

Second chance 221

Chapter 221:

He thought of the Cailin he had known five years ago. She couldn't bring herself to hurt a fly. She had wept over a dead bird she found in the garden.

But the woman in the wheelchair tonight — the woman who had looked at him with eyes like empty glass?

I will not rest until the English family name is nothing but a cautionary tale.

A cold horror moved through him.

Had she ordered this? Was this her justice?

"Sir?" Gavin said quietly, retrieving the phone from the pavement.

"Call the police chief," Hilliard said, his voice shaking — not with grief, but with rage. "Tell him I know where Charla is. Tell him to bring a SWAT team to Kegan Aguirre's estate."

"Sir, if we do that—"

“Do it!” Hilliard roared. “She is still my wife. I will not let her become a murderer — not even to avenge herself against people who deserve everything coming to them.”

He turned back to the gate and drove his fist against the iron.

“Cailin!” he shouted into the dark. “I know what you did! Open this goddamn gate!”

Inside the estate, in the warm, fire-lit library, Cailin sat with both hands wrapped around a cup of tea. She couldn’t hear him. She was watching her children sleep on the rug by the hearth, their small chests rising and falling in the firelight.

She had no idea that outside, the man who claimed to love her was about to bring an army to her door — and accuse her of the one thing she had never done: becoming like them.

The sirens were deafening.

Blue and red light strobed through the tall library windows, painting the walls in a frantic, rhythmic pulse.

Cailin dropped her teacup. It shattered on the hardwood floor.

“What is happening?” she gasped.

Kegan rose from the armchair where he had been cleaning a vintage flintlock pistol. He didn’t look surprised. He looked annoyed.

“It seems your husband lacks patience,” he said calmly.

The front doors burst open with a crash.

“Police! Nobody move!”

A dozen officers in tactical gear swarmed into the grand foyer. Behind them, Hilliard strode in looking like the angel of death. He marched straight into the library and pointed a finger at Cailin.

“Where is she?”

Cailin stared at him. “Who?”

“Charla. Don’t play innocent. We saw the video, Cailin. The finger. Is she in the basement, or did Kegan already dump the body?”

Cailin's mouth fell open. She looked at Kegan.

"You kidnapped her?" she whispered.

Kegan shrugged and holstered the antique pistol. "She hurt you. I balanced the scales."

"You cut off her finger?" Cailin screamed, horror flooding through her. "Kegan! I didn't ask for that! I wanted justice, not torture!"

"Justice is subjective," Kegan said coolly.

"You're sick," Hilliard spat. He turned to the officers. "Arrest him. Check the basement."

Two officers seized Kegan. He didn't resist. He simply smiled at Hilliard as they cuffed him.

"You should thank me, Holloway," Kegan said. "I did what you were too weak to do."

"Get him out of here," Hilliard growled.

Chapter 222:

As they dragged Kegan away, Hilliard turned back to Cailin. His eyes were blazing.

“Did you know?” he demanded. “Tell me the truth. Did you order this?”

“No!” Cailin cried, tears streaming down her face. “I didn’t know. I swear it.”

“I want to believe you,” Hilliard said, stepping closer. “But you’ve lied about everything else. The miscarriage. The disappearance. Why should I believe this isn’t your revenge?”

“Because I’m not a monster!” Cailin shouted. “Unlike you and your family!”

“Mommy?”

The small voice cut through the shouting like a blade.

Hilliard froze. Cailin stopped breathing. They both turned toward the staircase.

Elia stood on the landing, clutching a stuffed rabbit, wearing oversized pajamas with her hair tangled from sleep. She looked utterly terrified.

“Bad Man?” she whispered, staring at Hilliard.

Then a sudden movement from one of the officers startled her, and she turned and bolted back up the stairs. As she ran, the back of her loose pajama shirt lifted for just a fraction of a second.

And he saw it. The Holloway Moon.

There it was — the same mark he had glimpsed in the dim light of the boathouse when he pulled her from the water, now stark and unmistakable beneath the flashing police lights. The undeniable biological stamp that branded her as his, sending a wave of guilt and fierce, helpless possession crashing through his chest.

“Elia,” Hilliard breathed.

He took a step toward the stairs. “Elia—”

Cailin moved. Despite her injury, despite her exhaustion, she threw herself between him and the staircase.

“Don’t you dare!” she screamed, her voice raw and feral. “Don’t you look at her! She is not yours!”

“She has the mark, Cailin!” Hilliard shouted, pointing past her. “She has the Holloway Moon! Stop lying to me! She is my daughter!”

“She is Ashley’s!” Cailin cried, spreading her good arm wide to block his view. “Get out! Get out of this house!”

“It’s not your house,” Hilliard said, his voice trembling with awe and rage in equal measure. “It’s a crime scene. And that is my child.”

He looked over Cailin’s shoulder, his voice dropping to something almost gentle.

“Elia. I’m not the Bad Man. I’m your daddy.”

Elia looked at Cailin.

“No, baby,” Cailin wept. “Go upstairs. Go to Aron and Davy.”

Hilliard’s head snapped back to her.

“Aron and Davy,” he repeated.

The names from the phone call. Hearing her say them aloud — confirming everything — made the reality crash down on him all at once. They were no longer disembodied voices on an encrypted line. They were here. They were real.

Three. Not just the girl. Three.

The full, crushing weight of it landed on him. He had suspected, but the sheer scale of the secret — five years, three children, hidden in plain sight — drove the air from his lungs. He staggered back and caught himself against the doorframe.

“You hid three of them,” he whispered. “For five years.”

Chapter 223:

The police captain stepped forward. “Mr. Holloway, we found something in the garage — a vehicle matching the description of the kidnapping car. We need you at the station to give a statement.”

Hilliard didn’t look at the captain. He kept his eyes fixed on Cailin.

“I’m coming back,” he said.

It was a promise. And a threat.

“I’m coming back for all of them.”

He turned and walked out, leaving Cailin crumpling to the floor — her secret laid bare in the cold, merciless pulse of the police lights.

The chaos at the estate settled into a tense, suffocating quiet after the police left.

Ashley rushed down the stairs, her face drained of color. She helped Cailin up from the floor.

“He knows,” Cailin whispered, still shaking. “He saw Elia’s mark. He heard the names.”

“We have to go,” Ashley said. “Now. Before he comes back with a court order.”

“We can’t,” Cailin said. “Kegan is in custody. The jet is grounded. The police are watching the perimeter.”

They were trapped.

Meanwhile, at the hospital.

Hilliard had spent a grueling hour at the precinct giving a carefully sanitized statement about a “business misunderstanding” at the estate — deliberately omitting enough to shield Cailin from assault charges. The moment the detective released him, he didn’t go home. He drove straight to Mount Sinai.

He walked down the hallway with his mind a blur of colliding images: Charla’s bandaged hand, Elia’s face on the landing, the Lego ninja warm in his palm.

He reached Charla’s room.

She was there. Alive. Heavily bandaged. She had been found and dropped near the ER entrance an hour earlier, shortly after the police raided Kegan’s estate.

Victoria was weeping by the bed. Gregg was shouting at a nurse.

“Where were you?” Charla screamed when she saw Hilliard. She thrust her bandaged hand toward him. “Look at this! Look what your wife did to me!”

Hilliard looked at her hand. He felt a distant flicker of pity.

“Cailin didn’t do it,” he said flatly. “Kegan did.”

“She ordered it!” Victoria shrieked. “She’s a devil!”

“She didn’t know.” He didn’t fully understand why he was defending her, but he knew it was true. The horror on Cailin’s face had been real — the kind that couldn’t be faked.

“Well, well, well.”

A slow, deliberate clap echoed from the doorway.

Hilliard turned.

Leaning against the doorframe, wearing a floral silk shirt unbuttoned halfway down his chest and oversized sunglasses, was Vance Holloway.

“Vance?” Hilliard frowned. “When did you get back from Ibiza?”

“Grandpa called,” Vance said, strolling into the room. He removed his sunglasses, revealing eyes that were sharp and entirely sober. “Said the family IQ was dropping at an alarming rate and he needed me to balance the average.”

He looked at Charla. He looked at her bandaged hand.

“Ouch,” Vance said. “Nine fingers? That’s going to make counting to ten very difficult for you, darling.”

“Get out!” Charla hissed.

“Now, now,” Vance said with a click of his tongue. “Is that how you speak to your future — oh, wait. Hilliard ended the engagement, didn’t he? So you’re just... nobody.”

“Vance, enough,” Hilliard said, though without much conviction.

Chapter 224:

“Is it enough?” Vance turned to face him. “Because from what I hear, you let this—” he gestured loosely in Charla’s direction, “—this walking disaster zone frame your wife, try to kill her, and now you’re standing in her hospital room while she plays the victim because she finally ran into someone crazier than herself.”

“She lost a finger, Vance,” Hilliard said.

“And Cailin lost five years,” Vance shot back. The playfulness dropped from his voice entirely. “I saw the security footage from the Ferris wheel, Hilliard. I hacked the cloud backup before your security chief could even find the login page. It’s crystal clear — Charla jumped. I know you saw it too. So why are you standing in this room instead of going to get your real family back?”

Charla went pale.

"You hacked it?" Gregg sputtered. "That's illegal!"

"So is laundering money through a charity foundation, Gregg," Vance said, showing too many teeth. "Shall we compare felonies?"

He turned back to Hilliard and dropped a hand on his shoulder.

"Wake up, big cousin. You have a wife who is extraordinary, and apparently a collection of children who are smarter than your entire security team. Stop wasting time with the nine-fingered fraud and go get your family."

Hilliard looked at him. For the first time in years, he saw something clear and steady behind his cousin's eyes.

"You're right," Hilliard said.

He turned and walked out.

"Hilliard!" Charla screamed after him.

“Save your breath, honey,” Vance said, pulling a flask from his breast pocket. “You’re going to need it for the deposition.”

The dining room at the Holloway main estate was a cavernous hall of mahogany and old oil paintings. Thunder rumbled outside, rattling the crystal glasses arranged along the long table.

Preston Holloway sat at the head, his face flushed purple with rage. Jeraldine sat to his right, pressing a handkerchief to her eyes. Amerigo occupied the far end, silent, eating his soup — his very stillness more commanding than any man standing in the room.

Hilliard and Vance sat opposite each other.

“You have to marry her,” Preston said, slamming his fist on the table. “The English family is threatening a billion-dollar lawsuit — negligence, emotional distress. They’re saying Cailin ordered the attack!”

“Cailin didn’t order it,” Hilliard said, cutting his steak without looking up. “And I’m not marrying Charla. I’d rather lose the billion.”

“You are destroying this family!” Jeraldine wailed. “For that woman! She’s a criminal, Hilliard. She associates with gangsters like Kegan Aguirre!”

“She associates with him because we failed her,” Hilliard said. “Because I failed her.”

“Oh, spare me the melodrama,” Preston sneered. “It’s business. We merge with English Holdings, bury the scandal, and move on.”

“English Holdings is finished,” Vance said, swirling his wine. “Hilliard cut their supply chain this morning. Their stock dropped forty percent by closing bell. If we merge with them, we’re merging with a corpse.”

“Vance!” Preston barked. “Shut up!”

Amerigo tapped his cane sharply on the floor. The sound cut through the room like a gunshot. Everyone fell silent.

“Charla English is a liability,” Amerigo said. “She is unstable. And her parents are thieves.” He paused, then fixed Hilliard with cold, hard eyes. “However. Cailin Morton is a far more significant problem.”

“She’s hiding heirs,” Hilliard said.

Chapter 225:

He set down his knife and fork. He looked at his mother, then his father, then his grandfather.

The silence in the room became absolute.

“What?” Jeraldine whispered.

"Tonight," Hilliard said. "At Kegan's house. Elia."

"Elia?" Jeraldine scoffed, waving a dismissive hand. "That little girl we met at the estate? The one Ashley claimed was hers? Don't be absurd, Hilliard. You told us yourself the DNA test came back a zero percent match. There is no secret heir."

"The test was faked by Kegan," Hilliard said. "She has the Moon."

Jeraldine dropped her fork. It struck the china with a sharp, ringing clatter.

"On her back," Hilliard continued. "The mark."

Amerigo stopped eating. He lowered his spoon slowly. His eyes, usually softened by age, sharpened into something predatory.

"And there are two others," Hilliard said. "Boys. Aron and Davy."

"Triplets?" Jeraldine breathed. "My god."

"Three Holloway heirs," Vance said with a low whistle. "Damn, cousin. You don't do things by halves."

Preston's expression shifted. The anger drained away, replaced by something colder and more calculated. "Three? Are you certain they're yours?"

"The girl is undeniably mine," Hilliard said. "And the boys — they hacked into my company's systems. They have the Holloway intellect."

Amerigo wiped his mouth with his napkin. He did not stand. He simply raised his cane and pointed it at Hilliard.

"Forget the lawsuit," he said. "Forget Charla. Get those children."

"Cailin won't give them up," Hilliard said. "She hates us."

"She is legally your wife," Amerigo said. "They are legally your children. Use the lawyers. Use the police. Use force if you must. But bring them here."

"I don't want to take them from her," Hilliard said, rising to face his grandfather. "I want to bring her back too. I want my family — whole."

"Then you have a great deal of groveling ahead of you," Vance muttered into his glass.

“I’m going to get them,” Hilliard said. “Tonight.”

“Good,” Amerigo said. “Because if you don’t, I will.”

The threat settled over the table like a cold fog. Hilliard understood exactly what it meant. Amerigo would use ruthless, surgical force. He would dismantle Cailin entirely to secure the heirs. Hilliard had to reach her first — to protect her.

Again.

The Obsidian Suite was a private, soundproofed lounge deep within one of Kegan’s secure downtown properties. It smelled of expensive perfume and aged leather — the kind of place where people went to hide in plain sight.

Cailin sat in a corner booth, a glass of water and a small prescription bottle of painkillers on the table in front of her. She had taken one an hour ago, but the throbbing in her arm was still a roaring fire. The medication was beginning to soften the edges, though it was also making her thoughts drift and her emotions uncomfortably raw.

Ashley sat across from her, looking worried.

“We need to go, Cailin. Kegan’s lawyers will have him out by morning, but until then, we are exposed.”

Chapter 226:

“Let me have this, Ash,” Cailin said, her speech slightly slurred. “Just one night. I lost my sanctuary. I lost my anonymity. I almost lost my mind.”

“The pain meds are making you talk nonsense,” Ashley said softly.

“I deserve to talk nonsense!” Cailin laughed, though tears spilled down her face at the same moment. “Do you know what today is? It’s the anniversary.”

“Cailin...”

“Five years ago today,” Cailin whispered, tracing the rim of her glass with one finger. “I was on that table. In the clinic.”

In the booth directly behind them, separated only by a high velvet partition, Hilliard went completely still.

He had received a text from Vance an hour ago: Kegan’s got her stashed in the Obsidian Suite. His network is tough, but not for me. Booth 4. Don’t go in guns blazing. Just listen. He had bribed a waiter, slipped in through the service entrance with his heart hammering, and settled into the adjacent booth. Now he sat with his back to hers, holding his breath, straining to hear their hushed voices beneath the low thrum of music.

"I called him," Cailin said, her voice breaking. "Ten times, Ash. I was bleeding. I was so scared. The doctor said I might not make it. He said the babies were in distress."

Hilliard closed his eyes.

He remembered that day. He had been in a board meeting. His phone had been on silent. When he checked it afterward, he saw the missed calls. He had tried calling back, but she hadn't answered. He assumed she was still angry about the argument they'd had that morning.

He hadn't known she was dying.

"Charla answered on the eleventh call," Cailin continued. "She said he was busy. She said they were celebrating."

Hilliard's fist tightened on the table. He hadn't been celebrating. He had been working. Charla had answered his phone.

"I lay there," Cailin sobbed quietly, "and I thought — if I die, he won't even care. He'll just marry her. And she'll raise my babies. She'll hurt them."

"She tried," Ashley said darkly.

"I saved them," Cailin whispered. "Three of them. Tiny little things. Aron was so small — he fit in my hand. Davy didn't cry for a whole minute. I thought he was gone."

Hilliard's heart shattered quietly in his chest.

He listened to the account of their birth. The trauma. The fear. The loneliness. He had missed every second of it — sitting in an office making money while his wife fought for the lives of his children entirely alone.

"And now he wants them," Cailin said, her voice turning bitter. "He sees Elia's mark and he thinks he owns her. He doesn't know about the nights I stayed up watching them breathe. He doesn't know about the fevers. The nightmares."

"He doesn't deserve them," Ashley agreed.

"He thinks he can just walk in," Cailin said. "Because he has money. Because he has a name. He thinks that makes him a father." She set her glass down hard on the table. "He's not a father. He's a donor. A sperm donor who broke my heart."

Chapter 227:

A tear slid down Hilliard's cheek. He didn't wipe it away.

He sat there, pinned beneath the weight of his own failures. The anger he had felt toward her for hiding the children had dissolved completely. She hadn't hidden them to hurt him. She had hidden them to save them — from him, from his world, from Charla. And she had been right.

"I hate him, Ash," Cailin whispered. "I hate him so much it burns."

"I know, sweetie."

"But..." Cailin's voice dropped so low that Hilliard had to ease back in his seat to catch it. "When he held me after the water — for just a second, I wasn't afraid of the world. Only of him. And that terrifies me."

Hilliard let out a slow, unsteady breath.

There was still an ember. Buried under five years of ash and pain, there was a small, stubborn spark.

He stood up.

He walked around the partition.

Ashley looked up, her eyes widening in alarm. She started to move, but Hilliard raised a hand.

"I'm not here to fight," he said. His voice was stripped raw.

Cailin looked up. Her eyes were glassy and red-rimmed. She looked at him with a mixture of confusion and loathing.

“You,” she said.

“Me,” Hilliard said.

He didn’t say sorry. Sorry wasn’t enough — it was a word for stepping on someone’s toe, not for dismantling their life.

“We have a problem,” he said, the urgency in his voice cutting cleanly through her medicated haze.

At that moment, the lounge doors burst open. A man in a tailored suit strode in, waving a thick manila envelope. Cailin stiffened, recognizing the Holloway features immediately.

“They’re moving fast,” the man said, slightly out of breath, stopping beside Hilliard. He looked at Cailin and gave a quick, tight nod. “We haven’t officially met. I’m Vance Holloway — the family disappointment. Right now, we share a mutual enemy.”

“Vance?” Cailin blinked, trying to push through the fog. “What is going on?”

“My father, Preston, just hired the Dream Team — the legal sharks from hell,” Vance said, dropping the envelope on the table. “He’s backing Charla fully. They just filed a fifty-million-dollar civil suit against you for attempted murder.”

Cailin felt the floor tilt beneath her. “Fifty million?”

“It gets worse,” Vance said grimly. “They filed an emergency restraining order. You can’t leave the state of New York. They’ve flagged your passport. If you try to cross any border, you’ll be arrested on sight as a flight risk.”

“They want to trap me here,” Cailin whispered, her hand gripping the edge of the table. “They want to bleed me dry and lock me in a cage so they can take my children.”

“Take our children,” Hilliard said, his voice hardening into something cold and absolute. He looked at Cailin, and for the first time, she saw no conflict in his eyes — only a singular, unwavering focus. He had finally chosen a side.

Chapter 228:

“They’re not just declaring war on you, Cailin,” Hilliard said, pulling out his phone. “They’re declaring war on me. And that is a war they are going to lose.”

The adrenaline spike from Vance’s news was too much for Cailin’s battered system. When she tried to stand, the room lurched violently. Her knees buckled, and Hilliard caught her before she reached the floor.

“She’s burning up,” he said, feeling the unnatural heat radiating through her clothes. “The infection from the water, the stress — she’s crashing.”

“Take her to my car,” Vance ordered. “I’ll make sure Ashley gets out of here safely before Preston’s people figure out where we are.”

The elevator ride to the penthouse was silent. Cailin was a dead weight in Hilliard’s arms.

He carried her into the master bedroom — the room she had fled five years ago. He noted with grim satisfaction that his team had already restored this one room to pristine condition, exactly as he had ordered. The rest of the penthouse was still a wreck, but this space he had kept like a shrine. He kicked the door shut behind him.

He laid her gently on the bed. The sheets were crisp and white, untouched. He hadn’t slept in this room since she left. It had become a mausoleum.

He sat on the edge of the mattress and unbuckled her shoes. Her feet were cold. He rubbed them slowly, trying to bring some warmth back.

He carefully removed the torn, grimy janitor’s jacket she was still wearing beneath her coat, meaning to throw it away. As he folded it back, his fingers caught on something hard and crinkled in the breast pocket. He reached inside and pulled out a small waterproof plastic bag. Within it, folded into a tiny square, was a faded and heavily creased piece of paper.

He unfolded it carefully.

It was a hospital admission slip, dated five years ago. Under Reason for Admission, two lines were printed in stark, clinical text:

Placental abruption. Risk of exsanguination. Proceed with emergency cesarean section.

She had kept it. Preserved it like a holy relic — or a piece of shrapnel from a battle she had survived alone.

The paper felt as though it burned his fingers. This was it. The cold, medical proof of the day he had let her calls go unanswered.

She stirred.

“Kegan?” she murmured, her eyes still closed.

Hilliard flinched. “No. It’s Hilliard.”

She frowned faintly in her sleep. “Bad Man.”

“Yeah,” Hilliard whispered, his throat tight. “Bad Man.”

He went to the bathroom and wetted a washcloth. He returned and gently wiped her face — the blood from her lip, the dirt from her cheek, careful around the bruise Victoria had left. He let his fingertips trace the line of her jaw.

“I’m so sorry,” he said to the sleeping woman. “I’m so sorry I wasn’t there.”

He thought of the triplets. Aron. Davy. Elia.

He walked to the window and looked out at the city. Somewhere out there, his sons were hiding — probably frightened, probably furious with him.

He pulled out his phone and called Gavin.

Chapter 229:

“Is the security team at the penthouse?”

“Yes, sir. Perimeter is locked down. No one gets in or out without your bio-scan.”

“Good. And Gavin — get a message to Kegan Aguirre’s legal team. His bail hearing needs to be fast-tracked. Use whatever resources are necessary. I want him out by morning.”

A brief silence. "Sir... Kegan?"

"He's been protecting my children," Hilliard said. The words tasted like ash. "For now, that makes him an ally. Also — find the best pediatric wing in the city and arrange a donation in their names. Aron, Davy, Elia."

"Understood, sir."

He hung up. He removed his jacket and shoes but didn't get into the bed. He hadn't earned that.

He settled into the armchair in the corner and watched her sleep.

Hours passed. The rain stopped. The sun began to creep above the horizon, spreading gray light slowly across the room.

Cailin shifted. She groaned.

Her eyes fluttered open. She blinked at the ceiling, then at the window. Then she saw him.

She sat up abruptly, gasping as the residual haze of painkillers and the renewed fire in her shoulder hit her simultaneously.

“Where am I?” she rasped.

“My apartment,” Hilliard said. His voice was rough from hours of silence. He hadn’t slept.

Recognition moved across Cailin’s face, followed immediately by alarm.

“Why am I here? Where are the kids?”

“Safe,” Hilliard said. “Ashley is with them. I’ve arranged for Kegan’s release — he’ll be with them too.”

Cailin relaxed fractionally, though her eyes stayed guarded. “Why did you bring me here?”

“Because you were in pain,” Hilliard said. “And because I heard you.”

Cailin went still. “Heard what?”

“At the lounge.” He stood and walked toward the bed, stopping a few feet away, giving her space. “I was in the booth behind you.”

The color left Cailin's face. She reached back through the medicated haze, trying to reconstruct what she had said. The memories were blurred, but the feeling of exposure was sharp and immediate.

"I know, Cailin," Hilliard said quietly. "I know about the calls I missed. And I know about this." He held up the crumpled hospital slip.

Cailin stared at it. She pulled the duvet up to her chin.

"You know," she whispered.

"Yes."

"And what are you going to do?" Her voice trembled. "Are you going to take them? Are you going to sue me?"

Hilliard looked at her — at the fear in her eyes. Fear of him.

He lowered himself slowly to his knees.

Right there on the rug. The great Hilliard Holloway, the shark of Wall Street, kneeling before his wife.

"I'm going to beg," he said.

Cailin's breath caught.

Chapter 230:

"I'm going to spend the rest of my life begging you to forgive me," Hilliard said. "For not answering the phone. For letting you go through that alone. For all of it." He held out one hand, palm up — an offering. "I don't want to take them from you, Cailin. I want to help you protect them. From my family. From Charla. From all of it."

Cailin looked at his hand. She looked at his face. He was crying — silent tears tracking slowly through the stubble on his jaw.

She wanted to believe him. God, she wanted to believe him.

But five years of pain didn't dissolve with a single apology.

"Get up," Cailin said. Her voice was cold.

Hilliard didn't move.

"I said get up," she snapped. "Don't you dare kneel to me now. Not after everything."

She pushed the covers back and stood, swaying slightly on her feet.

"You think knowing their names makes you a father?" she asked. "You think reading a piece of paper makes you a husband?"

She walked to the door.

"You're right, Hilliard. You have a great deal of begging ahead of you. But not today."

She opened the door and paused, looking back at him over her shoulder.

"Today," she said, "you're just the man who kidnapped me. Again."

She walked out.

Hilliard stayed on his knees. He listened to her footsteps fade down the hall until there was nothing left but silence.

He hadn't won her back. He hadn't fixed a single thing.

But she hadn't said never. She had said not today.

And for a man who had been living on nothing but regrets, that was enough of a lifeline to hold onto.

Cailin woke to the sensation of silk against her skin and a jackhammer pounding inside her skull.

She didn't open her eyes immediately. For a split second, her body tricked her into believing she was back at the safe house, or perhaps in the guest room at Kegan's estate. But the smell was wrong. It wasn't the sterile neutrality of a hotel or the old-wood warmth of the estate. It was sandalwood, expensive leather, and a sharp, clean note of rain.

It was the smell of Hilliard Holloway.

Her eyes snapped open.

Above her: a slate-gray ceiling, aggressively minimalist. She pushed herself upright. The room tilted. She looked down at herself.

She wasn't wearing her own clothes. She was drowning in a white dress shirt, the cuffs hanging past her fingertips, the fabric saturated with his scent.

Cold, immediate panic flooded her chest.

She remembered everything. The Obsidian Suite. Vance's warning about the lawsuit. Hilliard carrying her. He had brought her here — to his penthouse. To the heart of the beast.

She scrambled backward until her spine met the headboard. What had she said? What had she done?

The bedroom door swung open.

Hilliard walked in looking infuriatingly composed for a man who had supposedly spent the night watching over an unconscious, injured woman. He was wearing gray sweatpants and a black t-shirt that pulled tight across his chest. He carried a tray.

"You're awake," he said. His voice was low, stripped of its usual arrogance. "Drink this. It's for the hangover."

He set the tray on the bedside table: a glass of water, two pills, and a bowl of something steaming.