

Second chance 191

Chapter 191:

"Did you push her?" Hilliard asked. His voice was quiet. Deadly.

Cailin stared at him. "I saved her. And she tried to pull me down."

"I saw you fighting," Hilliard said, dragging a hand through his wet hair. "I saw you kicking her."

"I was kicking her off me!"

"Mr. Holloway." A detective stepped forward. "We need to take Ms. Morton into custody. Attempted murder."

"No." Hilliard stepped in front of Cailin. "She's my wife. I'm taking her to the hospital. We will deal with this there."

"Sir, this is a crime scene," the detective argued.

"And that woman," Hilliard said, pointing at Charla, "is my fiancée. Or was. This is a domestic dispute. I will bring Cailin in for questioning after she has been treated. Look at her arm."

The detective looked at the blood soaking through Cailin's sleeve. He hesitated.

"Fine," he said. "But an officer rides with you."

Cailin slipped her hand into her pocket. Her fingers found her phone. She had hit record before going up. She had the audio.

But as she drew it out, she saw the screen.

Shattered. Spiderweb cracks across the glass. Black.

Panic flared in her chest. The evidence — locked inside a dead phone. She shoved it back into her pocket. She couldn't let the police take it. If it disappeared into evidence, English money would make sure it never resurfaced.

"Let's go," Hilliard said, grabbing her uninjured arm.

His grip was not gentle.

The ride to the hospital was suffocating. An officer sat in the front seat of the Aston Martin, silent and watchful. Hilliard drove, his knuckles white on the steering wheel.

Cailin sat in the back, pressing the towel against her arm. She kept trying to turn on her phone beneath her coat. Nothing. Just a dead, black screen.

"You're going to apologize," Hilliard said suddenly. He didn't look back.

Cailin's head snapped up. "Excuse me?"

"When we get there. You are going to apologize to Charla."

"I will do no such thing," Cailin hissed. "She tried to kill me."

"And she ended up with a broken leg while you walked away," Hilliard countered. "The optics are terrible, Cailin. If you don't show remorse, the DA will eat you alive. Victoria is already calling her lawyers."

"Let them call," Cailin said. "I have the truth."

"Do you?" Hilliard glanced at her in the rearview mirror. "Because from where I stood, it looked like you threw her off that ride."

“You’re blind,” Cailin whispered. Tears stung her eyes. “You’ve always been blind when it comes to her.”

“I am trying to keep you out of prison!” Hilliard snapped. “If you go to prison, Cailin, I will get full custody. I will get a warrant to search that hotel room. I will find those children you are hiding.”

The threat landed exactly where he intended.

Cailin went still. The hotel room. The children. If she was arrested tonight, police would search her belongings. Ashley and the children would be discovered.

Chapter 192:

She couldn’t let that happen. She had to buy time — Ashley needed time to get them out.

She swallowed the bile rising in her throat. She had to play the game. She had to bow down to the monster.

“Fine,” she said, her voice hollow. “I’ll apologize.”

They arrived at the hospital. Hilliard marched her past the waiting room and straight to the VIP wing where Charla had been taken.

The room was crowded. Victoria sat at Charla's bedside, clutching her hand. Gregg English stood by the window, looking furious.

Charla lay in the bed, her leg in a cast and elevated, her nose bandaged. She looked pathetic. And triumphant.

"Get her out of here!" Victoria shrieked as Cailin walked in.

"She's here to apologize," Hilliard announced, pushing Cailin forward.

Cailin stood at the foot of the bed. She looked at Charla. She saw the smirk hidden beneath the performance of pain.

"I'm sorry," Cailin said. The words tasted like ash. "I'm sorry you fell."

"You pushed me," Charla whimpered, squeezing out a tear. "But I forgive you, Cailin. I know you're unstable. I know losing the baby made you — like this."

Cailin's hands balled into fists inside her pockets. She wanted to scream. She wanted to tear the IV from Charla's arm.

Instead she stood perfectly still.

For Aron. For Davy. For Elia.

Bzzzt. Bzzzt. Bzzzt.

A series of short, sharp vibrations pulsed against her hip.

Cailin startled.

Her phone. It wasn't restarting. It was a signal. Kegan. He was activating the emergency data transfer.

The vibrations were subtle, muffled by the fabric of her coat — but in the tense silence of the hospital room, Charla's head snapped toward the sound.

Her eyes widened. She stopped crying instantly. Her gaze locked onto Cailin's pocket.

She knew. She knew Cailin always recorded everything.

"What is that?" Victoria demanded, her eyes narrowing. "Is she recording us?"

“It’s just an alarm,” Cailin said quickly, her hand flying to her pocket to smother the vibrations.

“She has a recording!” Charla screamed, bolting upright. “It’s a remote upload — she’s sending it to her accomplice! Daddy, get her phone! She edited it! She’s going to frame me!”

Gregg English moved fast for an older man. He lunged at Cailin.

“Give me the phone!” he shouted.

“No!” Cailin stumbled backward, catching her heel on a chair.

Hilliard stepped between them. “Gregg, back off!”

“She’s manipulating evidence!” Victoria joined the fray. She grabbed Cailin’s arm — the injured one.

Cailin cried out. Her hand spasmed.

The phone slipped from her fingers.

It struck the linoleum with a clatter, spun across the floor, and disappeared under Charla's hospital bed.

"Get it!" Charla shrieked.

Gregg dropped to his knees and reached under the bed.

Cailin lunged for it, but Hilliard held her back. "Stop it — both of you!"

"It's my phone!" Cailin yelled. "It has the truth on it!"

Gregg's hand swept blindly beneath the bed. His fingers touched something.

"Ew!" He recoiled, snatching his hand back. He had grazed the catheter bag hanging low off the bed rail.

Chapter 193:

"Mr. English!" A nurse burst into the room. "What are you doing? Get off the floor — this is a sterile environment!"

"There's a phone under there!" Gregg pointed.

The nurse peered beneath the bed and nudged something with her white shoe. The phone slid further back, wedging itself against the wall in the shadows behind the medical equipment.

"I don't see a phone," the nurse said firmly. "Everyone out. The patient needs rest."

"It's there!" Charla insisted. "Daddy, don't leave it!"

"Out!" The nurse herded them toward the door.

Hilliard dragged Cailin into the hallway.

"You are causing a scene," he hissed.

"My phone is in there!" Cailin struggled against his grip. "Hilliard, please — you have to get it back. It proves she tried to kill me."

"I will buy you a new phone," Hilliard said, steering her toward the exit. "We are leaving before you get arrested."

"No!" Cailin looked back at the closed door of Room 304. Her lifeline. Her proof. Lying in the dust under the bed of her enemy.

Inside the room, Charla looked at her father.

“Find it,” she whispered. “Destroy it.”

Gregg nodded. He waited for the nurse to turn back to the monitors, then dropped to his knees again. He swept his arm under the bed, this time ignoring the catheter bag, and felt carefully across the floor.

Nothing.

He frowned and lowered his head to look.

The floor was empty.

The phone was gone.

Hilliard stood in the sterile white corridor of the hospital, the smell of antiseptic burning his nose. He watched the elevator doors close on Cailin. He had sent her back to the hotel in a taxi, alone. He couldn't look at her right now — not with the doubt gnawing at his gut.

He pulled a pack of cigarettes from his pocket, ignoring the No Smoking sign. He didn't light one. He just rolled it between his fingers.

He replayed the scene on the Ferris wheel. The kick. The fall.

But he also replayed Cailin's face — the desperation, the way she had guarded her pocket with her life.

It has the truth on it.

Why would she fight so hard for a phone if she were guilty?

He pulled out his own phone and dialed Gavin, his head of security.

"The footage from the amusement park," Hilliard said, his voice low. "The high-angle security cam. I want it scrubbed, enhanced, and on my screen in ten minutes. I want to see exactly what happened in that car."

"On it, boss," Gavin replied. "And sir — the item you requested from the hotel room was recovered. It's being sent to the lab now."

Meanwhile, in the back of the taxi, Cailin was shaking. She borrowed the driver's phone and dialed a number from memory.

“Kegan,” she whispered when he answered. “I lost it. The phone. It’s under her bed.”

“Relax, mon amour,” Kegan’s voice was smooth and unbothered. “It’s already taken care of.”

“What?”

Chapter 194:

“The pendant was a decoy,” Kegan said. “The real microphone was the center stone of your earring — the one you were wearing when you went up. The audio is secure. The file is already on its way to your lawyers.”

Cailin slumped against the seat, tears of relief tracking down her face. “Thank you. God, Kegan, thank you.”

“The extraction is complete. Ashley and the children are secure and en route to the secondary location,” Kegan said. “The suite is empty. Go back, collect your personal effects. We leave the country tonight.”

The taxi pulled up to The Sanctuary.

Cailin ran through the lobby, ignoring the stares. She rode the elevator to the penthouse and burst into the suite.

Silence.

The destruction from Hilliard's rage was a fresh wound in the luxurious room — shattered glass, slashed cushions, feathers still drifting through the air. But there were no toys. No small coats. No Ashley. No children.

A wave of profound, aching loneliness washed over her. It was done. They were safe. She was alone.

Knock. Knock. Knock.

Heavy fists pounded on the suite door.

"Police! Open up!"

Cailin's blood froze. She smoothed her hair, walked to the door, and opened it.

Two uniformed officers stood in the hallway. Behind them was Hilliard. He had just arrived, his face a mask of conflict and shock.

"Cailin Morton?" the officer asked.

“Yes.”

“You are under arrest for the attempted murder of Charla English.” The officer produced a pair of handcuffs. “The family has pressed formal charges.”

Hilliard stepped forward immediately. “I didn’t authorize this! I told you to wait!”

“The victim’s father pressed the charges, Mr. Holloway,” the officer said. He glanced past Cailin at the destroyed suite. “And given the state of this room, we’ll need to secure the premises as a potential secondary crime scene.”

“You will do no such thing,” Hilliard said, his voice dropping dangerously low. He stepped between the officer and the open bedroom door. “You have a warrant for her arrest — not a search warrant for this suite. My lawyers are five minutes out. You will not take one step further into this room until they arrive.”

Cailin looked at Hilliard. She saw the horror on his face. He hadn’t done this. But he had let it happen. He had lost control of everything.

She turned around. The cold metal clicked around her wrists.

The officer gave Hilliard a curt nod, accepting the temporary standoff, and they led her out. As she passed Hilliard, he reached for her.

“Cailin, I’ll fix this. I’ll call my lawyers.”

Cailin pulled away from his touch. She looked at him with dead eyes.

“This is what you wanted, isn’t it?” she whispered. “You won, Hilliard. You finally broke me.”

She let them lead her away, leaving Hilliard standing alone in the hallway of the empty, ruined suite — the silence a screaming testament to everything he had just lost.

The air in the interrogation room was stale and recycled, carrying the faint smell of floor wax and old fear. It was a small, windowless box designed to make a person feel small, and it was working.

Chapter 195:

Cailin sat at the metal table, one wrist cuffed to the bar bolted to its surface. The steel bit into her skin — cold and unforgiving — a sharp contrast to the feverish heat radiating from her injured arm.

She stared at her reflection in the one-way mirror. Her hair was a wreck, damp and tangled from the rain and the struggle on the Ferris wheel. Her coat was torn. She looked like a criminal. She looked like a woman who had lost everything.

But her mind wasn’t on her appearance. It was on the twenty-fifth floor of The Sanctuary Hotel.

Aron. Davy. Elia.

Kegan's call confirming the children were being extracted was a lifeline she clung to with both hands. But how long did an extraction take? Every second she sat in this room was a second closer to a search warrant, a second closer to police finding the empty vent and the small signs of children who weren't supposed to exist.

The door buzzed and swung open.

Cailin stiffened, expecting a detective with a notepad and a bad attitude.

Instead, Hilliard walked in.

He looked impeccable despite the chaos of the last hour, carrying an air of authority that seemed to suck the oxygen from the small room. Behind him was a man in a sharp gray suit with a briefcase.

One of the Holloway family's army of lawyers.

Hilliard didn't sit. He stood by the door, watching her with an expression she couldn't decipher — not anger, not pity, but a cold and calculating assessment. The lawyer leaned out and spoke in a low, urgent tone to an officer in the hallway, then stepped back inside and gave Hilliard a slight nod. The officer pulled the door almost shut, leaving it cracked just enough to be technically compliant.

"You have five minutes," Hilliard said quietly. "That's all my lawyer could negotiate."

He glanced at the red light on the camera in the corner. It blinked once, then went dark.

"They've paused the recording," he added. Then, to the lawyer: "Leave us."

The lawyer nodded and slipped out. The door clicked shut with heavy finality.

Now it was just the two of them. The silence stretched, thick and suffocating.

Hilliard pulled out the metal chair opposite her and sat down. He placed his hands on the table, fingers laced together. He looked at her cuffed wrist, then up to her eyes.

"The English family is pressing for attempted murder in the first degree," he said, his voice flat, stripped of all the passion he had shown at the hotel. "Victoria has given a statement. Gregg has called the District Attorney. They have witnesses who saw you attacking Charla in the car."

Cailin let out a harsh, incredulous laugh. "Attacking her? She had a knife, Hilliard. She tried to gut me."

"There was no knife found at the scene," Hilliard said calmly. "Just a distraught woman with a broken leg and a shattered nose, claiming her fiancé's jealous ex-wife tried to throw her to her death."

“My phone,” Cailin said, leaning forward, the handcuff chain rattling against the bar. “I recorded it. The audio is on my phone.”

Chapter 196:

“Your phone is gone,” Hilliard reminded her. “And even if it turns up, without a chain of custody it’s inadmissible. Right now it’s your word against the victim’s.”

“I am the victim!” Cailin’s voice cracked.

“Not in the eyes of the law. Not tonight.” Hilliard leaned back. “Gregg English has deep pockets and deeper connections. If this goes to trial, they will bury you. You’ll be looking at twenty years minimum.”

The blood drained from Cailin’s face. Twenty years. Her children would be grown. They would forget her. Or worse — Hilliard would find them, raise them, and shape them into cold, unfeeling replicas of himself.

“Why are you here?” she whispered. “To gloat?”

“I’m here to get you out.”

Cailin narrowed her eyes. “Why would you help me? You think I tried to kill your fiancée.”

"I think you and Charla have a toxic history that exploded tonight," Hilliard said carefully. "I don't want my wife in prison. It reflects poorly on the company."

He was lying. Or hiding something. But Cailin didn't have the energy to parse his motives.

"What's the catch?"

"My lawyers are arranging bail, but it's conditional," Hilliard said. "The DA wants a gesture of de-escalation — a sign that this won't become a media circus." He leaned forward, his voice dropping. "The condition is that you agree to a restraining order. Stay five hundred feet away from Charla English at all times. No contact. No public statements."

Cailin recoiled as though he had slapped her. "A restraining order? Against me? She's the one who attacked me!"

"It's a legal maneuver, Cailin. A formality," Hilliard said. "You agree to the order, it shows the court you're not a threat. Bail is granted, no questions asked. We walk out of here tonight." He held her gaze. "You refuse, and they hold you for seventy-two hours while they investigate. Seventy-two hours for them to obtain a search warrant for your hotel suite."

He let the threat hang in the air. He didn't know what was in that suite — but he knew it was her weakness. The mention of the family package had sent her into a panic. He was aiming a weapon in the dark, and Cailin knew exactly where it was pointed.

If they were still there. If Ashley hadn't gotten them out in time.

Seventy-two hours was an eternity. They couldn't risk it.

Cailin closed her eyes. A single tear escaped, hot and humiliating. She dug her fingernails into her palm until she felt skin give.

"You are a monster," she whispered.

"I am the only one who can save you right now," Hilliard said. He stood and buttoned his jacket. "So — seventy-two hours in a cell and a search warrant? Or a piece of paper and your freedom?"

Cailin opened her eyes. They were dry now, and hard as flint.

"I'll do it," she said. Her voice was dead. "I'll sign the papers."

Hilliard nodded. He didn't look triumphant. He looked relieved — which was almost worse.

"Good." He knocked on the door.

Chapter 197:

The lawyer entered instantly. “She’s agreed to the terms,” Hilliard said. “Get the paperwork started. We’re leaving.”

Cailin sat still while the officer unlocked her cuff. She rubbed her wrist, feeling the phantom weight of the metal. She had just sold another piece of her soul to the devil.

But she had bought her children time.

“Let’s go,” Hilliard said, holding the door open. “The car is waiting.”

Cailin stood on shaky legs. She walked past him without touching him, out of the interrogation room, down the corridor, through the police station, and into the night — toward a freedom that felt more like a cage.

The interior of the Aston Martin was a cocoon of luxury that felt like a prison cell. The leather was soft, the climate control perfect, the engine a low, powerful purr that vibrated through the floorboards.

Outside, the city blurred past in streaks of rain-slicked neon, distorted by their speed.

Hilliard drove with focused intensity, his hands at ten and two, his profile sharp and unreadable against the passing streetlights.

Cailin sat in the passenger seat, pressing her forehead against the cool glass. Her arm throbbed with a dull, rhythmic ache — a constant reminder of the knife that had nearly ended her life.

The silence between them was heavy, saturated with unsaid words and five years of bitterness.

“I don’t understand,” Cailin said, her voice breaking the quiet. She kept her eyes on the wet pavement rushing beneath them.

“What don’t you understand?” Hilliard asked. His tone was weary rather than angry.

“How you can be so sharp in business and so completely blind in your personal life.” She turned her head slowly to look at him. “The English family — do you really not see what they are?”

“We are not doing this, Cailin. Not now.”

“You have to.” Her voice gained a desperate edge. “You’re in bed with them, Hilliard. And not just with Charla. Gregg English isn’t just a partner — he’s a crook. Look at his offshore accounts. Look at the shell companies he uses to funnel money through your logistics division.”

“Gregg is a philanthropist,” Hilliard said, his jaw tightening. “He’s been a friend of this family for thirty years.”

“He’s a criminal,” Cailin countered. “And Victoria — do you know about the allegations from her first marriage? The stepdaughter who accidentally fell down the stairs and ended up in a wheelchair? The press buried it because the English family paid them off.”

Hilliard slammed on the brakes.

The car screeched to a halt at a red light. The seatbelt locked painfully against Cailin’s injured shoulder. She gasped, clutching her arm.

Hilliard turned to her, his eyes blazing. “You sound like a conspiracy theorist. You sound unhinged. This is exactly why people think you’re unstable, Cailin — you invent villains to justify your own behavior.”

“If I’m crazy,” Cailin whispered, meeting his gaze, “then you must be insane. Because you loved me once.”

The words hung between them, charged and electric.

Chapter 198:

Hilliard flinched. For a single moment the mask slipped, and Cailin saw a flash of raw pain — a glimpse of the man who used to hold her while she slept.

“I did,” he said, his voice rough. “I loved you more than I thought was possible.”

The light turned green. A car behind them honked.

Hilliard turned back to the road, the moment shattered. He pressed the accelerator and the car surged forward.

“That’s why this hurts,” he said, staring straight ahead. “Watching you turn into this.”

“I didn’t turn into anything,” Cailin said softly. “I survived. And one day, Hilliard, you’re going to wake up and realize you’ve been sleeping next to a viper. And I won’t be there to save you.”

“I don’t need saving,” Hilliard said. “I need peace. And that restraining order buys us peace.”

“It won’t buy peace,” Cailin murmured, turning back to the window. “It will just buy them time to reload.”

They didn’t speak for the rest of the drive.

The car descended into the hospital’s underground parking garage. Fluorescent lights flickered overhead, casting long, dancing shadows across the concrete walls. It felt like descending into the underworld.

Hilliard parked in a reserved spot near the elevators and killed the engine. He didn’t open his door.

He sat for a moment, gripping the steering wheel.

“Cailin,” he said. “About five years ago—”

“Don’t.” Her hand was already on the door handle. “Don’t you dare ask me about the past right now. You forfeited the right to that conversation when you sided with her.”

“I am siding with the person who is in a hospital bed with a broken leg,” Hilliard snapped.

“And I’m the person with a stab wound you refuse to see,” Cailin shot back. She shoved the door open. “Let’s get this over with. I need my arm looked at.”

She stepped out into the damp, cool air of the garage. Her legs felt weak, but she locked her knees. She would not collapse. Not in front of him.

Hilliard got out and walked around the car. He reached out as though to take her elbow — a reflex of old manners, or perhaps old affection.

Cailin stepped away, putting distance between them.

“Don’t touch me,” she said.

Hilliard dropped his hand. His expression hardened again.

“Fine,” he said. “You get your arm treated, the restraining order is filed, and everyone walks away. Then you go back to your hotel, and we figure out what comes next.”

“There is no ‘next’ for us, Hilliard,” Cailin said, moving toward the elevator. “After tonight, we are done.”

They stepped into the elevator together. Hilliard pressed the button for the VIP floor. The doors slid shut, sealing them in a metal box that rose steadily upward.

Cailin watched the numbers climb, feeling like a prisoner walking to the gallows.

Chapter 199:

The elevator doors opened with a cheerful ding that felt entirely inappropriate for the mood. Hilliard stepped out first, his stride long and purposeful. Cailin followed, pulling her coat tighter around herself as if it could shield her from the malice waiting down the hall.

Room 304. The door was closed.

Hilliard didn’t knock. He pushed it open and held it for Cailin.

The room was large, filled with flowers that smelled too sweet, like a funeral parlor. Charla lay in the bed, her leg elevated in a cast, her face bandaged. She looked small and fragile — a perfect tableau of victimhood.

Victoria English was pacing by the window. When she saw Cailin, she stopped dead. Her eyes, heavily lined with smudged mascara, widened in outrage.

“You brought her here?” Victoria shrieked. “Get that murderer out of my daughter’s room!”

Gregg English was sitting in a corner chair, speaking low into a cell phone. He hung up immediately and rose to his feet, his face flushing red.

“Hilliard, have you lost your mind?” Gregg barked.

Hilliard stepped further into the room, positioning himself slightly in front of Cailin — a shield, or perhaps a jailer.

“She is here to have her injuries documented by a hospital physician, which is her right,” he announced, his voice cutting cleanly through the hysteria. “And to inform you that she has agreed to a mutual restraining order. The circus ends tonight.”

Charla stirred in the bed. She opened her eyes — one was swollen shut, the other glazed with painkillers. She looked at Cailin, and for just a moment, Cailin caught the flicker of triumph behind the pain. A restraining order meant Cailin was legally branded the aggressor.

“Hilliard,” Charla whimpered, reaching out a trembling hand. “I’m scared. Don’t let her hurt me again.”

“She’s not going to hurt you,” Hilliard said, though he made no move to take Charla’s hand. He turned to Cailin and gave a curt nod. Get it over with.

Cailin drew a slow breath and swallowed the bile rising in her throat. She walked to the foot of the bed, her gaze fixed on the white blanket, refusing to look at Charla’s gloating face. She didn’t need to say a word. The legal document said it for her. She simply had to stand there — a living testament to their victory.

“That’s it?” Victoria scoffed, stepping closer. “She nearly kills my daughter and she just gets to stand there?”

“The lawyers are handling it, Victoria,” Hilliard warned.

“It is not enough!”

Victoria lunged forward. Before Hilliard could react, she swung her hand.

Smack.

The sound cracked through the quiet room like a pistol shot. Victoria's palm connected hard with Cailin's cheek. Cailin's head snapped to the side, the force of the blow splitting her lip. She tasted the metallic tang of blood.

The room froze.

Hilliard looked horrified. He seized Victoria's wrist as she raised her hand for a second strike. "I said stop!" he roared.

Chapter 200:

Cailin slowly turned her head back to center. She touched her tongue to her split lip.

Something inside her snapped. The fear, the exhaustion, the relentless humiliation — it all boiled over into a cold, white rage. She was no longer Cailin Morton, the socialite. She was Cali. She was a woman who had survived the underground.

Her eyes went dark. The air around her seemed to drop ten degrees.

She looked directly at Victoria, her voice falling to a low, chilling whisper. "You think a slap fixes this? I know about the accident with your first husband's daughter, Victoria — the one who fell down the stairs at the ski lodge. The press buried it, but the hospital records didn't. Touch me again, and I'll make sure those records see the light of day."

Victoria gasped and scrambled backward, tripping over her own feet. Gregg rushed forward, then stopped cold when Cailin's icy gaze swung to him.

"And you, Gregg," Cailin continued, her voice stripped of all emotion. "The SEC would be very interested in those charitable donations you've been laundering through Hilliard's logistics division. I still have the original server logs."

Hilliard stared at her. He had never seen this woman before. This was not the Cailin who cried over sad movies. This was a woman who knew how to dismantle a dynasty with a few well-placed words — a woman prepared to burn everything to the ground.

"Cailin, that's enough," he said, his voice caught somewhere between awe and alarm. "You've made your point."

"Get her out!" Charla screamed from the bed, dragging the sheets up to her chin. "Daddy! She's crazy! She's going to ruin us!"

Charla was not acting. She was genuinely terrified. She had pushed the mouse too far, and the mouse had turned into a wolf.

"Get out!" Gregg shouted, jabbing a finger toward the door. "Get out before I call security!"

Cailin held them in her gaze for one final moment. Then she looked at Hilliard. Her eyes were full of a profound disappointment that cut him far deeper than any weapon could have. She wiped the blood from her lip with the back of her hand.

“The order is mutual,” she said quietly. “Stay away from me.”

She turned on her heel and walked out of the room, leaving behind a stunned silence and the unmistakable scent of fear.

Victoria, her face drained of color, stumbled after Cailin into the hallway, but Gregg caught her arm. “Let her go, Vicky. Now. Before she says something we can’t take back.” Victoria trembled, muttering about lawsuits, but Gregg pulled her back into the room and closed the door — leaving Hilliard alone with Cailin in the corridor.

Hilliard stood in the middle of the hallway, looking first at the closed door, then at Cailin, who had her back against the wall, her chest heaving, blood still trickling from her lip.

“You’re bleeding,” he said quietly. He took a step toward her and reached into his pocket for a handkerchief.