

Second chance 231

Chapter 231:

Cailin pulled her knees to her chest and wrapped the oversized shirt tighter around her legs. “Why am I here?”

“You collapsed,” Hilliard said, stepping back to give her room. “The exhaustion, the medication — it was too much. I couldn’t let you leave in that state. My team secured the penthouse. It was the only option.”

Cailin studied him, scanning for the trap. His eyes were dark and tired, but unusually clear.

“I need to leave,” she said. Her throat felt raw, like she’d swallowed glass.

“Eat first,” Hilliard said. “You look like a ghost.”

“I’m not hungry.” She swung her legs off the bed, wincing sharply as her shoulder fired in protest. “Where are my clothes?”

“Being cleaned. They were covered in mud and blood.” He crossed his arms. He didn’t move to block her, but his presence filled the room like a wall. “We need to talk.”

Cailin froze. Her hand hovered over the water glass.

"I heard you last night, Cailin. All of it."

"I was on medication," she said quickly, her heart slamming against her ribs. "It was the painkillers talking."

"Painkillers don't invent names," Hilliard said quietly. He moved to the window and looked out at the gray skyline. "Aron. Davy. I heard you say you had to protect all three of them."

The air left the room.

Cailin's blood turned to ice. She gripped the edge of the mattress until her knuckles went white.

"You're twisting the delirious ramblings of a drugged woman," she said, forcing a laugh. It came out brittle and sharp. "You heard what you wanted to hear."

Hilliard didn't flinch. He didn't look angry. He looked hopeful. And broken.

"Cailin." He stepped closer and lowered himself to the edge of the bed. "It's true, isn't it? Elia has two brothers. Our sons." His voice cracked on the word. "I know I have no right to ask. But please — stop shutting me out. I will spend the rest of my life atoning for missing their lives. I will burn down the world to make it right for them."

“There is no ‘them’!” Cailin scrambled off the far side of the bed, putting the mattress between them. “You’re obsessed. You’re inventing children to satisfy your own guilt. I have one daughter, and you will stay away from her!”

She was shaking — not from cold, but from the sheer terror of being seen so clearly. He was too close. He was assembling the pieces too fast.

“I’m leaving,” she announced, marching toward the door in his shirt. “I don’t care if I walk out in nothing. Vance said your father is trying to cage me with that lawsuit. I can’t fight them from your gilded prison.”

Hilliard was on his feet instantly. He caught her wrist before she reached the door — his grip firm, but careful.

“Stop running,” he said, his voice rough. “Just stop. Eat the soup. Then I’ll drive you wherever you want to go.”

“Let go of me,” she hissed.

Chapter 232:

He watched the determination settle into her face like stone. He knew that holding her here would only confirm everything she believed about him. It was a risk — a monumental one — but he released her wrist.

“Fine,” he said, his jaw tight. “Vance is waiting downstairs. He’ll take you. I’ll have a team follow at a distance. You won’t be alone out there.”

“I’m never alone,” Cailin said, already moving through the door. “I’m going to war.”

The VIP suite at Mount Sinai looked less like a hospital room and more like a war room for the morally bankrupt.

Charla lay in the bed, propped up by a mountain of pillows. Her hand was heavily bandaged — a stark white reminder of the finger she no longer possessed. But her face wasn’t twisted in pain. It was arranged into a mask of calculated tragedy.

“I just wanted to talk to her,” Charla whimpered, dabbing at perfectly dry eyes with a tissue. “I told her I forgave her for everything, and then she just... snapped.”

Three lawyers in Italian suits scribbled furiously on yellow legal pads. These were Preston Holloway’s personal attack dogs — men who billed more per hour than most people earned in a month.

“She pushed you?” the lead lawyer, a shark named Sterling, asked. “Explicitly?”

“She grabbed me,” Charla said, her voice trembling with practiced precision. “She said, ‘If I can’t have him, no one can.’ And then she shoved me. I tried to hold on to the railing, but she struck my hands.”

Gregg English stood by the window, nodding grimly. “We have witnesses who saw her aggressive behavior earlier that night. She’s unstable.”

“And the phone?” Sterling asked. “The defendant claims she has a recording.”

Gregg made a dismissive gesture. “Her phone went missing during the commotion at the hospital.”

“Perfect,” Sterling said. A predatory smile settled on his face as he closed his notebook. “If the phone was never recovered by police at the scene, the chain of custody is completely broken. Any audio she attempts to present can be dismissed as doctored or AI-generated. She has no legally admissible evidence.”

Charla exhaled a breath she hadn’t realized she was holding. She was safe. The recording was legally useless.

“Make sure she rots,” Victoria hissed from the corner, clutching her pearls. “I want her in federal prison. I want her children in foster care.”

Outside the room, Hilliard stood beside the observation window. The blinds were partially open. He watched the performance with a face made of stone.

Gavin stood behind him. “Sir, are you going to intervene? They’re fabricating a narrative that could put Ms. Morton away for twenty years.”

“No,” Hilliard said. His voice was cold and detached. “Let them build their tower.”

“Sir?”

“If I stop them now, they’ll just try again in the shadows,” Hilliard said, turning from the window. “Let them put it all on record. Let them lie under oath. Let them believe they’ve won.”

“And then?”

“And then,” Hilliard said, a dark glint moving through his eyes, “we let gravity do the rest.”

Across the city, in the dim light of the Brooklyn safe house, the atmosphere was electric.

Chapter 233:

Cailin sat at the metal table, the legal summons spread before her like a map of enemy territory. Ashley paced back and forth, swearing in Spanish.

“Fifty million dollars?” Ashley said. “Attempted murder? These people are delusional!”

“They’re not delusional,” Cailin said, her voice level. She was wearing a hoodie borrowed from Vance, her injured arm resting in a fresh sling. “They’re confident. They think they destroyed the only leverage I had.”

“The phone,” Ashley said, stopping mid-stride. “Kegan’s people retrieved it from the hospital room, but it was smashed in the scuffle. It’s dead.”

“Charla’s lawyers will argue the chain of custody is broken regardless,” Cailin said. She reached into her pocket and produced a small, glittering diamond earring. “They think destroying the hardware destroys the data. They think the phone was the only microphone.”

She set the earring on the table. “Kegan gave me this right before the gala. Military-grade satellite uplink.”

She tapped the earring, and a nearby laptop chimed. Ashley leaned in as Cailin typed a quick command.

A waveform appeared on the screen. File name: Ferris_Wheel_Confession_Backup_01.mp3.

“Live-streamed audio, encrypted and bounced through three continents before landing on a secure server in Zurich,” Cailin said. A small, vicious smile touched her lips. “They think they’re safe because they lost a piece of plastic and glass.”

Ashley let out a laugh of pure relief. “This is going to be devastating. When do we leak it? TMZ? The Times?”

“No,” Cailin said, closing the laptop. “The media will spin it. ‘Doctored audio. Fake news.’ The English family owns half the editors in this city, and with the police bought and paid for, handing this over directly would be like feeding it into a shredder. We have to make it undeniable.”

“Then what do we do?”

“We wait,” Cailin said. “Charla wants a show? I’ll give her one. She’s demanding a public apology at the hospital tomorrow. She’s invited the press.”

“You’re going to go?”

“I’m going to walk straight into her trap,” Cailin said, standing. “And blow it up from the inside.”

The heavy steel door of the safe house groaned open. Vance walked in, looking conspicuously out of place in his designer suit amidst the server racks and exposed brick.

“Knock knock,” he said. “Grandpa wants a word.”

Cailin went still. “Amerigo?”

“The old lion himself,” Vance confirmed. “He’s at the main estate. Says he can make the lawsuit disappear. But he wants to see you. Alone.”

"It's a trap," Ashley said immediately.

"Probably," Cailin said. She reached for her coat. "But Amerigo is the only person Preston listens to. If I can neutralize the grandfather, I neutralize the money behind the lawsuit."

"He'll try to eat you alive," Vance warned.

Cailin slipped her hand into the hidden pocket of her coat, her fingers finding the cold weight of the earring.

"Let him try," she said. "I'm not the same girl he scared off five years ago."

The Holloway Estate loomed against the night sky like a gothic nightmare, rain lashing the stone gargoyles perched along the eaves.

Chapter 234:

Cailin walked into the dining hall alone. Her heels struck the marble floor in sharp, measured clicks that echoed through the cavernous silence. She wore a black trench coat belted tightly at the waist, her posture rigid.

Five years ago, she would have been trembling. She would have been anxious about using the wrong fork.

Tonight, she simply wanted to get this over with.

Amerigo Holloway sat at the head of the table — a king enthroned in mahogany. Preston sat to his right, looking like a bloated toad. Hilliard sat opposite him, his face unreadable.

“You’re late,” Amerigo rasped, without looking up from his soup.

“I didn’t realize I was on a schedule,” Cailin said. She didn’t sit. She stood at the foot of the table with both hands gripping the back of a chair. “You wanted to see me.”

“Sit,” Amerigo commanded, pointing a bony finger at the empty chair beside Hilliard.

Cailin hesitated, then pulled the chair out and sat, keeping a deliberate foot of distance between herself and Hilliard. She didn’t look at him.

“I hear you’re in something of a bind,” Amerigo said, dabbing his mouth with a linen napkin. “Attempted murder. Nasty business.”

“It’s a lie,” Cailin said.

“Truth doesn’t matter in court, girl. Perception matters,” Preston sneered. “And right now, you look like a scorned ex-wife who tried to kill the new fiancée.”

“I can make it go away,” Amerigo cut in. His eyes — sharp beneath the cloud of age — locked onto hers. “Preston will pull the funding. The lawsuit will be dropped. Charla will be silenced.”

“What’s the price?” Cailin asked. She knew there was always a price.

Amerigo leaned forward. The candlelight carved deep shadows into his face. “The children,” he said. “All three of them.”

Cailin felt her heart stop.

“Give us the children,” he said, his voice unhurried and calm. “Sign over full custody to Hilliard. We will raise them. The Holloway name, the legacy — it belongs to them. And they belong here.”

Hilliard’s hand came down hard on the table. “Grandfather! That was not the arrangement!”

“Quiet, boy,” Amerigo said sharply. He turned back to Cailin. “You leave New York. You go back to whatever corner of Europe you’ve been hiding in. We raise the girl and her brothers as Holloways. They receive the trust funds, the education, the legacy. You receive your freedom.”

Cailin looked at the old man. She looked at Preston, who was smirking. She looked at Hilliard, who appeared furious and paralyzed in equal measure.

A cold, white-hot rage bloomed slowly in her chest.

"You think," Cailin said, her voice trembling with suppressed fury, "that you can buy my children?"

"They are Holloways," Amerigo said. "They belong here."

"They belong with their mother!" Cailin rose to her feet, her chair shrieking against the marble floor. "Five years ago, you treated me like a broodmare. Now you want the foals? You make me sick."

"Sit down, Cailin," Hilliard said, reaching for her arm. "He's testing you. Don't take the bait."

"Don't touch me!" She slapped his hand away. "You're all the same. You think people are assets. You think blood is a currency."

Chapter 235:

She turned back to Amerigo. "Tell Charla I'll see her in court. I'd rather rot in a cell than let you poison my children with your toxic legacy."

She turned on her heel and marched toward the massive double doors.

"You're making a mistake!" Preston shouted after her. "We will destroy you!"

Amerigo didn't shout. He watched her go, a small, slow smile forming at the corner of his mouth.

"She has fire," the old man murmured. "Good. The children will need that fire."

Hilliard didn't wait. He shoved his chair back and went after her.

He caught her in the driveway just as she reached for the door of Vance's car. The rain was coming down hard now, drenching them both in seconds.

"Cailin, wait!"

She spun to face him, water running from her hair. "What? Did you forget to ask for my kidneys too?"

"He didn't mean it," Hilliard called over the rain. "He wanted to see if you'd sell them out. If you'd said yes, he would have despised you."

"I don't care what he thinks!" Cailin shouted back. "I care that you sat there. You brought me into that house knowing exactly what they are!"

"I'm trying to help you!" Hilliard stepped closer, closing the distance between them. "I'm on your side. I'm fighting them from the inside."

"Then fight better!" She shoved his chest hard with her good hand. "Because from where I'm standing, it looks like you're just holding the door open while they sharpen the knives."

"I won't let them take Elia," Hilliard said, gripping her shoulders. "Or the boys. I swear it to you."

"I don't need your promises, Hilliard. I need you to stay out of my way."

She wrenched herself free and dropped into the car. "Drive," she told Vance.

Hilliard stood in the rain and watched the taillights bleed into the darkness. He dragged a hand down his soaked face.

She was right. He couldn't just hold the door anymore.

He had to tear the house down.

The morning sun filtered through the grimy windows of the safe house, catching dust motes suspended in the still air.

A sharp knock on the metal door shattered the quiet.

Ashley checked the monitor. "Process server."

Cailin opened the door. A bored-looking man pressed a thick stack of papers into her hand.

"You've been served," he mumbled, and walked away.

Cailin closed the door and flipped through the document. It was heavier than a brick.

Civil Suit: English v. Morton. Damages sought: \$50,000,000.

"Fifty million?" Ashley choked on her coffee. "Does she think you're Elon Musk?"

Cailin's burner phone buzzed. Unknown number.

She answered and put it on speaker.

“Did you get my invitation?” Charla’s voice dripped with saccharine sweetness.

“I got your fan fiction,” Cailin said, tossing the lawsuit onto the table. “Fifty million. You’re ambitious for someone with nine fingers.”

A sharp intake of breath on the other end.

Chapter 236:

“You think you’re funny,” Charla hissed. “Tomorrow. Two PM. The hospital lobby. If you come and apologize — on your knees, in front of the cameras — I might convince my father to drop the criminal charges. You’ll just pay the money.”

“And if I don’t?”

“Then you go to prison,” Charla said, her voice turning cheerful. “And I’ll make sure Elia gets a very nice room at the English estate. I’ve always wanted a daughter.”

Cailin’s grip tightened on the phone until the plastic creaked.

“You stay away from her,” Cailin said, her voice dropping to a lethal whisper.

“See you at two, Cali. Wear something humble.”

The line went dead.

Cailin stared at the phone for a moment.

“She wants a show,” she said. “She wants to break me publicly so that even if I win in court later, my reputation is already rubble.”

“She’s digging her own grave,” Ashley said, holding up a small black USB drive. “The audio is cleaned up — crystal clear. I also pulled the metadata to prove the timestamp.”

“Good.”

Cailin crossed to her suitcase and lifted out a garment bag.

“What are you wearing?” Ashley asked. “Something humble?”

Cailin unzipped the bag.

Inside was a suit. Not black. Not gray.

Red. Blood red. Sharp lapels, a tailored waist. A power suit — a war suit. Ashley had managed to retrieve one of her emergency go-bags from the apartment during the chaos, and this had been waiting in it, patient as a held breath, for exactly this moment.

“I’m not going there to apologize,” Cailin said. “I’m going there to end her.”

In his office at Holloway Tower, Hilliard stared at the press release Charla had distributed.

Victim of Brutal Attack to Speak Out.

“She’s turning this into a circus,” Gavin said from beside the desk. “CNN is sending a crew. It’s going to be live.”

“Let it be live,” Hilliard said. He stood and moved to the window. “The brighter the light, the darker the shadow.”

“Sir, if Cailin goes there — it’s a trap. They’ll ambush her.”

“Cailin knows it’s a trap,” Hilliard said. He thought of the fire in her eyes last night in the rain. “She’s counting on it.”

“Are you going?”

“Yes.” He reached for his jacket. “I need to be there when the walls come down.”

“To catch Charla?”

“No,” Hilliard said. “To make sure no one stops Cailin from swinging the sledgehammer.”

That night, Cailin couldn’t sleep.

She sat on the edge of the cot and video-called the kids. They were safe at Kegan’s secure location.

“Mommy, are you okay?” Elia asked, pressing her face so close to the screen that her nose went blurry.

“I’m fine, baby. Just work stuff.”

“We’re helping!” Aron shouted from somewhere in the background. “We hacked the hospital’s digital signage system. We have root access!”

“Aron!” Cailin said sharply — though a smile pulled at the corner of her mouth despite herself. “What did I say about federal crimes?”

“It’s not a crime if they deserve it,” Davy piped up.

Cailin closed her eyes briefly. They were definitely Hilliard’s children.

Chapter 237:

“Just be ready,” she said, looking back at the screen. “Tomorrow, Mommy is going to fight the monsters. And I might need some magic.”

“We got you, Mom,” Aron said.

Cailin ended the call. She held the dark screen for a moment, her thumb resting where Elia’s face had been.

Tomorrow. It ended tomorrow.

The lobby of Mount Sinai Hospital had been transformed into a grotesque theater.

A podium stood in front of the donor wall — the Holloway Wing donor wall, by a cruel twist of irony. Dozens of reporters jostled for position, their cameras raised like weapons.

Charla sat in a wheelchair at center stage, dressed in a pale, oversized cardigan designed to make her look frail and small. Her bandaged hand rested prominently across her lap. Victoria stood behind her, dabbing at her eyes. Gregg occupied one side, his expression arranged into a portrait of solemn grief.

Hilliard sat in the front row, legs crossed, face impassive. He ignored the reporters shouting at him from every direction.

“Mr. Holloway! Do you stand by your fiancée?”

“Is it true the attacker is your ex-wife?”

Hilliard checked his watch. 1:00 PM.

At exactly 2:00 PM, the double doors at the back of the lobby swung open.

The room went silent.

Cailin walked in.

She was not wearing the humble, gray penitent's clothes Charla had clearly anticipated. She was wearing the red suit. It blazed against the sterile white of the hospital like a lit match in a dark room. Her hair was pulled back severely, her makeup precise and sharp, expertly concealing the shadows beneath her eyes. She didn't look like a defendant. She looked like a CEO arriving to announce a hostile takeover.

Ashley followed one step behind, carrying a laptop case. Two of Kegan's lawyers flanked them on either side.

"She's here!" a reporter shouted. Flashbulbs erupted across the lobby like a lightning storm.

Charla's eyes narrowed. She leaned into the microphone.

"Thank you for coming," Charla said, her voice soft and breathy. "I invited Ms. Morton here because I believe in forgiveness. Even after she tried to kill me."

Victoria let out a loud, heaving sob. "My poor baby!"

Cailin walked directly to the podium. She winced almost imperceptibly as her injured shoulder caught the edge of a reporter — a sharp reminder that the only thing holding her together right now was painkillers and sheer will. She didn't wait for permission. She stepped up beside Charla, towering over the wheelchair.

“You invited me here for an apology,” Cailin said, her voice steady and clear in the microphone. “But I think there’s been a misunderstanding.”

“You pushed me!” Charla cried, jabbing her good hand toward Cailin. “Admit it! You were jealous!”

“Jealous?” Cailin looked down at her. “Of what, exactly? A fake engagement ring and a stolen life?”

“You’re a monster!” Victoria lunged forward. “You hurt my daughter!”

One of Kegan’s security guards stepped smoothly in front of her, blocking her path without a word.

Chapter 238:

“I’m here to set the record straight,” Cailin said, turning back to the cameras. “Charla claims I pushed her off the Ferris wheel. She claims I’m violent.”

“We have witnesses!” Gregg shouted from the side. “My staff saw everything!”

“Your staff is on your payroll,” Cailin replied. She glanced at Ashley.

Ashley opened the laptop and connected it to the AV system — one Aron had conveniently left unlocked.

"Preston's lawyers will object to this!" Gregg shouted. "This is not a courtroom!"

"No," Hilliard said from the front row. His voice cut cleanly through the noise. "It's a press conference. You wanted the public to know the truth, Gregg. Let her speak."

Charla looked at Hilliard, naked betrayal crossing her face. "Hilliard?"

"Go ahead, Cailin," Hilliard said.

Cailin reached into her pocket and produced a small, sleek playback controller.

"You wanted evidence," she said, looking directly at Charla. "You had a phone destroyed because you believed it was the only copy."

Charla's face went slack.

"But you forgot about the cloud," Cailin said.

She raised the controller and aimed it at the massive digital donor screen behind them.

“Let’s watch a movie.”

Cailin’s thumb hovered over the button.

“Wait!” Charla shrieked.

The panic in her voice was real this time. She grabbed for the microphone, but it was bolted to the podium.

“She’s faking it!” Charla shouted at the reporters. “Whatever she shows you, it’s AI — it’s a deepfake! My father told me she has hacker friends!”

Cailin paused. She lowered the controller slightly.

“You’re so sure it’s fake?” she asked.

A hush fell over the lobby.

“Then let’s make a bet.”

“What?” Charla blinked.

“A wager,” Cailin said, her voice carrying effortlessly through the room. “Right here. In front of the world. If the evidence I show is fake — doctored in any way — I will kneel down right now. I will kiss your feet. And I will plead guilty to every charge.”

The reporters drew a collective breath. Cameras swung and tightened on Cailin’s face.

“But,” Cailin stepped closer to the wheelchair, “if it’s real — if it proves you’re a liar — then you kneel.”

Charla stammered.

“You kneel,” Cailin repeated, her voice hard as diamond, “and you admit to everyone in this room exactly what you are.”

Charla looked at Gregg. Gregg looked terrified. She looked at Hilliard. Hilliard was watching her with undisguised contempt.

She had no choice. If she refused, she looked guilty.

“Fine,” Charla snapped. “You’re bluffing. I take the bet. Prepare your knees.”

Cailin smiled. It wasn't a kind smile.

"As you wish."

She pressed the button.

The screen didn't show the Ferris wheel. Not yet.

Instead, a grainy black-and-white video feed appeared. The timestamp placed it three days ago. The location tag read: Mount Sinai — East Wing Corridor.

It was the hallway outside Elia's room.

In the footage, a woman in a hospital gown — Charla — was backing a small child into a corner. The child was Elia.

Something glinted in Charla's hand. A fruit knife.

The audio crackled to life. Ashley had boosted the gain.

Chapter 239:

"I'm going to carve that little face up." Charla's voice hissed out of the speakers and filled the lobby. "I'm going to make you ugly so your daddy won't look at you anymore."

Elia's terrified sobbing followed. "No! Mommy!"

The room erupted.

"Oh my god," a reporter whispered.

"She has a knife on a kid!" another shouted.

Charla's face had gone the color of chalk. "No! That's not me! That's — that's CGI!"

"Is it?" Cailin asked. "Because the metadata matches the hospital's own security logs. That file just emailed itself to every news outlet in this room."

Hilliard rose to his feet. His hands were balled into fists at his sides. Seeing it again — hearing those words directed at his daughter — made his blood run hot and cold at once. He took a step toward the stage.

"You threatened my daughter," he said. His voice was dangerously quiet.

"It's fake!" Charla screamed, tears streaming down her face. "Hilliard, she fabricated all of this!"

"And this?" Cailin asked. "Is this fabricated too?"

She pressed the button again.

The screen flickered.

This time, there was no video. Only audio. But the waveform danced across the display, jagged and violent.

The sound of wind. The creak of metal.

"Here we are." Charla's voice. Clear. Undeniable. "Top of the world."

"Charla, stop." Cailin's voice. Frightened.

“There are no cameras up here,” Charla said. The malice in her tone was quiet and chilling. “If I jump... Hilliard will blame you. He’ll hate you forever.”

“Don’t do this!”

“Goodbye, Cailin. Enjoy prison.”

Then: the sound of a struggle. Fabric tearing. A scream that faded into the wind.

The audio cut out.

Silence. Absolute, suffocating silence.

Gregg English lunged for the AV system’s power cord. “Turn it off! It’s illegal! Wiretapping!”

Vance Holloway stepped out from the side of the stage and hip-checked Gregg squarely into a potted plant. “Leave it, Gregg. The show isn’t over.”

Cailin lowered the controller. She looked out at the reporters. They were typing furiously, cameras rolling, streaming the revelation live.

“She jumped,” Cailin said simply. “She framed me. Just as she framed me five years ago.”

Charla sat rigid in her wheelchair, her mouth opening and closing. “It’s fake! You can’t prove that was me — it’s just audio!”

“I can prove it,” Hilliard said from the front row.

He stood, turning to face the press. He produced a remote from his jacket pocket and gave a single nod to Vance.

The screen behind Cailin flickered again.

Video this time. Enhanced, high-contrast security footage captured from the park’s elevated camera. The reporters gasped as it played — the image unmistakably clear. It showed Charla dangling from the gondola. It showed Cailin straining, pulling her upward, fighting to save her. And then it showed Charla deliberately kicking away from the car and leaping onto the platform below.

“My security team recovered and enhanced the footage,” Hilliard announced, his gaze locked on Charla with cold, absolute disgust. “She wasn’t pushed. She jumped. And she lied to the police to frame an innocent woman.”

Chapter 240:

Charla sat motionless, her mouth still working soundlessly. There was no defense left. Her own voice and the footage had condemned her.

Hilliard climbed the steps to the stage.

He didn't look at Cailin. He walked directly to Charla.

"Hilliard." Charla extended her good hand toward him, her voice dropping to a plea. "Baby... it's a trick..."

Hilliard pushed her hand aside.

He lifted the microphone from the stand.

"The engagement is over," he said. His voice carried through every corner of the lobby. "Holloway Group is severing all ties with English Holdings, effective immediately." He looked down at Charla. "And we are filing charges for fraud, extortion, and the attempted murder of a child."

Victoria let out a shriek and crumpled, collapsing into the arms of a startled nurse.

Gregg was already shouting into his phone, frantically trying to move assets before they could be frozen.

Cailin watched the chaos unfold around her. She felt a strange, hollow numbness settle in her chest. She had won. The truth was out, in front of every camera in the city.

But it didn't restore the five years. It didn't heal her shoulder. It didn't undo what had been done.

She walked over to Charla.

Charla was trembling, her eyes fixed on the floor. Her world had collapsed in under three minutes.

"We had a bet," Cailin said quietly.

Charla looked up. Her eyes were full of hatred and fear in equal measure.

"Kneel," Cailin said.

"I won't," Charla whispered. "You can't make me."

"You made a promise," Cailin said. "In front of all of them." She gestured toward the cameras.

"I don't care!" Charla hissed. "I am not kneeling to a whore!"

At that moment, one of the English family lawyers rushed onto the stage, his face pale and slick with sweat. He bent down and whispered frantically into Charla's ear.

"Kneel, you idiot," he hissed, his voice barely controlled. "This is your only play. The DA is on the phone. With that audio, they'll deny bail. This is your one chance to perform remorse — kneel, or you're sleeping at Rikers tonight."

Cailin leaned in close, dropping her voice so only Charla could hear. "If you don't kneel, I will release the other recording. The one from the boathouse. The one where you tell the kidnapper to 'dispose of the package.'"

Charla went rigid.

"I don't actually have that video," Cailin admitted, the bluff delivered without a flicker. "But do you want to take that risk? Kidnapping carries a life sentence, Charla. Attempted murder is only twenty years. Show remorse now — maybe the judge will be lenient."

Charla looked at the cameras. She looked at Hilliard's cold back turned toward her. She looked at her father, who was already being restrained by security for assaulting Vance.

She was alone.

Slowly, with visible effort, Charla slid out of the wheelchair.

Her knees struck the hard tile with a dull crack. A thousand camera shutters fired at once — the sound like a swarm of locusts descending.

“I’m sorry,” Charla choked out, staring at Cailin’s red shoes.

“Louder,” Cailin said.