

## **Second chance 241**

Chapter 241:

"I'm sorry!" Charla screamed, sobbing. "I lied! I did it! I'm sorry!"

Cailin looked down at the woman who had dismantled her life. She had expected to feel triumph. She had expected to feel something close to joy.

Instead, she just felt tired.

"Your apology is worthless," Cailin said. "But I accept your defeat."

She turned and walked away. She didn't look back at the sobbing woman on the floor. She didn't look at the cameras. She walked straight for the exit.

Hilliard caught up to her in the hallway. "Cailin!"

She kept walking. "Not now, Hilliard."

He reached for her arm. "You did it. You destroyed them."

“We destroyed them,” Cailin corrected, pulling free. “Ashley and the kids did the work. You just provided the venue.”

“Cailin, please.” Hilliard stepped in front of her. “Come back to the penthouse. Let’s talk about the kids. Let me meet them properly.”

“No,” Cailin said.

“Why?” His voice cracked with desperation. “Charla is gone. The lawsuit is dead. We can be a family.”

“Because you still don’t understand,” Cailin said, stopping to look at him directly. “You think removing Charla fixes the rot? Your father is still trying to sue me. Your grandfather tried to buy my children last night. The problem isn’t just Charla, Hilliard. It’s the entire ecosystem you live in.”

She pushed through the exit doors. The cool air hit her face.

“I’m going to my kids,” she said. “Don’t follow me.”

Hilliard stood in the empty corridor and watched her climb into Ashley’s van. He watched until it turned the corner and disappeared.

The victory turned to ash in his mouth. He had won the battle. He was losing the war.

He pulled out his phone.

“Gavin,” he said. “Initiate the takeover of English Holdings. Burn it to the ground. And get my lawyers on the phone — I’m going to war with my own family.”

The English mansion was a scene of devastation.

Servants were making off with the silver. Movers were hauling paintings out through the front door. The IRS had frozen every account within an hour of the press conference.

Charla sat in the middle of the living room floor, drinking straight from a bottle of vodka. Her bandage was unraveling at the wrist.

In the study, Gregg screamed into the phone at a lawyer who had evidently just dropped him as a client.

“It’s over,” Victoria wailed from the sofa. “We’re destitute. We’ll have to move to — to Connecticut!”

Charla didn’t hear them. She was replaying the last hour on a loop behind her eyes. The humiliation. The kneeling. Cailin’s red shoes. The lobby full of cameras.

And the hack. The hospital AV system. How had Cailin pulled that off?

Charla pulled a backup phone from her pocket. She had spent her last ten thousand dollars bribing a sleazy IT contractor at Mount Sinai to trace the source of the breach. His report had just arrived.

Chapter 242:

She read the text. The hack originated from a localized ghost network. The IP signatures bounce, but the device profiles are logged. Three distinct user profiles. Two are heavily modified gaming tablets. One is a child's smartwatch, registered under the Volkov alias.

Charla's eyes went wide.

She thought of the three plates she had noticed on the table in Brooklyn. She thought of the young boy's voice she had heard on Hilliard's phone that night in the penthouse. She thought of Elia's green eyes.

"Three," Charla whispered.

The pieces slammed together with horrible clarity. Cailin hadn't hidden one child. She had hidden three.

And her new weapon wasn't the secret itself. It was the context surrounding it. Not merely that the children existed — but that Cailin was turning them into her own private criminal enterprise, right under Hilliard's nose.

“I can’t win,” Charla said to the empty room. “But I can make sure they all lose.”

She picked up the backup phone. She didn’t text Hilliard — he wouldn’t read it. She pulled up Amerigo Holloway’s private number.

Subject: Your True Legacy

Message: You know Hilliard has three children. But did he tell you that two of them are prodigy hackers who just committed multiple federal crimes to aid their mother? Hilliard knows. He’s allowing Cailin to turn your heirs into her personal army of cyber-criminals — and he’s been hiding them from you.

Sent.

Charla lay back on the floor and laughed until the laughter turned to tears. She had just lit the fuse on a nuclear bomb.

Amerigo Holloway sat in his library, the text message glowing on the screen in his hand.

He didn’t look surprised. He looked vindicated.

He had known about the triplets for weeks, ever since Hilliard's reckless confession at dinner. But this — this was the ammunition he had been waiting for. He had suspected the children were gifted, but proof of Cailin actively deploying them in illegal activity gave him the legal leverage he needed.

He pressed a button on his desk. "Bring me the file on Cailin Morton's network."

Five minutes later, his head of security placed a folder in front of him.

"A property owned by Kegan, as the text suggests," the man said. "We've been monitoring it. Three children are present. The boys — Aron and Davy — show exceptional digital aptitude."

Amerigo studied the surveillance photographs. The boys looked like Hilliard. The girl had the chin.

"Hackers," Amerigo whispered. "My blood. And she's been using them."

He picked up the phone. "Get Hilliard here. Now."

Hilliard walked into the library an hour later, looking hollowed out.

"I'm busy, Grandfather. I'm liquidating English Holdings."

“Forget the English family,” Amerigo said. He pushed the photographs across the desk.

Hilliard looked down. His breath caught. They were surveillance photos of the children at Kegan’s chalet.

“Charla’s little parting gift,” Amerigo said. “She confirmed what we already suspected — the location. The boys’ particular talents.”

“They are safe,” Hilliard said.

“Safe?” Amerigo’s cane struck the floor with a crack. “They’re being raised by a fugitive to serve as her soldiers! Three Holloway heirs living like criminals in hiding — and you knew! You knew where they were, and you left them there!”

Chapter 243:

“Because of us!” Hilliard snapped. “Because she knew we would do exactly this! Look at yourself. You don’t see grandchildren — you see assets!”

“I see the future of this company!” Amerigo rose to his feet, his whole frame shaking. “You have failed, Hilliard. You let that woman run circles around you. You let her keep what belongs to this family.”

“They are not yours,” Hilliard said, his voice dropping cold. “They are hers. And mine.”

“Then prove it,” Amerigo hissed. “Bring them here by tonight. Now that the world knows they exist, now that I have their location, the game is finished. Bring them home — or I will file for emergency custody. I will have Swiss authorities remove those children from whatever hole she’s hiding them in. I will have her declared an unfit mother. I will bury her.”

Hilliard looked at his grandfather and saw the ruthlessness that had always run in their blood — the same ruthlessness he recognized in himself.

“If you touch them,” Hilliard said quietly, “I will burn this company to the ground.”

“Try it,” Amerigo said. “You have one hour to obtain a court order grounding that jet and diverting it here. One hour — or my people in Geneva will handle it for me.”

Hilliard turned and ran.

He was dialing Cailin before he reached the car.

“Pick up, pick up,” he muttered.

She answered on the first ring. She sounded out of breath.

“What?”

“He knows,” Hilliard said. “Charla told him. He knows where the kids are, and he’s sending his people there now. He’s filing for custody.”

Silence.

“Cailin?”

“I’m leaving,” she said. Her voice was calm — terrifyingly calm. “I’m at the airstrip. Kegan’s jet is fueling.”

“You can’t run,” Hilliard said, starting the Aston Martin. “You’ll be flying straight into his trap. He has Interpol contacts.”

“Let him try.”

“Cailin, if you run, you lose. Stay and fight.”

“I’m done fighting your monsters,” she said. “Goodbye, Hilliard.”

Click.

Hilliard threw the phone onto the passenger seat.

“Gavin!” he barked into the hands-free system. “Get our legal team on the phone with Teterboro’s management. Remind them that Holloway Group holds the debt on their last expansion. I want Kegan Aguirre’s Gulfstream grounded — cite a security breach, a fuel contamination scare, I don’t care. Just do it now.”

“Sir, that’s highly irregular,” Gavin said. “Kegan’s aircraft has diplomatic clearance.”

“Then find a loophole!” Hilliard roared, flooring the accelerator. “I’ll put this car on the runway myself if I have to. Stop that plane.”

He tore onto the highway, threading through traffic at over a hundred miles an hour.

He wasn’t chasing a fugitive. He was chasing his life.

If that jet left the ground, he knew he would never see them again.

The chase was on.

The tires of the Aston Martin screamed as Hilliard drifted onto the private access road for Teterboro Airport. Through the chain-link fence, he could already see the sleek black Gulfstream, its engines whining, beginning to taxi.

“Block the runway!” he yelled to Gavin over comms. “Do not let them take off!”

Chapter 244:

He smashed through the secondary security gate, ignoring the shower of sparks and the screaming alarms, and accelerated diagonally across the tarmac, cutting directly into the jet’s path. He slammed the brakes and threw the car sideways, stopping it squarely in front of the nose gear.

The massive plane shuddered to a halt, engines winding down with an indignant roar.

Hilliard was out of the car before it fully stopped, his heart hammering. The cabin door swung open and the stairs descended.

Cailin stood at the top, her face pale, holding Elia against her chest. Behind her, Kegan stood with the boys, one hand resting on a holstered weapon.

“Move the car, Hilliard!” Cailin shouted over the wind. “You’re trapping us!”

“I’m saving you!” He ran to the bottom of the stairs. “Look up, Cailin — look at the sky!”

She looked up.

Two unmarked black helicopters were circling the airport's perimeter like vultures, slow and deliberate. They didn't belong to Kegan. They didn't belong to Hilliard.

"Amerigo's men," Hilliard said, breathless, pointing upward. "They're waiting for you to breach international airspace so they can intercept under the Hague Convention. If you leave this tarmac, he takes them."

Cailin went rigid, her arms tightening around Elia. She looked at Kegan, who gave a grim nod. The airspace was compromised.

"What do we do?" she whispered.

"We split up," Hilliard said, his voice leaving no room for argument. "Amerigo is tracking my every movement. If we all disappear together, he'll tear the city apart. Kegan — your men need to take Ashley and the children to a ghost facility right now. Run completely dark."

"And me?" Cailin asked, her grip on Elia tightening further.

"You come with me. We go back to the city and make a public appearance. We draw Amerigo's fire. If his eyes are on us, they won't be looking for them. It's the only way to give the children cover."

Cailin stared at his outstretched hand. It was a devil's bargain. But the helicopters above were real.

She looked at Kegan.

"My ground team can move Ashley and the kids through the service tunnels right now," Kegan confirmed. "They'll be untraceable."

Cailin pressed her lips to Elia's forehead, her heart fracturing, and passed her to Ashley, who had just come down the stairs. She dropped to her knees and pulled Aron and Davy into her arms.

"Be brave," she whispered. "Protect your sister. Mommy will be right behind you."

As Ashley and the children disappeared into the shadows with Kegan's guards, Cailin rose and turned to Hilliard, her eyes hard as stone.

"If anything happens to them, I will kill you myself."

"I know," Hilliard said, opening the passenger door for her. "I'm counting on it."

While Hilliard and Cailin raced back toward Manhattan to serve as bait, the air on the top floor of Holloway Group's headquarters was so thin it felt like breathing through gauze.

Amerigo sat at the head of the mahogany boardroom table, spine rigid, the panoramic Manhattan skyline spread behind him like a backdrop for a verdict.

Gregg English burst through the double doors. He looked nothing like the polished tycoon who graced the society pages. His tie was askew, his collar dark with sweat.

Chapter 245:

“Mr. Holloway,” Gregg panted. “There’s been a misunderstanding. The stock price — the account freeze—”

Amerigo didn’t blink. He slid a thin blue folder across the table.

“Sign it,” he said. His voice was like dry leaves dragged across concrete. “English Holdings becomes a subsidiary of Holloway Group. We’re acquiring you at thirty cents on the dollar.”

Gregg stared at the folder. “Thirty cents? That’s robbery.”

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Amerigo tapped his cane against the floor. Thud. Thud.

"I'm not taking it," he said calmly. "I'm salvaging it. Your daughter's performance destroyed your credibility. The banks have already called your loans. Sign the papers — or go to prison for aiding and abetting a felon."

Gregg's hand trembled as he reached for the pen.

"One more thing," Amerigo added. "I want a video."

Gregg looked up. "What video?"

"Charla," Amerigo said. "She records a full public apology to Cailin Morton. She admits everything was a fabrication — every accusation, every tear, every threat."

Gregg's jaw dropped. "That will destroy her. She'll be a pariah."

"Does she have a reputation left to protect?" Amerigo's eyes narrowed. "My great-grandchildren will not have a mother whose name is entangled with the lies of a lunatic. Cailin Morton's name must be cleared. Completely."

He smiled. He was paving the road. Removing obstacles. Ensuring the children came from an untarnished lineage before he moved to claim them.

"Sign. And get the camera rolling."

Gregg signed. A hundred years of English family legacy, surrendered in seconds.

Miles away, in a sterile, windowless room that smelled of fresh paint and ozone, the air was taut.

This was not the Brooklyn safe house. It was a ghost facility — a corporate short-stay apartment Kegan kept near Teterboro for emergencies. They had slipped through the net.

Ashley paced the plush beige carpet, her fingernails pressing into her palms.

“Auntie Ash?”

Elia’s voice was small. Ashley stopped and forced a smile, turning to the sofa where the three of them — Aron, Davy, and Elia — were huddled together under a cashmere blanket.

“I’m here, bug,” Ashley said, crossing over and smoothing Elia’s hair. “Mommy is just keeping the bad guys busy so we can stay safe.”

“The bad man stopped the plane,” Davy muttered, eyes fixed on his tablet. “I saw it in the code.”

“He’s not just a bad man,” Aron corrected, fingers moving steadily across his own device. “He’s a persistent adversary.”

A holographic projection flickered to life in the center of the room. Kegan’s face appeared, blue-tinted and grim.

“The perimeter is secure,” he said, his voice flattened by encryption. “But Amerigo’s men are swarming the transport hubs. Lay low until Cailin and Hilliard finish their play.”

Before Ashley could respond, the television in the corner flashed a breaking news banner.

She grabbed the remote and unmuted it.

Charla’s face filled the screen. She looked hollowed out — her makeup immaculate, her eyes completely dead — reading from a teleprompter in a studio.

“I, Charla English, would like to formally retract my statements regarding Cailin Morton...”

Ashley went still.

Chapter 246:

"I admit that I fabricated the events at the Ferris wheel," Charla continued, her voice mechanical, emptied of all soul. "I admit to the attempted kidnapping. Ms. Morton is innocent of all charges."

"See?" Davy grinned at Ashley. "Mommy won! Hilliard made her do it."

Ashley didn't smile. A chill moved up her spine, slow and deliberate.

"No," she said quietly, shaking her head. "Hilliard wouldn't do it this way. He'd let her rot in a cell."

She watched Charla's blank, humiliated face. This was too clean. Too surgical.

"This is Amerigo," Ashley said, the horror arriving fully formed. "He's clearing the battlefield. Removing the legal obstacles so he can file for custody without a scandal attached to the mother."

"They're coming for the children," Kegan's voice confirmed over the projection, arriving at the same conclusion.

Ashley grabbed her phone, hands shaking, and typed a frantic warning to Cailin.

They were out of time.

The studio lights were blinding, burning against Charla's retinas, making her headache throb in time with her pulse.

Hilliard had summoned Cailin here — an unspoken command delivered through his lawyers. He wanted her to witness this, to watch the final nail driven into Charla's coffin as a twisted form of reassurance. So Cailin stood off to one side, arms folded over her chest, a prisoner in all but name, watching the last moments of Charla's humiliation play out under the studio lights.

Hilliard stood ten feet away. He hadn't looked at her once since they'd entered the building. He was focused entirely on Charla, his expression unreadable — a statue carved from ice.

"And finally," Charla read, her voice fraying, "I sign this affidavit confirming the truth of this statement."

A lawyer placed a document in front of her. Charla's hand shook so badly the pen skittered across the paper. She signed it.

It was done. The English family was ruined. Cailin was legally exonerated.

"Cut," the director called.

The red light on the camera died.

Charla slumped in her chair. She looked small. Defeated.

“Are you happy?” Hilliard asked, stepping forward. He looked at Cailin then, and the ice in his eyes cracked — revealing, just for a moment, a glimpse of the man who had once held her hair back when she was sick. “It’s over, Cailin. The charges are gone. You don’t have to run anymore.”

“It’s not over,” Cailin said, her voice tight. “Your grandfather is just getting started.”

“I can handle Amerigo,” Hilliard said. He reached out as if to touch her arm, then stopped an inch from her skin. “Just — come home. Let me meet them. Properly.”

Charla let out a laugh. It was a wet, jagged sound.

“You really are pathetic, Hilliard,” she whispered.

Hilliard turned to her. “Shut up, Charla. You’ve done enough.”

Charla stood up, swaying slightly. Then she walked toward him — not unsteadily, but with a kind of terrible lucidity that was more frightening than anything else she had shown today.

Chapter 247:

“You think you’re the hero?” she murmured, stepping into his space. She lowered her voice so that only he — and Cailin, standing close enough — could hear. “You think you’re saving a damsel? She’s been playing you for a fool for five years.”

“Get her out of here,” Hilliard said to the security guards.

“The boys?” Charla laughed softly. “Aron and Davy? Triplets, Hilliard. You have three. And you let her hide them from you like a dirty secret.”

“You will not use their names as a weapon,” Hilliard growled, his voice dropping to a low threat as he pushed her back. The shock wasn’t in the information — it was in the venom with which she delivered it, twisting his deepest wound into something aimed directly at Cailin.

“Oh, she already made them one,” Charla said, her eyes glittering. “She’s been hiding them in Europe. She probably laughed about it. Laughed that you were too blind to see what was right in front of you.”

Hilliard turned to Cailin.

The look on his face broke something in her. It wasn’t the flare of a new revelation — it was the devastation of a truth he had been trying to hold at arm’s length, now confirmed and hurled at him by his worst enemy.

“I know,” he said, barely above a whisper. A raw nerve laid bare. “I’ve known. But I need to hear it from you.”

Cailin opened her mouth. Nothing came out. She wanted to lie. She wanted to deny it. But the truth sat in her throat like a stone, choking her.

"Hilliard..." she started.

"Say it." He stepped closer, his presence pressing in on her, his voice cracking under the weight of five years. "Look at me and tell me. Are they mine?"

"Yes," Cailin whispered.

The word hung in the air, heavy and irreversible.

Hilliard closed his eyes. He drew a long, shuddering breath. When he opened them again, the devastation had been replaced by something fierce and absolute.

"We're going to the hospital," he said, taking hold of her wrist. "Now. A paternity test. I want it on paper."

"No!" Cailin pulled against his grip. "You can't just—"

"I can and I will," Hilliard said, his jaw set. "You took five years. You don't get to take another second."

Before he could move her toward the exit, the elevator doors at the end of the hall chimed open.

Six men in dark suits walked out. They weren't Hilliard's security — they were bigger, older, harder.

"Mr. Holloway," the lead man said, with a measured nod. "Mr. Amerigo Holloway sends his regards."

"What is this?" Hilliard demanded, stepping instinctively in front of Cailin.

"A diversion," Cailin said. Her stomach dropped. "He sent you here to keep us busy."

"Mr. Amerigo is currently en route to the designated location near Teterboro," the man said calmly. "He intends to take the children into protective custody."

Cailin screamed. It was raw and animal. She didn't think. She didn't plan.

She drove her heel down hard onto Hilliard's foot. He grunted, his grip loosening just enough. She wrenched her arm free and bolted for the fire stairs.

"Cailin!" Hilliard shouted.

Chapter 248:

She didn't look back. She threw the heavy door open and took the stairs two at a time, her shoulder burning, her lungs already screaming.

Amerigo was going for the children.

If she didn't get there first, she would never see them again.

Cailin burst out of the studio's back alley and into a waiting black Audi, its engine already running. Kegan had planned for every contingency. The driver — a grim-faced woman with a scar on her cheek — didn't need to be told where to go. She pulled into traffic with calculated aggression, threading through the Midtown gridlock without hesitation.

Meanwhile, Hilliard sprinted for the main exit, only to find his path blocked by the very men Amerigo had sent.

"Sir, your grandfather insisted on ensuring your safety," the lead guard said, his body an impassable wall. "Please wait for your vehicle."

It was a polite cage. Amerigo wasn't just sending a team to the children — he was actively detaining his own grandson.

By the time Hilliard shoved past them and roared the Aston Martin out of the garage, Cailin was already halfway across the Queensboro Bridge. It was never meant to be a fair race.

Cailin's car screamed around the corner onto the quiet industrial street where the temporary safe house was located, tires shrieking, smoke billowing from the wheel wells.

She slammed on the brakes.

The street in front of the building was a parking lot of black SUVs.

"No," she breathed, throwing her door open.

She sprinted toward the entrance. A wall of private security guards blocked it. Behind them, Amerigo Holloway stood on the sidewalk, leaning on his cane, surveying the building with the cool detachment of a man inspecting a property he intended to buy and demolish.

"Let me through!" Cailin screamed, shoving against a guard who didn't move an inch.

"Ms. Morton," Amerigo said, turning slowly. "You're just in time. The medical team is preparing to enter."

"You have no right!" Cailin yelled, her chest heaving. "This is kidnapping!"

"It's stewardship," Amerigo corrected. "I am securing the future of my company."

A screech of tires announced Hilliard's arrival. His Aston Martin skidded to a stop inches from Amerigo's bumper. Hilliard jumped out, his face thunderous.

"Grandfather!" He stormed past the guards, who dared not stop him. "Call them off!"

"You're being emotional, Hilliard," Amerigo said. "I'm doing what you couldn't. I'm verifying the assets."

"They are children!" Hilliard shouted. "Not assets!"

"They are Holloways!" Amerigo's voice rose with surprising force. "And they will be raised as such!"

He raised one hand. "Breach the door."

Two guards advanced on the reinforced steel door with a battering ram.

BAM.

The sound cracked through the street like a gunshot.

Inside the building, an alarm began to wail — high-pitched and piercing. Then came a mechanical hiss.

Water exploded from the ceiling in thick sheets. The fire suppression system.

“Aron,” Cailin whispered. Her boy. He had triggered the sprinklers.

The guards hesitated as water began seeping under the gap at the base of the door.

Chapter 249:

“Now!” Cailin ducked under a guard’s arm and threw herself against the door. “Open up! It’s Mommy!”

The lock clicked. The door swung open.

She stumbled inside. It was raining indoors, water spraying in heavy sheets, soaking everything instantly. The room was chaos.

“Mommy!”

Elia came running from the back, clutching a waterlogged teddy bear. She collided with Cailin’s legs and held on, sobbing.

Cailin dropped to her knees and wrapped both arms around her daughter, shielding her from the deluge. “I’ve got you. I’ve got you.”

Aron and Davy appeared behind Elia, holding their tablets sealed inside plastic bags. They looked frightened and furious in equal measure.

Hilliard walked through the door.

He stopped.

Water dripped from his hair and ran down his face. He looked at the scene before him — Cailin kneeling in the puddle, holding the girl — and then at the two boys standing like sentinels, glaring at him with eyes that were mirror images of his own.

And then Elia turned her face toward him.

The breath left his lungs.

It was one thing to be told. It was entirely another to see it — to feel the pull, primal and undeniable, tugging somewhere beneath his ribs. That was his face. These were his children.

Amerigo stepped into the doorway, flanked by the medical team.

“Secure them,” Amerigo ordered. “Sedate them if necessary.”

“NO!”

The roar didn’t come from Cailin. It came from Hilliard.

He spun around and planted himself firmly between his grandfather and his family, water streaming off him, his expression that of a man who had just discovered what he was willing to die for.

“Get out,” Hilliard snarled.

Amerigo blinked. “Excuse me?”

“I said get out.” Hilliard shoved the nearest doctor back toward the doorway. “Nobody touches them. Nobody takes a sample.” His voice cracked open. “Look at them, old man. Do you really need a test? Look at their faces.”

Amerigo looked past him. He studied the boys. He saw the resemblance — unmistakable, indelible. A slow, satisfied smile settled on his face.

“Fine,” Amerigo said. “We don’t need the test. The blood is obvious.” He gestured toward the children. “Bring them to the car.”

“They are not going anywhere with you,” Hilliard said, his voice dropping to a flat, dangerous calm. “If you take one more step, I will have you arrested for trespassing. I don’t care if you own the police commissioner. I will burn this city to the ground before I let you drag them out of here like prisoners.”

Amerigo looked at his grandson for a long moment. He saw a resolve there he hadn’t encountered in years.

“You’re making a mistake,” Amerigo said.

“Leave,” Hilliard said, pointing to the door. “Now.”

Amerigo scoffed, but he raised one hand and signaled his men to fall back. “I’ll be outside. You have until morning to bring them to the estate — or I return with a court order and every federal marshal on my payroll.”

The door slammed shut.

Silence settled over the room, broken only by the steady drip of water.

Chapter 250:

Cailin shivered, holding Elia against her. She looked up at Hilliard.

He was staring at the children with an expression she had never seen on his face before — something raw and undone, as though he were fighting the urge to drop to his knees.

“Cailin,” he said, his voice rough. “We need to talk.”

“Not here,” Cailin said, rising on unsteady legs. She was shaking — cold, adrenaline-drained, barely holding together. “Not like this.”

“Where, then?”

“The Four Seasons,” Cailin said, the plan Kegan had briefed her on clicking into place. It felt insane. It was also their only viable move. “Tonight. Eight o’clock. We negotiate.”

“Negotiate?” Hilliard looked wounded. “This isn’t a business deal.”

“With your family?” Cailin let out a short, bitter laugh. “Everything is a business deal.”

The safe house smelled of wet concrete and ozone. The sprinklers had finally cut off, leaving behind a dripping, sodden mess.

Hilliard stood in the center of the living room, water pooling around his expensive Italian loafers. He didn't seem to notice. His eyes were fixed on the three small figures standing by the kitchen island.

"I need to get them dried off," Cailin said, breaking the silence. She guided the children toward the stairs. "Go up with Ashley. Change into dry clothes."

"I'm not going anywhere with him here," Aron said, crossing his arms. He was soaking wet, his hair plastered to his forehead, looking so much like a miniature, furious Hilliard that it made Cailin's chest ache.

"I'm not going to hurt you," Hilliard said softly. He took a step forward and crouched to bring himself to eye level. "I'm — I'm Hilliard."

"We know who you are," Davy said, stepping in front of Elia. "You're the sperm donor."

Hilliard flinched. "I suppose that's technically true. But I'd like to be more than that."

"You're the Bad Man," Elia whispered, peeking out from behind Davy's shoulder. "You made Mommy cry."

Hilliard looked at Cailin. Elia's words landed like a blade between his ribs.

"I never wanted to make her cry," he said, looking back at Elia. "I made mistakes. Very big ones."

"Upstairs," Cailin said, her voice firm. "Now."

The children turned and marched reluctantly toward the stairs, their wet sneakers squeaking on the metal treads. Ashley followed, shooting Hilliard a look that could have stripped paint from the walls.

When they were gone, the silence that settled was heavy.

"They hate me," Hilliard murmured, straightening.

"They protect me," Cailin said. "There's a difference."

"Cailin." He dragged a hand through his wet hair. "Why? Why didn't you tell me? Five years — I missed their first steps. Their first words."

"You were busy," Cailin said, her voice flat and cold. "With Charla."

"I never loved her!" The frustration finally broke the surface. "I was a coward. I was doing what was expected of me. But I never stopped looking for you. I never stopped loving you."