Can I take a message?” The implication was clear: she was his gatekeeper — in business and in life.

Cailin felt as though she had been punched in the gut. The lie was so blatant, so deliberately designed to wound, that part of her almost believed it. The image of them together, intimate in his private sanctuary, turned her stomach.

“In his office? Classy,” Cailin said, her voice trembling with a mix of disgust and a hurt she refused to name.

Chapter 113:

The office door opened. Hilliard walked in, holding a file. He stopped when he saw Charla sitting in his chair, his phone pressed to her ear.

His expression darkened instantly. "Who is that?"

Charla startled. She fumbled with the phone. "It — it was a spam call. I hung up."

She ended the call and tossed the phone onto the desk as if it had burned her.

Hilliard crossed the room in three long strides, snatched the phone, and checked the log.

Last Call: Cali — 24 seconds.

His eyes turned to ice. He looked at Charla. "You hung up on my business partner."

"She was flirting with you!" Charla cried, rising from the chair. "She called your private line. Why does she even have it?"

"Get out," Hilliard said. He pointed to the door. His voice was low, completely devoid of emotion.

“But Hilliard —”

“Get. Out.”

Charla grabbed her purse and fled, sobbing.

Hilliard stared at the phone for a long moment before pressing redial.

It went straight to voicemail.

In Brooklyn, Cailin was staring at her phone, tears stinging the corners of her eyes. She declined the call.

“He’s with her,” she whispered to Ashely. “He lets her answer his phone.”

She wiped her eyes furiously and straightened.

“I’m going to that dinner,” she said. “And I’m going to make him regret ever meeting me.”

A private booth at a restaurant was safer, more controlled than the apartment — neutral ground. Ashely, Cailin, and Elia arrived just minutes before Hilliard was due. Cailin scanned the room, her nerves stretched taut.

They slid into the large, U-shaped booth. Elia settled between the two women, a small, innocent buffer in the middle of a war zone.

Then two small figures darted from behind a decorative potted palm near the entrance and wedged themselves into the booth without warning.

Aron and Davy.

“We are not staying home!” Aron crossed his arms, his face a perfect, miniature mirror of Hilliard’s stubbornness.

“We want to see the Bad Man,” Davy added, his eyes wide with an uneasy mixture of fear and determination.

“He will be here in two minutes!” Cailin checked her watch. Cold, sharp panic seized her. “You can’t be seen — you look exactly like him!”

Footsteps approached the heavy velvet curtain of their alcove.

“Under the table. Now!” Cailin ordered in a fierce whisper.

Aron and Davy scrambled beneath the long, floor-length tablecloth without another word. Cailin kicked their stray sneakers under the heavy linen just as she heard Hilliard’s voice outside. She smoothed the cloth, her heart hammering against her ribs.

The curtain parted.

Hilliard entered. He looked impeccable in a charcoal suit, the fabric expensive and perfectly tailored. He brought with him the scent of the city and costly cologne. He looked dangerous.

“Ladies.” He nodded, his eyes landing on Cailin immediately.

“You didn’t answer my call back,” he said softly as he sat down.

“I was in the shower,” Cailin said, throwing Charla’s lie back at him with a voice dripping with ice.

Chapter 114:

Hilliard’s lip twitched. He recognized the tone. He recognized the accusation. He didn’t smile, but something in his eyes softened slightly with understanding.

He sat down directly opposite Cailin — and directly above the spot where Davy was now hiding.

“So, this is the famous Elia,” Hilliard said, turning his gaze to the girl sitting beside Ashely.

Elia stared back at him with wide green eyes. She wasn’t scared anymore; she was curious. “Do you have the green stone?” she asked.

“Elia,” Ashely warned, placing a firm hand on the girl’s shoulder.

Hilliard’s eyes narrowed for a fraction of a second. How does this child know about the Ocean’s Tear? he wondered. It was a secret known only to himself, Cailin, and Kegan’s proxy. He filed the anomaly away carefully.

Under the table, Davy shifted, trying to find a more comfortable position. His knee connected with a dull, solid thud against Hilliard’s leg.

Hilliard paused. He glanced downward, but the tablecloth obscured everything. He looked back at Cailin, one eyebrow raised.

“Restless legs, Cailin?” he asked, his voice laced with quiet amusement.

“Nervous energy,” Cailin said smoothly, her face a mask of calm. Beneath the table, she subtly tapped her foot against Davy’s shin — a clear warning to stay still.

In protest, Davy reached out from the darkness and grabbed her ankle.

Cailin choked on her water.

The waiter brought a basket of breadsticks. The scent of garlic and butter filled the small booth.

Hilliard broke a breadstick in half and looked at Ashely.

“So, this ex-husband,” he said, his tone light but his eyes sharp. “What was his name?”

Ashely stiffened. The breadstick she was holding snapped clean between her fingers. “I don’t talk about him,” she said, her voice turning cold. “He’s gone. That’s all you need to know.”

Hilliard raised an eyebrow, sensing the raw nerve he had just struck. He decided to let it go — for now.

Under the table, Aron’s stomach let out a long, mournful growl.

Silence fell over the booth.

Hilliard looked around slowly, his head tilted. "Was that a dog?"

"That was me!" Ashely announced brightly, patting her stomach. "I'm absolutely starving."

Cailin, seizing the opportunity, reached for a breadstick and broke it in half beneath the table, discreetly passing a piece back to the boys.

Davy took it gratefully, but in the cramped space a shower of crumbs cascaded from the breadstick directly onto Hilliard's polished Italian leather shoe.

Hilliard felt the light patter of debris on his foot. He frowned and shifted his leg back.

"Something is on the floor," he said, his voice now edged with suspicion. He reached for the hem of the tablecloth as if to lift it and look.

Cailin's blood ran cold.

"Wait!" she blurted.

Hilliard stopped, his hand gripping the fabric. "What?"

"I dropped my contact lens. Don't move — you'll crush it!" Without waiting for a response, she dove beneath the table.

The space was dark and cramped. Two pairs of identical green eyes stared back at her in terror. She met them with a sharp glare. Stay still.

Chapter 115:

She reached out and brushed the crumbs from Hilliard's shoe. As she did, the back of her hand grazed his ankle. The contact was electric — a startling jolt of warmth through the thin fabric of his dress sock.

Above her, Hilliard stiffened. He felt her hand on his ankle, the touch unexpected and strangely intimate. It sent a low hum of electricity straight up his spine. His mind, which had been methodically piecing together a puzzle, was suddenly and completely derailed by a surge of raw, long-forgotten desire.

Cailin emerged from beneath the table, her face flushed, holding nothing. "Found it," she lied, bringing her fingers to her eye in a convincing pantomime.

Hilliard watched her. His pupils were dark and wide. The suspicion that had sharpened his gaze only moments ago had been replaced by something else entirely — something darker, and far hungrier.

"You are clumsy tonight, Cailin," he murmured.

"You distract me," she said, smoothing her hair.

It was the only true thing she had said all evening.

Under the table, Aron leaned toward his brother.

“He likes her,” Aron whispered.

Davy whispered back, “He’s still a jerk.”

The meal was an eternity of small talk and near-disasters. By the time the plates were cleared, Cailin was exhausted, her adrenaline crashing in slow, punishing waves.

Hilliard signaled for the check.

“I’ll get it,” Ashely insisted, reaching for her purse.

Hilliard smirked. “My treat. As agreed.”

He reached back for his wallet. As he did, he leaned back slightly, stretching his legs beneath the table — and his foot came down squarely on Davy’s hand, pinning it against the base.

Davy suppressed a yelp. Instead of crying out, instinct took over. He bit down hard on whatever was trapping him.

Hilliard yanked his leg back as if he had been electrocuted. "What the hell?"

"What?" Cailin jumped, her heart lurching into her throat.

"Something bit me," Hilliard growled, his face a mask of disbelief. "A rat? In this place?" He grabbed the edge of the tablecloth, ready to rip it aside and expose whatever was underneath.

"Spilled wine!" Ashely shrieked, and in the same breath she knocked her full glass of red wine directly into Hilliard's lap.

The dark liquid soaked through the front of his expensive charcoal suit.

Hilliard shot to his feet, cursing. "Damn it!"

"Oh my God, I am so clumsy!" Ashely cried, snatching a fistful of napkins and rushing to his side, effectively planting herself between him and any view of the floor as she dabbed uselessly at the stain.

Under the cover of the chaos, Cailin nudged both boys sharply with her foot. Move to the back. Now.

They scrambled like mice into the shadowy depths of the U-shaped booth.

Hilliard was too consumed with the damage to his suit to notice. "I need the restroom," he said through clenched teeth, his voice tight with barely contained fury. He turned and marched away without another word.

The second he was out of sight, Cailin seized Ashely's arm.

"Go. Now," she hissed.

Chapter 116:

Ashely grabbed Elia. Cailin hauled out a protesting Aron and Davy. They didn't wait for the check or the valet. They pushed through the back kitchen exit and burst into the cool night air, piling into a taxi Cailin had already summoned.

Two minutes later, Hilliard returned, a damp stain still prominent on his trousers.

The booth was empty.

A single hundred-dollar bill lay on the table.

And on the floor, half-hidden in the shadows where his foot had been, sat one small, scuffed boy's sneaker.

He bent down and picked it up slowly, turning it over in his hands. He stared at it as the pieces of the puzzle clicked into place with horrifying clarity.

He pulled out his phone and opened Gavin's previous report from memory. Ashely Trevino. One child on record. Elia Trevino, female, age five. No other registered dependents. No sons.

Hilliard gripped the sneaker.

Ashely had a daughter. So who did this belong to?

Cailin stood in the lobby of her apartment building, arms crossed tight against her chest. She had sent Ashely and the kids upstairs the moment the elevator arrived. She knew he would come. He always came.

Headlights swept across the glass doors. Tires screeched.

Hilliard stormed into the lobby still wearing the wine-stained suit from dinner, looking disheveled and dangerous. In his hand, he held the small blue sneaker.

“Explain this,” he demanded, his voice ricocheting off the marble walls. He threw the shoe, and it landed at her feet.

Cailin looked down at it, then back at him. “Ashely is babysitting a neighbor’s boy,” she said. Her voice was flat. She was so tired of lying.

“Stop lying!” Hilliard roared. He closed the distance between them, invading her space. “I saw it. I know what I saw. You are hiding children, Cailin. Plural.”

“Why do you care?” Cailin snapped, her composure fracturing. “You have Charla! You have your perfect life, your fake necklace, and your fake fiancée!” She reached into her bag and pulled out a crumpled document — the Divorce Agreement she had been carrying for weeks like a flimsy shield. “Just sign it, Hilliard! Set me free! Let me go!” She shoved the papers against his chest.

Hilliard looked down at them. He didn’t take them. He stared at the bold letters: DISSOLUTION OF MARRIAGE.

“You think this is about freedom?” he asked quietly.

He snatched the papers from her hand.

Rip.

He tore them in half.

Rip.

He tore them again. Quarters. Then he cast the pieces into the air, and they fluttered down around them like snow.

"I never filed them, Cailin," he said, his voice a low growl. "You know this. We have been over this. It was never a real option."

Cailin stood frozen as the world seemed to tilt on its axis. It wasn't the legal reality that stunned her — she already knew it. It was the sight of him destroying the last symbol of her hope. That paper had been a promise she'd made to herself, and he had just turned it to ash.

"That technicality means nothing," she whispered.

Chapter 117:

"It means everything," Hilliard said. He stepped closer, backing her against the wall and planting his hands on either side of her head, caging her in. "I never let you go. You are still my wife. Legally. Bound to me."

His eyes burned into hers. "And those children — if they are yours, they are mine. I don't care about the DNA test. I don't care about Ashely's lies. My gut tells me you are hiding my family."

"You're insane," Cailin breathed.

"I am persistent," Hilliard corrected.

He leaned in. For one terrible second, Cailin thought he was going to strike her. Instead, he kissed her — not gently, but with possession, a claim pressed into her skin like a seal on a contract she couldn't escape.

Cailin turned her head at the last moment. His lips met her cheek, hot and demanding.

"Go to hell, Hilliard," she whispered, pressing against his chest.

"I'm already there," he admitted, his voice rough, his forehead coming to rest against hers. "It's called life without you."

He stepped back, breathing hard. He looked at the torn paper scattered across the floor, then at her. "I will prove they are mine. And I will take you all home."

He turned and walked out into the night.

Cailin slid down the wall and buried her face in her hands. She was still married. The trap was tighter than she had ever allowed herself to imagine.

The city felt hostile the next morning. Cailin needed coffee to process the bomb Hilliard had dropped the night before. The legal reality of their marriage wasn't new information — but his decision to wield it as a weapon was. His words still echoed in her skull.

She walked to the corner bodega on autopilot, moving mechanically, wearing jeans and a hoodie as if she could disappear into the morning crowd.

A sleek red sports car idled down the block, its engine purring with a low, aggressive rumble.

Inside, Charla gripped the steering wheel with white-knuckled hands. In the passenger seat, a nervous-looking socialite named Tiffany pressed herself against the dashboard.

"There she is," Charla whispered.

"Just scare her, Charla," Tiffany said, her voice tight with anxiety. "Don't actually hit her. We can't go to jail."

"She embarrassed me." Charla's eyes were wide and unblinking, something manic burning behind them. "She needs to learn her place."

Cailin stepped off the curb at the crosswalk. The walk signal glowed a bright, inviting white.

Charla slammed the gas pedal.

The engine roared. Tires screamed against the asphalt.

Cailin turned her head and saw the red blur hurtling toward her. It wasn't slowing down.

Instinct took over — not thought, just survival. She threw herself backward onto the sidewalk.

The car's side-view mirror whistled past her hip, so close it snagged the fabric of her hoodie. The force of the near-miss sent her spinning off balance, and she hit the concrete hard. Her coffee cup exploded on impact, splashing hot liquid across the pavement and up her hoodie. Pain cracked through her hip and shoulder.

The car swerved, its tires briefly mounting the curb before it tore off down the avenue.

"Crazy driver!" a passerby screamed.

Chapter 118:

Cailin sat up, gasping. Her hip throbbed with a deep, heavy ache. She looked down the street — and spotted the red sports car caught at a red light half a block away.

The vanity plate was unmistakable: CHARLA 1.

Rage flooded through her, washing away the fear, the pain, and the exhaustion in a single surge. This was no accident. This was attempted murder. Charla had just tried to kill the mother of Hilliard's children.

Cailin got to her feet. Her leg nearly buckled beneath her, but she forced it to hold.

She didn't call the police. She didn't call Hilliard.

She ran.

She ran toward the red car, limping heavily, driven by pure maternal fury.

"She's coming! Go!" Charla screamed, her eyes locked on the rearview mirror.

"It's a red light!" Tiffany shrieked. "There's traffic everywhere!"

Cailin reached the car and grabbed the door handle. Locked.

She drove her fist against the window. “Get out!” she screamed. “Get out right now!”

Cailin drove her fist against the driver’s side window again. The impact sent a sharp pain up her arm. She ignored it.

“Open it, or I break the glass!” she yelled. Her hood had fallen back, her hair wild around her face.

A crowd was gathering on the sidewalk. Phones were out. Filming.

Charla saw the cameras and panicked — she feared bad press far more than physical confrontation. She unlocked the door and stepped out, already composing herself to play the victim.

“You jumped in front of me! You psycho! You’re trying to frame me!”

Cailin didn’t answer. She grabbed Charla by her long, expensive hair extensions and dragged her away from the car, spinning her around.

Slap.

Cailin's hand connected with Charla's cheek. The sound was crisp, loud, and sharp. Charla stumbled back, shock written across her face.

"That is for the car," Cailin hissed.

She stepped forward again. Charla raised her hands, but Cailin was faster.

Slap. A backhand. Harder this time.

"And that is for myself. Stay away from me."

Charla wailed, clutching her face. "Help! She's crazy!"

Inside the car, Tiffany locked the doors and shrank into her seat, too terrified to move.

A siren wailed somewhere in the distance. Then Hilliard's black Maybach rolled up behind the sports car, boxing it in. He stepped out immediately. He had been following Charla — he had placed a tracker on her car after the necklace incident, increasingly suspicious of her erratic behavior.

He took in the scene in a single sweep: Cailin standing over a weeping Charla, spilled coffee soaking her hoodie, her weight shifted unmistakably off her left leg.

“What is going on?” Hilliard demanded, pushing through the ring of onlookers.

Charla spotted him and threw herself in his direction. “Hilliard! She attacked me! She pulled me out of the car — look at my face!” She staged a faint, sliding down his chest with theatrical precision, her knees buckling dramatically beneath her.

Hilliard caught her on instinct, his arms closing around her waist before she could hit the ground.

Chapter 119:

Cailin watched him hold the woman who had just tried to kill her. She stood completely still, chest heaving, her hip burning with every breath.

“She tried to run me over,” Cailin said. Her voice trembled — not with fear, but with adrenaline.

“She jumped in front of me! I swerved to save her!” Charla sobbed into his shirt, smearing mascara across the fabric. “She’s obsessed with you, Hilliard. She’s dangerous.”

Hilliard looked at Cailin. He took in the torn jeans, the scrape across her hand, the bruise already darkening along her hip where she had hit the pavement. Then he looked at Charla’s reddened cheek.

He felt the lie in Charla’s body. He felt the truth in Cailin’s rage.

“Take her to the hospital,” Cailin said, her voice dropping to something quieter and far more dangerous. She pointed a trembling finger at Charla. “But know this, Hilliard — if you don’t leash your dog, I will put her down myself.”

She turned and limped away. The crowd parted for her in silence.

Hilliard watched her go. A wave of revulsion moved through him as he felt the woman clinging to his chest. He set Charla upright, his hands neither gentle nor careful about it.

“Get in the car, Charla,” he said, his voice cold as bare concrete. “We are going to have a very long talk.”

Hilliard dropped Charla off at the emergency entrance of Horizon Medical, his face a mask of cold indifference. He watched her limp through the sliding doors, then pulled away to a nearby parking garage, needing a moment of silence before facing the inevitable storm.

Charla wasted none of it. The moment she was through the doors, she had her phone out, dialing Jeraldine Holloway’s private number.

“Mother Jeraldine, you won’t believe what that woman did to me,” she wailed, already spinning her story before the line had fully connected.

The hospital room smelled of antiseptic and expensive lilies — a cloying, suffocating combination that clung to the back of the throat. Charla English lay in the center of the VIP suite, propped against a mountain of pillows. A small, neat bandage was taped to her forehead, a stark white square pressed

against her perfectly applied foundation. She had insisted on the bandage, despite the fact that the doctor had found nothing more alarming than a slight elevation in her blood pressure.

Jeraldine Holloway paced the length of the room. Her heels struck the linoleum with the steady rhythm of a ticking clock. She wore a tweed suit that cost more than most people's monthly rent, and her face was set in a mask of pure, unadulterated fury.

"She attacked you in public?" Jeraldine stopped at the foot of the bed, gripping the railing until her knuckles whitened. "That gutter rat laid hands on a future Holloway?"

Charla squeezed her eyes shut and forced a tear loose, letting it track a deliberate line through her powder. It was a practiced motion — one she had perfected over years of managing men and matrons alike.

Chapter 120:

"She is insane, Mother Jeraldine," Charla whispered, her voice carefully unsteady. "She pulled me out of the car. She slapped me in front of everyone. She said she would destroy us."

Jeraldine scoffed, a harsh sound that scraped the air clean. "Destroy us? She is a disgraced runaway with a history of instability. She has nothing."

"She said she has a weapon." Charla opened her eyes wide, manufacturing fear behind them. "A secret weapon to take the Holloway fortune. Something Hilliard can't ignore."

Jeraldine went still. The pacing stopped. The temperature in the room seemed to drop ten degrees.

“A weapon?”

“A child,” Charla whispered.

The word settled in the air between them, heavy and poisonous.

Jeraldine’s face drained of color, the rouge on her cheeks standing out like bruises against the sudden pallor. Then the blood surged back, mottling her skin a deep, angry red.

“Impossible. She terminated the pregnancy. We have records. We paid for the silence of that clinic.”

“What if she didn’t?” Charla planted the seed carefully, watching it take root in the fertile soil of Jeraldine’s paranoia. “What if she hid it? What if she spent five years waiting for the right moment to blackmail us? Think about it — why is Hilliard so fixated on her? Why does he let her get away with attacking me?”

Jeraldine turned toward the door, her eyes hard and calculating. The possibility of an heir — a child raised by a woman she despised — was a direct threat to the Holloway line. More than that, it was a threat to her control.

The door handle turned.

Hilliard walked in. He looked exhausted. His tie was loosened, the top button of his shirt undone. He was still wearing the suit from the street incident, and there was a smudge of dirt on his cuff from where he had caught Charla. He didn't look at her. He looked past her, toward the window and the city skyline beyond.

Jeraldine crossed the room immediately. She offered no greeting, asked after no one's wellbeing.

"Is it true?" she demanded. "Does that woman have a child?"

Hilliard's brow furrowed. "Who told you that?"

"Charla says Cailin threatened her with a secret heir!" Jeraldine pointed a manicured finger at the bed. "She says Cailin attacked her because of it!"

Hilliard turned his head slowly. His eyes settled on Charla — cold and utterly devoid of the warmth or indulgence she had grown accustomed to. They were the eyes of a stranger.

"Cailin didn't threaten anyone," he said. His voice was flat and factual. "Charla tried to run her over."

Charla sat up sharply, clutching the sheets to her chest. "Lies! She jumped in front of my car! I swerved to avoid her!"

"I reviewed the dashboard camera footage from the taxi behind you," Hilliard said. He didn't raise his voice. He didn't need to. The weight of his words compressed the air out of the room. "You accelerated. You aimed for her."

Jeraldine looked between them. Doubt flickered briefly behind her eyes before she forced it down. Family came first. And Charla, for all her flaws, was the chosen one.