

Second chance 271

Chapter 271:

BREAKING: Cailin Morton, ex-wife of Hilliard Holloway, has slipped into a deep coma following complications from surgery. Sources close to the family say she is unresponsive and her prognosis is grim, with doctors stating that survival is highly unlikely.

Up on the twelfth floor, in the VIP suite, Charla English stared at her phone.

A smile spread slowly across her face — slow and venomous.

“She’s gone,” Charla whispered.

She glanced over at Jeraldine, who was peeling an orange by the window.

“Jeraldine, look,” Charla said, letting her voice tremble carefully. “The news...”

Jeraldine took the phone and read the headline. She sighed — a sound that carried more relief than sorrow.

“It’s a tragedy,” Jeraldine said. “But perhaps it’s for the best. That woman was unstable. A danger to herself.”

“What about the child?” Charla asked, her heart hammering beneath the performance. “Did she... wake up?”

“Hilliard has locked down the pediatric ICU,” Jeraldine said. “But the nurses are whispering. They say the hypothermia was severe. Brain damage. She may never speak again.”

Charla let out a breath she hadn’t realized she’d been holding.

Comatose mother. Vegetable child.

She was safe.

The door opened. Hilliard walked in.

Charla threw herself off the bed. “Hilliard! Oh God, I saw the news!” She reached for him.

Hilliard stepped back and looked at her with dead eyes.

“Don’t,” he said. “I smell like death.”

Charla froze. "I... I just want to comfort you."

"You want to comfort me?" He moved to the window. "Go home, Charla. Get some rest. You look terrible."

"I can't leave you," she said.

"I'm staying here tonight," Hilliard said. "I have to say goodbye to her. And the hospital... it feels strange tonight. Heavy." He turned and looked at her directly. "Like ghosts are watching."

Charla shivered.

"Go," Hilliard ordered.

Charla grabbed her purse. She needed a drink. She needed to celebrate.

The moment she left, Hilliard pulled out his phone.

“Gavin,” he said. “Confirm that Charla’s private nurse is in place and feeding her the narrative. Good. She took the bait. Start the short sell — dump every share of English Holdings we have. Trigger the margin calls. I want them bankrupt by morning.”

Down in the ICU, the “comatose” patient sat up.

Cailin winced as her stitches pulled. A wave of nausea rolled through her and she gripped the bedrail, knuckles white.

Hilliard stepped out of the shadows. He had never left the hospital. The press release had been his idea — a trap laid with Cailin’s full consent.

“You sure about this?” he whispered. “You can barely stand.”

“I don’t need to stand to cut,” Cailin said, her voice a dry rasp.

She held out her hand.

Hilliard reached into his pocket, produced a sterile package, tore it open, and dropped a surgical scalpel into her palm.

The steel was cold. Comforting.

“Get me a wheelchair,” Cailin said. “And tell your men to cut the lights.”

“I’m right behind you,” Hilliard said. “I won’t let her touch you.”

“I’m not the one who needs protecting tonight,” Cailin said, testing the blade against her thumb. A thin line of red appeared. “I’m not playing.”

Chapter 272:

Midnight in a hospital is a unique kind of quiet. It is the silence of held breath.

Charla couldn’t sleep.

The VIP suite was luxurious — more hotel than hospital — but Hilliard’s words kept echoing in her head.

Like ghosts are watching.

She sat up and pressed the call button.

“Nurse? Can I get a sleeping pill? And some warm milk.”

No answer.

She pressed it again.

Silence.

Irritated, Charla threw off the duvet and marched to the door. She yanked it open.

The hallway was empty.

The overhead lights flickered. Buzz. Snap. Darkness. Buzz. Snap. Light.

“Hello?” Charla called out.

At the far end of the corridor, a wheelchair sat empty. As she watched, its wheels turned — just an inch. Squeak.

Charla slammed the door and locked it.

“Calm down,” she muttered. “It’s just a draft. Old wiring.”

She turned back toward the bed.

The massive flat-screen TV on the wall turned on.

Static roared at full volume — white noise that sounded disturbingly like screaming.

“What the hell?” Charla grabbed the remote and mashed the power button.

Nothing.

She crossed the room in three steps and yanked the power cord from the wall.

The screen went black.

Charla stood with her back against the wall, chest heaving.

Then the screen flickered.

It wasn't plugged in. It shouldn't have been working.

But an image formed in the static — grainy and black and white. A photo of a car crash. The exact photo she had shown Elia.

Then text appeared, typed out letter by letter in blood-red font.

M O M M Y I S C O L D

"No," Charla whispered, backing away. "Stop it!"

She seized a heavy glass vase of hydrangeas from the nightstand and hurled it at the screen.

CRASH.

Glass shattered. The TV screen cracked. The image vanished.

The room dropped back into silence.

Charla was shaking. Sweat had soaked through her silk pajamas.

"I'm losing it," she said aloud. "Stress. It's just stress."

She needed cold water. That would fix it.

She stumbled into the bathroom and turned on the tap, splashing freezing water onto her burning face. She kept her eyes shut for a long moment, breathing deliberately through her nose.

Then she looked up at the mirror.

She screamed.

Written on the glass in thick, wet crimson — letters that looked exactly like fresh blood — were five words.

I KNOW WHAT YOU DID

The letters were dripping, running in slow rivulets down the mirror and into the sink.

Charla spun around, pressing her back hard against the vanity. The bathroom was empty. The shower curtain was drawn closed.

Wait.

The curtain.

It bulged — just slightly, just once.

Someone was standing in the tub.

Charla couldn't breathe. Her throat sealed shut.

"Who's there?" she managed.

From behind the plastic curtain, a voice answered. It was barely a whisper — raspy and broken, as though it were coming from a crushed throat.

"The rats, Charla. The rats are hungry."

Charla's hand shook so violently she could barely grip the plastic of the shower curtain.

Chapter 273:

She didn't want to open it. She wanted to run. But the bathroom door was behind her and her legs had turned to lead.

She ripped the curtain back.

Empty.

Just the white porcelain tub. A slow drip from the faucet. Plink. Plink.

Charla let out a sob of relief and slid down the wall, collapsing onto the cold tile floor.

"Crazy," she gasped. "I'm going crazy."

She sat there for a moment, gathering herself. Then she stood, kept her eyes deliberately away from the bloody writing on the mirror, and walked back into the bedroom.

The room was freezing. She could see her own breath.

Someone had turned the AC down to its lowest setting.

Charla crawled back into bed and pulled the duvet up to her chin. She squeezed her eyes shut.

Then she felt it.

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Weight.

Something heavy settled onto the foot of the bed.

Charla's eyes flew open.

A figure sat at the end of the mattress. It wore a hospital gown stained with brown, dried blood. Long, dark hair hung down over its face.

Slowly, the figure raised its head.

Cailin.

Her face was pale as chalk. Her lips were blue. Her eyes were dark, hollow pits.

“You...” Charla whispered. “You’re dead. The news said you were in a coma.”

Cailin tilted her head. “I am dead, Charla. You killed me.”

“No!” Charla grabbed a pillow and hurled it.

Cailin didn’t flinch. She simply sat there.

Then she raised her right hand.

The light from the hallway caught the blade of the scalpel. It glinted — sharp and wicked.

“It’s cold in the basement,” Cailin whispered.

She stood. Each movement was a visible, agonizing effort; she braced one hand against the bedpost to keep from collapsing. Yet she moved forward nonetheless, and every step sent a fresh wave of agony tearing through her abdomen.

“You should come see.”

“Stay away from me!” Charla scrambled backward and fell off the bed. She clawed toward the door on her hands and knees, reached the handle, and twisted it.

Locked.

“Help! Hilliard! Help me!” Charla screamed, pounding both fists against the wood.

She spun around.

Cailin was standing directly behind her.

She stepped down onto the hem of Charla’s silk pajama pants, pinning her to the floor. Then she leaned down, her breath coming in ragged, labored gasps, and brought the scalpel to Charla’s cheek. The metal was ice cold against her skin.

“Why?” Cailin asked. “She is five years old.”

"I didn't mean to!" Charla shrieked, tears streaming freely down her face. A dark stain spread across the front of her pants. "I just wanted you gone! You and your bastards! You were ruining everything!"

"So you sent her to freeze?" Cailin pressed the blade harder. A bead of blood surfaced on Charla's cheek.

"Yes! Yes, I told her to go! I wanted her to die so Hilliard would forget you! I'm sorry! Please don't kill me!" Charla was sobbing, a pathetic and broken thing on the floor. "I confess! I did it! I hired the truck! I sent the kid! Just let me go!"

BOOM.

Chapter 274:

The door to the suite exploded inward.

Charla screamed, throwing her arms over her head.

Light from the hallway flooded the room.

Hilliard stood in the doorway. Behind him were two uniformed NYPD officers and a very pale Vance.

Hilliard looked at Charla, cowering on the floor in her own filth.

Then he looked at Cailin — standing over her, scalpel in hand, swaying with exhaustion.

“Got it,” Hilliard said. He held up his phone. “Every word.”

Charla blinked against the harsh light. She looked at Hilliard. Then back at Cailin.

Cailin wasn’t glowing. She wasn’t transparent. She was breathing heavily, sweat beading on her forehead, her hand trembling — not from supernatural power, but from sheer exhaustion.

“She’s... she’s alive?” Charla whispered.

The realization landed like a physical blow. The fear evaporated instantly, replaced by a rage so pure it nearly choked her.

“You bitch!” Charla screamed, scrambling to her feet. “You tricked me! You set me up!”

She lunged at Cailin, fingers curled into claws.

Cailin didn't move. She didn't have the energy to dodge.

But Hilliard was faster.

He stepped between them and caught Charla by the wrists, twisting her arms behind her back with enough force to wring a yelp from her throat.

"Officers," Hilliard said, and shoved Charla toward the police.

The cops moved in, snapping handcuffs onto her wrists.

"You can't do this!" Charla thrashed wildly. "This is entrapment! She threatened me with a knife — look! She has a weapon!"

"I see no weapon," Hilliard said.

Cailin opened her hand. The scalpel dropped to the carpet with a muffled thud. She kicked it under the bed.

"Ms. English," one of the officers said, reciting the Miranda warning in a flat, practiced tone, "you are under arrest for two counts of attempted murder, child endangerment, and solicitation of a felony."

“Hilliard!” Charla screamed as they dragged her toward the door. “I did it for us! That child is a mongrel — she’s not yours! She’s holding you back!”

Hilliard walked over to Cailin and slipped his arm around her waist to steady her. He felt her sag against him.

He looked at Charla one last time.

“That child,” Hilliard said, his voice ringing clean in the silence, “is the only good thing I have ever created. She is my life. And you tried to throw her away like garbage.”

“You’ll regret this!”

Charla’s voice faded down the hallway. The elevator doors closed. The room went quiet.

Cailin pushed Hilliard away.

She stumbled, catching herself against the nightstand.

“Don’t touch me,” she said. Her voice was weak, but the venom behind it was not.

"Cailin, you're bleeding," Hilliard said, nodding toward the fresh stain spreading across her gown. "You tore your stitches again."

"Worth it," she muttered.

"We got her," Hilliard said, stepping closer. "The confession is the final nail. I have enough evidence to put her away for decades. She's gone. She's never coming back."

Chapter 275:

"You think that fixes it?" Cailin looked at him, eyes glassy with pain. "You brought her into our lives. You let her near my daughter. This is on you, Hilliard. All of it."

"I know," he said softly. "I will spend the rest of my life making up for it."

"You don't get the rest of my life," Cailin whispered.

The room spun. The floor rushed up to meet her.

Hilliard caught her before she hit the ground. He lifted her into his arms, ignoring the strain pulling through his own body. She was so light.

“You’re not going anywhere,” Hilliard whispered into her hair as he carried her out of the room. “I’m never letting you out of my sight again.”

Monday morning in the boardroom of Holloway Enterprises was usually a quiet affair.

Not today.

Hilliard sat at the head of the table. He hadn’t slept in forty-eight hours. He was wearing a fresh suit, but his eyes were dark, dangerous tunnels.

On the massive screen at the far end of the room, a video feed showed Gregg English, Charla’s father. He looked disheveled, panic radiating off him in waves.

“Hilliard, please,” Gregg begged. “Charla is sick. She needs help, not prison. We can settle this — I’ll pay whatever you want.”

Hilliard tapped a pen against the table. Click. Click.

“I don’t want your money, Gregg. I have more than God.”

“Then what? What do you want?”

“I want you to feel what it’s like to be helpless,” Hilliard said. He turned to Gavin. “Execute.”

Gavin typed a single command.

“What are you doing?” Gregg shouted from the screen.

“I just dumped forty percent of English Holdings stock onto the market,” Hilliard said. “And I’ve instructed every supplier in the tri-state area that if they do business with you, they don’t do business with me.”

The board members murmured among themselves. This was financial suicide — it would cost Holloway Enterprises millions in broken contracts.

“Sir,” the CFO spoke up. “This will tank our Q3 earnings.”

Hilliard looked at him. “Do I pay you to worry about my earnings, or do I pay you to do what I say?”

The CFO closed his mouth.

“Hilliard! You can’t do this — we’re family friends!” Gregg screamed.

“We were,” Hilliard said. “Then your daughter tried to freeze my child to death.”

He cut the feed. The screen went black.

“Short it,” Hilliard told the room. “Drive it to zero. I want the English name to be synonymous with bankruptcy by Friday.”

Across town, Cailin woke up.

She was no longer in the ICU. She was lying in a bed dressed with Egyptian cotton sheets, sunlight streaming through floor-to-ceiling windows.

She sat up, gasping as her incision pulled sharply.

She looked around. It was the Presidential Suite on the top floor of the hospital.

She tried the door.

Locked.

She pounded on it. “Let me out!”

The door opened. A massive bodyguard filled the frame.

“Mr. Holloway’s orders, ma’am. For your safety. You are not to leave the floor.”

“This isn’t safety,” Cailin said. “This is prison.”

Chapter 276:

The door opened again a moment later. A nurse walked in wearing a surgical mask and carrying a clipboard. The moment the door closed behind her, she pulled the mask down.

It was Ashely.

“How did you get past the guards?” Cailin asked, her shoulders dropping with relief.

“Forged a transfer badge. Kegan’s network is still good for something,” Ashely said, locking the door.

“The boys are safe — they’re at the downtown safe house, ten blocks from here. Kegan has them locked down tight.”

“It’s worse than prison, Cali,” Ashely said, pulling a tablet from her clipboard. “Check the news.”

She held out the screen.

English Holdings Stock Plummets 60% in Opening Bell Bloodbath.

“He’s destroying them,” Ashely said. “He’s burning the whole kingdom down for you.”

Cailin stared at the screen. She felt nothing.

“I don’t care about his kingdom,” Cailin said. “Where is Kegan? Why isn’t he here?”

Ashely grimaced. “Hilliard called in a favor with the Department of Homeland Security — a favor so large it probably cost him a future ambassadorship. Kegan’s plane is grounded in Zurich. He’s on a global No-Fly list pending a trumped-up investigation into international arms dealing. Hilliard has the ports watched too, using satellite surveillance. Kegan is furious — he’s trying to arrange private transport via submarine, but it will take time. He’s stuck.”

Cailin sank onto the bed.

Hilliard had checkmated everyone. He had jailed Charla, bankrupted her family, and exiled Kegan.

He had isolated her completely.

“He thinks he can keep me,” Cailin whispered.

She looked at the window. It was sealed shut.

“Get me a phone,” Cailin said to Ashely. “A burner. One he can’t track.”

“What are you going to do?”

“If I can’t leave,” Cailin said, “I’m going to make him fight a war on a front he can’t control. I’m going to make him wish he never kept me.”

Jeraldine Holloway had never begged for anything in her life.

Today, she was on her knees.

“Hilliard, please,” she sobbed, clutching the edge of his desk. “Victoria is calling me every five minutes. They are losing everything — the house, the yachts, the foundation.”

Hilliard didn't look up from the file he was reading. It was Elia's medical chart. Severe hypothermia. Potential cardiac damage.

"They should have thought of that before they raised a sociopath," Hilliard said.

"Charla is my goddaughter!" Jeraldine cried. "I promised to look after her!"

Hilliard slammed the file shut. The sound cracked through the room like a gunshot.

"And you promised to look after me," he said, his voice dropping to something far more dangerous than anger. "But instead, you brought a viper into my house. You told me Cailin was crazy. You enabled Charla for five years."

He stood and walked around the desk.

"You are banned from the hospital," Hilliard said. "And you are banned from my home."

Jeraldine gasped. "I am your mother! You cannot cut me off!"

"Watch me." Hilliard pressed the intercom. "Security. Escort Mrs. Holloway out. Revoke her clearance."

Two guards entered, looking uncomfortable, and took Jeraldine by the arms.

Chapter 277:

“Hilliard! You will regret this!” she screamed as they steered her toward the door. “You are choosing a whore over your own blood!”

“Cailin is my wife,” Hilliard said to the empty room. “And Elia is my blood. You are just the past.”

In the Manhattan Detention Complex, Charla sat on a metal cot.

Her orange jumpsuit was itchy. Her makeup was gone, revealing the deep shadows beneath her eyes.

Her lawyer sat on the other side of the plexiglass.

“Bail is denied,” he said, clasping his briefcase shut. “The judge saw the video of your... confession.”

“It was under duress!” Charla screamed into the phone receiver. “She had a knife!”

“The police didn’t find a knife, Charla. And Hilliard’s lawyers are burying us in motions. On top of that, your father’s assets are frozen. I can’t represent you if I don’t get paid.”

He stood up.

“Wait — you can’t leave me here!” Charla slammed her palm against the glass.

The lawyer walked away.

Charla slid slowly down the wall until she was sitting on the cold floor. Alone. Truly alone.

She began to laugh. It was a high, jagged sound with nothing behind it.

“Well played, Cailin,” she whispered to the damp concrete.

In the hospital suite, Cailin lay under the covers with the burner phone Ashely had smuggled in.

She was texting Aron.

Cailin: Is the system ready?

Aron: Yes. I'm in. Ashely snuck Davy and me into her off-grid safe house downtown. We're piggybacking off a secure government server. I have access to the hospital's internal network. I can create a localized blackout on your floor — targeting the lights, magnetic locks, and security cameras.

Cailin: Will it affect any medical equipment? The main ICU?

Aron: No. Life support is on a completely separate, hardwired circuit. I've triple-checked. This will only affect your wing. It will look like a localized surge. You'll have 60 seconds before the floor's backup kicks in.

Cailin: Do it tonight. 8 PM.

Aron: Plan B is dangerous, Mom.

Cailin: Staying here is dangerous. We leave tonight.

At 7:55 PM, Hilliard left the hospital. Or rather, he made a show of leaving.

He had a scheduled meeting with the SEC regarding the English Holdings acquisition. He walked through the lobby, climbed into his SUV, and the convoy pulled away. But a block from the hospital, he slipped out and into a black surveillance van parked in an alley with a direct line of sight to the building.

He hated leaving Cailin and Elia. But he had doubled the guard detail — four men at the door, two in the stairwell. And he knew Cailin would try something. He was counting on it.

“Nobody goes in or out,” he told the head of security over a secure channel. “I don’t care if the building is on fire.”

At 8:00 PM, the VIP wing went dark.

Every light on Cailin’s floor died. The hum of the ventilation system fell silent.

For three seconds, there was nothing.

Then the emergency lights flickered on — dim, red, and eerie.

Click.

Chapter 278:

The magnetic lock on Cailin’s door disengaged. Safety protocol: in a power outage, all fire doors unlocked automatically.

Cailin was ready.

She was dressed in a nurse's uniform Ashely had stolen. She pushed the door open and stepped into the corridor.

It was chaos. Nurses were running with flashlights. Bodyguards were shouting into their radios.

"System failure! Check the perimeter!"

Cailin slipped into the crowd, head down.

Ashely was waiting by the service elevator with a laundry cart.

"Get in," Ashely hissed.

Cailin climbed into the canvas bag and buried herself under a pile of dirty sheets that smelled of bleach and illness.

Ashely pushed the cart forward.

"Hold the elevator!" she called out.

They squeezed inside. The ride down felt like an eternity. Cailin held her breath and pressed one hand against her stitches.

Ding. Basement level.

Ashely pushed the cart out to the loading dock. A black ambulance was waiting — no markings.

Cailin scrambled free of the sheets.

“Where is Elia?” she asked.

“Pediatric ICU,” Ashely said. “Aron unlocked the doors. We just have to grab her and go.”

They ran toward the pediatric wing entrance.

And stopped dead.

Standing in front of the double doors was not a hospital security guard. It was a wall of men in tactical gear, assault rifles held across their chests, patches bearing a black hawk logo stitched onto their shoulders.

Shadows. Hilliard's private military contractors.

They weren't affected by the blackout. They had night vision goggles.

"Step back," the lead soldier said, his voice amplified.

Cailin couldn't move. She couldn't fight an army.

Ashely's phone rang. She glanced at the screen, then at Cailin.

"It's him." She put it on speaker.

"Cailin." Hilliard's voice came through — calm and terrifying. "Did you really think I'd leave? I'm watching you from across the street."

"Let me have my daughter," Cailin screamed at the phone.

"Elia's heart is unstable from the rewarming process," Hilliard said. "She's on a continuous cardiac monitor and a precise intravenous drip to manage it. If you move her now, without the proper transport equipment, the shock could send her into cardiac arrest. She will die in that ambulance."

Cailin felt her knees give way.

“You’re lying,” she sobbed.

“Look at the soldiers, Cailin. Do they look like they’re playing? I put them there to protect her — from Charla, and from you making a mistake you cannot undo.”

Cailin turned to Ashely.

“Go,” she whispered. “Get out of here before they arrest you too. Go back to Aron and Davy. Keep them safe.”

“I’m not leaving you,” Ashely protested.

“You have to. If we both get caught, the boys are alone. Run.” Cailin shoved her toward the shadows of the loading dock exit.

Ashely hesitated, tears in her eyes, then melted into the darkness just as Hilliard’s SUV rolled into the garage.

“I hate you,” Cailin whispered into the phone.

"I know," Hilliard said. "But you're going to hate me from the backseat of my car. I'm two minutes away. Don't run."

Chapter 279:

The convoy of black SUVs swept into the underground garage like a storm.

Hilliard jumped out of the lead vehicle before it had fully stopped.

He saw Cailin standing by the ambulance, defeated. She looked small in the oversized scrubs, his jacket still hanging from her shoulders where he had placed it.

He walked up to her.

"Get in the car," he said.

"I'm not going to your house," Cailin said, her voice flat.

"The hospital is compromised," Hilliard said, gesturing toward the darkened building behind them. "The power grid is fried. The backup generators are failing. Elia needs a stable environment."

He pointed to a massive white medical transport truck that had pulled in behind the convoy.

“That is a mobile ICU. Her doctors and her equipment are inside. We are taking her to the Manor. I’ve converted the east wing into a sterile facility.”

Cailin looked at the truck. Then at Hilliard.

He had thought of everything. He had checkmated her again.

“I ride with her,” Cailin said.

“Fine.”

Cailin climbed into the medical truck and sat beside Elia’s stretcher, holding her hand as the vehicle rumbled through the city streets.

Thirty minutes later, the iron gates of Holloway Manor swung open.

Cailin looked out the window. The stone facade loomed above them, gray and imposing, like the face of a mausoleum. Servants stood in a line on the front steps.

Elia was wheeled upstairs to the new medical wing. It was immaculate — state of the art.

“Your room is next door,” Hilliard said, guiding Cailin toward the master suite.

She stopped at the threshold.

It was exactly as she had left it five years ago. Her perfume bottles still sat on the vanity. Her clothes hung in the closet. The air itself held a faint, almost artificial trace of her old perfume, too clean and deliberate.

Above the fireplace hung a massive portrait from their wedding day.

She crossed the room and stood before it.

In the photograph, she was smiling up at him. He was looking at his watch.

“You kept it all,” she said, her voice without color.

“I didn’t keep it,” Hilliard said, his voice low. “I had everything put in storage the day you left. I had it brought back last night — recreated exactly. I wanted to remind you of what this place is. What you belong to.”

Cailin reached up.

She gripped the heavy gold frame with both hands, and with a grunt of effort, wrenched it from the wall.

She let it fall.

CRACK.

The glass shattered across the floor.

She turned to face him.

"I am not your wife," she said. "I am a prisoner. And prisoners try to escape."

Hilliard looked at the broken portrait. He didn't flinch.

"Escape all you want," he said, stepping out of the room. "But you'll always come back for Elia."

He closed the door.

Click.

The lock turned.

Cailin stood alone in the silence of her old life.

Chapter 280:

Sunlight sliced through the gap in the heavy velvet curtains, striking Cailin's eyelids like a physical blow.

She woke with a gasp, her hand flying to her abdomen. The stitches pulled tight — a sharp, searing reminder of the surgery — and the space beside her was empty. The sheets were cold.

For a moment, the last five years vanished. She was twenty-two again, waking up in the master suite of Holloway Manor, waiting for the maid to bring her coffee.

Then reality crashed back in.

This was not her home. It was a cell with 800-thread-count sheets.

Cailin threw off the duvet and stumbled to the double doors. She grabbed the brass handles and pulled.

Locked.

Panic — cold and jagged — clawed at her throat.

“Open the door!” she screamed, pounding her fist against the solid mahogany. Each blow sent a shockwave of agony from her incision, making her grunt and press her forehead against the cool wood. “Let me out! I want to see Elia!”

Silence answered her. Only the hum of the central air conditioning, utterly indifferent to her terror.

She backed away, chest heaving, eyes sweeping the room for something she could use. A lamp. A vase. Anything.

Click.

The lock turned.

Cailin froze, every muscle coiling to spring.

Hilliard walked in.

He looked infuriatingly composed. Dark, tailored trousers. A fitted white t-shirt that clung to his chest, his hair still damp from a shower. He looked like a husband bringing his wife breakfast on a lazy Sunday morning — except for the dead quality behind his eyes.

He was carrying a silver tray. The smell of millet porridge — her favorite, the kind her mother used to make — drifted through the room.

“Elia is still sleeping,” Hilliard said, kicking the door shut behind him. “The doctors say her vitals are stable. Her temperature is back to normal.”

He set the tray on the bedside table. The china clinked softly.

“Eat,” he said. “You lost a lot of blood yesterday.”

He reached for her hand.

Cailin recoiled as if he were a burning brand, scrambling back until her spine met the headboard.

“Don’t touch me,” she said. “I don’t want your food. I want a divorce lawyer.”

Hilliard didn't blink. He picked up the spoon, stirred the steaming porridge, and blew on it gently.

"Eat first," he said, his voice low and stripped of all inflection. "We can talk once you have some strength."

He held the spoon toward her. "Open."

Cailin stared at the spoon. Then at his face. He was treating her like a child — like a pet being nursed back to health so it could be owned again.

She didn't think. She just reacted.

She swung her arm.

Smash.

Her hand connected with the bowl. The porcelain shattered against the wall, but the contents — the thick, scalding porridge — splashed across Hilliard's chest and stomach. Steam curled up from his shirt.

Cailin's hand flew to her mouth. That had to burn. It had to be searing straight through to his skin.