

Second chance 281

Chapter 281:

Hilliard didn't move. He didn't flinch. He didn't even drop the spoon still held loosely in his hand. He simply looked down at the mess on his shirt, then at the shards of porcelain embedded in the Persian rug. Liquid heat dripped from his chest, soaking into the white cotton, turning the skin beneath an angry red.

"You think a bowl of porridge fixes five years?" Cailin's voice cracked. "Get out. Get out of here!"

Hilliard set the spoon down on the tray. He reached for a linen napkin and began wiping the porridge from his chest — methodical, unhurried, terrifyingly calm.

"If you have the energy to throw things," he said, his voice dropping an octave, "it means you're recovering."

He placed a knee on the mattress and leaned over her, trapping her between his body and the headboard. The smell of the porridge mixed with his own scent — sandalwood and something darker.

"Divorce?" Hilliard whispered, his face inches from hers. "Unless I die. Or you die."

The air left the room.

Cailin looked into his grey eyes and saw only the abyss. He meant it.

“Then you better kill me now,” she whispered, lifting her chin. “Because I will never stop trying to leave.”

Hilliard’s hand came up. Cailin flinched, bracing for a blow.

Instead, his thumb brushed her cheekbone — light, almost reverent.

“How could I kill you?” he murmured, his eyes tracking the pulse beating in her neck. “I just got you back.”

He pulled away abruptly and pressed the intercom button on the wall.

“Send housekeeping. And bring another tray.”

“I won’t eat it!” Cailin called after him.

Hilliard paused at the door. The red burn mark on his chest was visible through the wet fabric of his shirt.

“If you don’t eat,” he said, his voice turning to ice, “I will have the doctors insert a feeding tube. You will receive nourishment, Cailin. One way or another.”

Cailin went still. Her stomach turned. He would do it. He was precisely insane enough to do it.

A maid slipped into the room, eyes fixed on the floor, hands trembling as she began collecting the broken china. She didn’t dare look at either of them.

Hilliard paused with his hand on the doorknob.

“Eat the food, Cailin. If the tray is empty when I come back, I’ll take you to see Elia.”

Click.

The lock turned.

Cailin slumped against the pillows. She grabbed a fistful of the duvet and squeezed until her knuckles went white.

She looked at the door. Then at her own stomach.

She had to be smart. Starving herself would not help Elia. She needed strength to fight. She needed allies.

She waited for the second tray.

Hilliard walked into his study and peeled off the ruined t-shirt. The skin on his chest was blistered, mapped with angry red welts.

He didn't care. The pain was grounding. It was better than the numbness that had consumed him for five years.

Vance was lounging on the leather sofa, swirling a glass of amber liquid. He watched Hilliard toss the shirt into the trash.

"Heard the sister-in-law gave you a bath," Vance drawled, taking a sip of his whiskey. "Hot porridge. Classic."

Chapter 282:

Hilliard ignored him. He walked to his desk, pulled a fresh dress shirt from a drawer, and buttoned it up. His fingers were steady.

"How is the English family?" Hilliard asked, sitting and picking up a fountain pen.

“Bleeding out,” Gavin said from the corner, tapping at his tablet with quiet efficiency. “Bankruptcy proceedings started an hour ago. They’re liquidating personal assets — looks like Gregg is trying to scrape together cash for Charla’s bail.”

“Choke them,” Hilliard said, signing a document. “Anyone who lends them a dime is an enemy of this family.”

“Done.” Gavin nodded. “Sir — on the other matter. The search for the other two assets has hit a wall. Kegan’s network is a ghost. He’s running a series of global proxies to make the digital signatures of the other children appear to originate from a server farm in Eastern Europe. We’re re-tasking satellites, but it’s like searching for ghosts inside a machine.”

“Find them,” Hilliard said. His voice was flat, but the command was absolute. “I don’t care what it costs.”

Gavin slipped out of the room. The heavy oak door clicked shut, leaving the two cousins alone.

Vance set his glass down. The humor drained from his face.

“Hilliard,” he said quietly. “Are you really going to keep her locked up in there forever?”

“It’s protection,” Hilliard said, not looking up from his papers.

“Protection?” Vance scoffed. “It looks a hell of a lot like house arrest. She hates you, brother. I saw her eyes when they brought her in. That wasn’t anger — that was the look of someone who wants to salt the earth where this house once stood.”

Hilliard’s hand paused. The nib of his pen dug into the paper, tearing the fiber. Ink bled into a dark blot.

“She’s just angry,” Hilliard said. “Once the threat is gone — once she understands...”

“There is nothing to understand,” Vance said, leaning forward. “Five years ago, you didn’t protect her. Yesterday, you brought the woman who tried to kill her child into her life. That’s not a misunderstanding. That’s a dead end.”

Hilliard looked up. His eyes were cold flint.

“If you really love her,” Vance said, “you should let her go. Or at least stop treating her like an inmate.”

“Let her go?” Hilliard stood sharply, the chair scraping against the floor. “Let her take my daughter and vanish again? Never.”

“Then get ready for her to tear this place apart brick by brick,” Vance said, rising and buttoning his jacket. “By the way — your father’s back.”

The air in the room shifted.

“When?” Hilliard asked.

“Just landed. Headed straight to the Old House. Probably here to clean up the mess with Charla.”

Hilliard seized his jacket. “Watch Cailin. Don’t let anyone near her — especially anyone from the Old House.”

Upstairs, the tray was empty.

Cailin had forced down every spoonful of the bland porridge. It sat heavily in her stomach, but she felt the nourishment reaching her bloodstream, clearing the fog from her mind.

The lock clicked.

It wasn’t Hilliard. It was a massive bodyguard.

Chapter 283:

“Mr. Holloway has authorized a visitation. Thirty minutes.”

Cailin didn't wait. She pushed past him, her hand going instinctively to her abdomen as a sharp pain lanced through her. She ignored it and moved quickly down the hall toward the East Wing — a determined, deliberate limp.

The medical suite was sterile, white, and silent.

Through the glass wall, she saw her.

Elia lay in a hospital bed that looked far too large for her small frame. Monitors beeped steadily around her, but the blue tint was gone from her lips.

Cailin scrubbed her hands, threw on a gown, and pushed through the door.

"Elia," she choked out.

She dropped into the chair beside the bed and took Elia's small hand in both of hers. It was warm. Thank God — it was warm.

Elia's eyelids fluttered and slowly opened, revealing groggy, unfocused eyes.

"Mommy?" she rasped. "Are we home?"

Cailin pressed her forehead against Elia's hand to hide the tears.

"Soon, baby," she whispered. "We're going home soon."

But looking around at the high-tech prison Hilliard had built around them, she knew "home" was still a lie. And she would have to fight a war to make it true.

"Time is up, Mrs. Holloway."

The bodyguard's voice was a flat drone.

Cailin didn't move. She was smoothing Elia's hair, watching the rhythmic rise and fall of her chest. Elia had drifted back to sleep minutes ago.

"I said, time is up."

"I'm staying," Cailin whispered. "I'm her mother. I'm sleeping here."

"Mr. Holloway's orders were specific. Rest for the patient. Rest for you."

The guard stepped forward and put a hand on her arm.

Cailin jerked away. “Don’t touch me!”

A second guard appeared. They didn’t hurt her, but they were immovable. They escorted — dragged — her out of the sterile room and back into the corridor.

“Let me go!” Cailin shouted, fighting against their grip.

They released her in the main hallway.

Hilliard stood at the far end, adjusting his cufflinks. He was dressed for war in a charcoal suit.

Cailin saw red.

“Hilliard!” She surged toward him in a staggering, desperate gait, the stitches in her side screaming in protest with every step. “Who do you think you are? Limiting my time with my own daughter?”

Hilliard raised a hand and dismissed the guards without a word. They dissolved into the shadows.

“You need rest,” he said, studying her pale face. “You look like a ghost, Cailin.”

“I don’t need your concern. I need my freedom.”

She tried to sidestep him, aiming for the main staircase.

Hilliard moved faster than a man his size had any right to. He caught her wrist, spun her around, and backed her into the wall. His hands slammed onto the wallpaper on either side of her head, caging her between his arms.

“Freedom?” He stepped closer, his body pressing against hers. “In this house, I am the law.”

Cailin glared up at him, her chest rising and falling hard against his.

“You’re a tyrant.”

Chapter 284:

Hilliard’s eyes dropped to her lips.

“Yes,” he muttered.

He crashed his mouth onto hers.

It wasn't a kiss. It was a possession — five years of starvation and rage and terrified relief compressed into a single act. He kissed her like he intended to devour her, his tongue sweeping into her mouth, demanding, taking.

Cailin went utterly still. Her body turned rigid, her eyes wide open, staring blankly past his shoulder at the gilded ceiling. A wave of cold, bitter nausea rolled through her.

Let him, a detached voice in her head said. Let him think this breaks me. Every second he spends lost in this delusion is another second for me to find a crack in this cage.

She bit him. Hard. It was a cold, calculated act of violence.

She tasted copper.

Hilliard groaned against her mouth but didn't stop. He deepened the kiss, smearing the blood between them.

Cailin wrenched her hand free. She put everything she had left into the swing.

Crack.

Her palm connected with his cheek. The sound rang down the empty corridor like a gunshot.

Hilliard's head snapped to the side.

He went still.

Cailin stood panting, wiping her mouth with the back of her hand as though removing something foul. Her palm stung.

Slowly, Hilliard turned his face back to her. A red handprint was already blooming on his cheek. A thin trickle of blood ran down his chin from his split lip.

He licked it away.

And then he smiled.

It was a dark, terrifying thing.

“Good,” he whispered. “If you have the strength to hit me, you don’t need liquid food anymore.”

He reached into his breast pocket and produced a black card — the titanium Centurion. He slid it into the neckline of her gown. The cold metal grazed her skin.

“Buy whatever you want,” he said. “Clothes. Toys for Elia. Anything.”

He stepped back and straightened his jacket.

“But don’t try to leave. Until I sign those papers, you are Mrs. Holloway. You belong here. Even when you die, you’ll be buried in the family plot beside me.”

He turned and walked away, his footsteps heavy on the hardwood.

Cailin slid down the wall until she hit the floor. She pulled the black card from her gown and stared at it.

He thought he could buy her. He thought money fixed this.

Her grip tightened until the metal edges bit into her palm.

Fine. If he wanted to hand her ammunition, she would use it. She would use his money to buy the saw that would cut these bars.

The stretch Lincoln Navigator idled outside the Manhattan Detention Complex.

The rear door opened, and a cane with a silver lion's-head handle struck the pavement.

Preston Holloway emerged. He was seventy, but he had the look of granite that had weathered a thousand storms — Hilliard without the conscience.

Gregg English rushed forward, hollow-eyed and unshaven, looking like a man who hadn't slept in days.

"Preston! Old friend! I knew you'd come."

Chapter 285:

"Shut up, Gregg," Preston said, his voice pure gravel. "You botched everything."

A lawyer in a sharp suit stepped out of the facility.

"Bail is posted. Ms. English is released pending trial. Her passport is surrendered."

The heavy metal doors buzzed.

Charla walked out.

She looked diminished — designer clothes wrinkled, hair disheveled, shielding her eyes against the sun as though the light itself was an offense. When she saw Preston, she burst into tears.

“Uncle Preston! Hilliard — he put me in there...”

“Get in the car,” Preston ordered.

Inside the vehicle, the leather interior was cold and still.

“The English family is ruined,” Preston said, tapping his cane against the floor. “Hilliard is on a warpath.”

“But the engagement...” Charla sniffled.

“I cannot have a felon as a daughter-in-law,” Preston said. “However, your father was foolish enough to tie the deeds for the new Hudson Yards expansion into your marital trust. Without your signature, those deeds are locked in probate and Hilliard’s project stalls. You are, for the moment, a necessary evil.”

He regarded Charla with the flat, dispassionate calculation of an accountant reviewing a balance sheet.

“We will find a scapegoat. The truck driver. The kidnapper. They will change their stories. You were coerced. You were a victim.”

Charla’s eyes widened. “Really? You’ll fix it?”

“Hilliard is compromised,” Preston said. “That woman has bewitched him. She is a liability to the Trust. I will handle her.”

“Handle her?”

“If she disappears,” Preston said, “Hilliard will grieve. But he will recover. The family mergers are about assets, not affection.”

Charla smiled — weak, but present.

“Thank you, Uncle Preston. I’ll be the perfect wife. I promise.”

Back at the Manor, Cailin was in the bathroom with the water running to mask her voice.

She had used the black Amex to order a burner phone via same-day courier, concealed inside a box of diapers for Elia.

She dialed the number for the top divorce attorney in New York.

"Slater & Associates."

"I need to file for divorce. Immediate restraining order."

"Name?"

"Cailin Holloway."

A pause. "Spouse?"

"Hilliard Holloway."

Click. The line went dead.

Cailin frowned and dialed the next number.

“We have a conflict of interest.” Click.

The third. “Sorry, we aren’t taking new clients.” Click.

By the tenth call, her hands were shaking.

Finally, a junior associate at a smaller firm dropped his voice to a whisper.

“Ma’am, look — Mr. Holloway sent a memo. Anyone who represents you gets blacklisted by Holloway Enterprises. Nobody in this city will touch your case. It’s career suicide.”

Cailin let the phone drop. It clattered onto the tile.

He had walled her in — not just with bricks and guards, but with fear.

Outside, gravel crunched.

Cailin crossed to the window.

A convoy of cars was pulling up to the front of the Manor. Preston Holloway stepped out, cane first.

The King had arrived.

And he looked far, far worse than the Prince.

The sound of the cane striking the marble foyer echoed like a gavel.

Thud. Thud. Thud.

Chapter 286:

Hilliard came down the stairs and stopped halfway.

“Why are you here?” Hilliard asked.

Preston had settled into the high-backed armchair at the center of the room as though it were a throne built for him.

“I came to see the woman who has turned my son into a fool.”

He leveled the cane at the staircase.

“Bring her down.”

“She’s recovering,” Hilliard said, his jaw tight.

“Is she sick? Or is she just ashamed?”

“If you mean ashamed of your dirty deals, then yes — I’m very sick.”

Cailin stood at the top of the stairs. She was wearing simple leggings and a sweater, but she held her head high.

She walked down, ignoring Hilliard’s outstretched hand.

Preston narrowed his eyes. “You’ve grown a spine. Pity. It makes you expensive.”

He reached into his jacket and produced a checkbook. He scribbled without ceremony, tore out the slip, and tossed it onto the coffee table.

“One hundred million dollars. Take the child. Go back to Europe. Never come back.”

“Dad, this is my house,” Hilliard said, stepping forward.

“You destroyed the English merger!” Preston roared, slamming his cane down. “This is business!”

Silence stretched through the room.

Hilliard stared at the check. His hands curled into fists. He looked at Cailin — a look that was equal parts plea and threat. Don’t you dare.

Cailin walked to the table.

She picked up the slip of paper.

One hundred million. It was freedom. It was an army.

But as her fingers closed over it, she noticed something. Printed in small, precise font beneath Preston's signature was the name of a bank: Cayman Trust & Fiduciary Services.

Kegan's voice surfaced from somewhere deep in her memory, a warning from years ago: That's not a bank, Cali. It's a laundry. The preferred cleaner for the old guard.

This wasn't just a check. It was a clue — a financial breadcrumb leading straight into Preston's darkest dealings.

She looked at Hilliard, her expression giving nothing away.

"You said you would never divorce me," she said softly.

"Never," Hilliard said.

"And you," she said, turning to Preston, her voice stripped of all warmth, "think this is her price?"

Cailin folded the check and slid it into her pocket.

"Fine," she said to Preston, the single word hanging in the air between them like a blade. "I accept your offer."

Hilliard looked as though he had been shot. The betrayal on his face was raw and unguarded.

Preston, by contrast, allowed himself a moment of quiet satisfaction — the expression of a man who had just resolved a tedious inconvenience.

Cailin turned without another word and walked back up the stairs, her spine straight as a steel rod.

Hilliard remained where he stood, frozen. He was too consumed by the sight of her taking the money to see what lived behind her eyes — the cold, precise flicker of a plan already in motion.

As Preston rose to leave, he paused beside his son.

Chapter 287:

“That check, by the way, is worthless until her flight confirmation is in my hand. It’s frozen. Don’t think she can outsmart me, boy.”

The moment Preston’s car disappeared through the gates, Hilliard exploded.

He swept his arm across the side table, sending a Ming vase crashing to the floor.

“Who told you to interfere?” he roared at the empty room.

He took the stairs two at a time and kicked the bedroom door open.

Cailin was throwing clothes into a duffel bag.

“Where are you going?” Hilliard demanded, filling the doorway.

“Your father paid me to leave. I’m leaving.” Cailin didn’t hold up the check. She didn’t need to. Her face was a mask of cold resolve.

Hilliard lunged forward, seized the duffel bag, and upended it onto the floor.

“You’re going nowhere. That check is a worthless piece of paper until you’re on his jet — he told me himself. It’s frozen until then.”

“You think I need money to leave you?” Cailin stepped into his space. “I have the only thing that matters: proof of his offer. A piece of paper linking him to a Cayman bank. He wants a clean break? He’ll get a war.”

“I am the only one who can protect you!” Hilliard grabbed her shoulders. “Charla is out. My father bailed her out. Do you think you’re safe out there?”

Cailin went still. "Charla is out?"

"Yes."

"And that's your protection?" Cailin laughed — a bitter, broken sound. "Your family let the monster out of the cage."

"As long as you are in this house, she cannot touch you."

"I don't want to bet my life on your protection." Cailin shoved him back. "Move."

"Elia is still on an IV," Hilliard said.

The trump card.

Cailin stopped. Her shoulders dropped.

"You bastard," she whispered.

“Stay,” Hilliard said. His voice softened. “Until she’s well. Just stay.”

“Fine.” Cailin turned her back to him. “But the day she is well, we are gone.”

Hilliard looked at her back. He wanted to touch her. He wanted to tell her he was terrified — that watching her hold that check had felt like losing her all over again, like she was choosing to leave him a second time with her eyes wide open.

He said nothing. He turned and left.

“Double the guard,” he told the head of security downstairs. “Nobody comes in. Nobody goes out.”

Outside the gates, in the shadow of a large oak tree, a red Porsche idled.

Charla watched the lights in the master bedroom go dark.

“Enjoy it while it lasts, Cailin,” she murmured, tapping her nails against the steering wheel. “I’m coming for my house.”

The morning sun was mocking Cailin.

She had been permitted into the garden — “fresh air for recovery,” Hilliard had said. But the perimeter was lined with guards, and the walls were tall, and the gates were locked.

She sat on a stone bench beside the fountain, watching the water fall, and plotted.

The roar of an engine shattered the quiet.

A red Porsche screeched up the driveway and stopped hard at the inner gate.

Charla.

Chapter 288:

The guards from the Shadows detail moved immediately to block the car’s path, hands resting on their sidearms.

“This is a restricted area, ma’am.”

Charla stepped out, unhurried, in a white Chanel suit and oversized sunglasses. She produced a document and held it out with two fingers.

“A direct authorization from Preston Holloway.”

The head guard took it, his face stone. "Our orders come from Mr. Hilliard Holloway."

"And my orders come from the man who signs his checks," Charla said pleasantly. "Call your superior. Mention the words 'Old Guard Protocol.' I'll wait."

The guard's jaw tightened. He spoke quietly into his wrist communicator. A tense voice crackled back after a moment. His shoulders dropped in defeat.

He waved her through with a look of pure disgust. "Family matter. We log it and let the boss handle the fallout."

Charla marched straight to Cailin.

"Enjoying the view?" she said, her smile sharp. "Take a good look. It's the last time you'll see it."

Cailin didn't stand. She looked up at Charla with the flat exhaustion of someone regarding a mild inconvenience.

"Fresh out of jail and already trespassing. You're eager to go back."

“Uncle Preston says this will be my garden,” Charla laughed. “And you? You’re just a surrogate he paid off.”

“Hilliard tore up the check,” Cailin said. “Guess I’m priceless.”

Charla’s face twisted. She raised her hand.

Cailin moved. She caught Charla’s wrist mid-swing, rose to her feet, and shoved.

Charla, balanced on six-inch stilettos, stumbled backward. Her heel caught the edge of the flowerbed.

Splash.

She landed in a patch of freshly watered mud.

“My suit!” Charla shrieked. “This is custom!”

“This isn’t your runway,” Cailin said, looking down at her. “Get out.”

Charla grabbed a fistful of wet mud.

“You bitch!”

She threw it.

Cailin sidestepped.

Splat.

The mud connected with a wall of grey wool.

Hilliard stood at the edge of the garden path. A thick glob slid slowly down the lapel of his suit.

Silence fell over the garden.

Charla went pale. “Hilliard — I... she pushed me...”

Hilliard looked at the mud on his jacket. Then at Charla, crouched in the dirt.

“Who let her in?” he asked the nearest guard.

“Sir, she invoked Old Guard Protocol. The authorization came directly from Mr. Preston’s office. Our hands were tied.”

“Preston doesn’t live here,” Hilliard said. “Revoke it. And throw this out.”

Two guards seized Charla by the arms and hauled her upright.

“Hilliard! I’m doing this for us!” she screamed as they dragged her toward the gate. “She’s poisoning you!”

Hilliard didn’t look at her. He turned to Cailin.

“Did she hurt you?”

He reached out.

Cailin stepped back. “Keep your dog on a leash, Hilliard.”

She turned and walked back toward the house, leaving him standing in the garden with mud on his jacket and something heavier on his chest.

The afternoon brought a secret visitor.

Ashely stood in the foyer with a travel bag over her shoulder. She had managed to secure a brief visitation pass from Gavin under the guise of delivering Elia's essential medical history.

Chapter 289:

"I have to go back to the boys, Cali," she said, her voice tight. "They're going crazy cooped up in the downtown safe house. I need to move them somewhere more secure outside the city before Hilliard's men expand their search grid."

Cailin felt the walls pressing closer. Ashely was her lifeline to her sons.

"How long?"

"A few days. Just until they're settled." Ashely pulled her into a fierce hug.

Hilliard walked in.

Ashely released her and crossed the room to face him. She was half his size, but she looked ready for a fight.

"Hilliard Holloway," she said. "I know you're a son of a bitch. But that little girl in there is your blood."

"I know," Hilliard said.

"If anything happens to her—" Ashely drove a thick binder into his chest— "Kegan will level this city."

Hilliard caught it. "Is that a threat?"

"It's a promise." She jabbed a finger at the binder. "Her medical history. Allergies. Night terrors. Everything you missed for five years."

Hilliard looked down at the weight in his hands.

"I will protect her," he said. "She is my daughter."

Ashely gave a single nod, shot Cailin a look that said stay strong, and left.

The heavy door fell shut.

Hilliard opened the binder. His eyes landed on a page titled Nightmares.

Subject wakes up screaming about “The Cold.” Needs to hold her left ear to self-soothe.

His chest tightened.

“I’m sleeping in the medical wing tonight,” Hilliard said.

Cailin stiffened. “What?”

“In the anteroom. Not with her. Just... near.”

Cailin looked at him — at the binder held in his hands like a bible.

“Fine,” she said.

That night, Hilliard sat alone in the dark anteroom, watching Elia through the glass. He read every page. Every fever. Every scraped knee. Every nightmare.

His phone buzzed.

Mother.

“What?” Hilliard answered.

“Tomorrow is your father’s seventieth birthday gala,” Jeraldine’s voice was crisp and precise. “You will be there. And you will bring Cailin.”

“We aren’t coming.”

“If you don’t,” Jeraldine said, “I have petitioned the court for an emergency psychiatric evaluation of Cailin, citing her documented history of instability and the recent incident with the surgical scalpel. The papers are ready to be filed. A judge will grant it, and while she is under a seventy-two-hour hold, Elia will be placed in my temporary care.”

Hilliard’s grip tightened until the phone screen cracked.

“You wouldn’t.”

“Try me. Bring her. We need to show a united front to the shareholders.”

He hung up.

They were using his daughter as a pawn.

Again.

Hilliard walked into the master bedroom. Cailin was sitting by the window, staring at the gate.

“We have to go out tonight,” he said.

“No.” Cailin didn’t turn around.

“It’s my father’s seventieth birthday. The gala.”

“Send a card. I’m not going to your family’s circus.”

“Jeraldine is threatening to have you committed,” Hilliard said, his voice flat. “She’s using your fabricated medical files from five years ago, along with the scalpel incident with Charla, to petition for a

mandatory psychiatric hold. If she files, they'll take you away, and Elia will be placed in her temporary care."

Cailin spun around. "She can't."

Chapter 290:

"She can. She's claiming you're unstable — a danger to yourself. It's dirty and underhanded, but a family court judge might grant it simply to be cautious."

Hilliard walked over and set a box on the bed.

"We need to show up. Smile. Prove we are a stable, happy family. Just for one night."

Cailin looked at the box. Then at him.

"You want me to act?"

"I want you to protect Elia."

She walked to the bed and opened the box. Inside lay a silver gown that looked like liquid moonlight.

“Fine,” she said. “But this is a negotiation. I want your word that I will have unrestricted access to Elia from now on — no more timed visits, no more guards dragging me away. I stay with her when she needs me.”

Hilliard looked at her for a moment, caught off guard. The demand wasn’t about money or freedom. It was only ever about her daughter.

“You have it.”

“Good,” Cailin said, her voice cold as glass. “Then I’ll play the part of your wife.”

Two hours later, Cailin stood before the mirror. The dress fit like a second skin. She looked dangerous — beautiful and sharp in equal measure.

Hilliard stood behind her, adjusting his tie. His eyes found hers in the reflection.

“You look—”

“Don’t,” Cailin cut him off. “Let’s go.”

The car ride was silent.

When they pulled up to the Pierre Hotel, the paparazzi swarm was blinding. As they made their way through the lobby toward the ballroom, a distinct, sharp scent drifted past — clove cigarettes, a smell she associated with only one person. She turned, but saw only a sea of anonymous tuxedos.

“Take my arm,” Hilliard said.

Cailin drew a breath, fixed a dazzling smile onto her face, and looped her arm through his.

They walked in.

The ballroom was opulent and crowded, and as they entered, a hush fell over the room.

Everyone was looking at the stage.

On the massive screen behind the podium, a slideshow was playing.

It was not photos of Preston.

It was photos of Hilliard and Charla — teenagers, then young adults, smiling, holding hands, sun-lit and golden. The text beneath the images read: A Love Destined to Be.

Cailin stopped walking. The smile froze on her face.

“Is this part of the deal?” she whispered, her voice vibrating with a rage she was barely containing.

Hilliard stared at the screen. The color drained from his face, then flooded back — dark red.

“No,” he said.

The slideshow clicked to the next image: Hilliard and Charla at a ski resort, looking like the perfect couple.

Whispers rippled through the crowd. Eyes darted to Cailin — the unwanted wife in the silver dress.

Hilliard moved to pull away, to storm the stage, but Cailin drove her nails into his arm.

“Don’t you dare leave me standing here alone,” she hissed.

Jeraldine stepped up to the microphone.

“Welcome, everyone. Tonight is a double celebration. We honor Preston, but we also celebrate a reunion. Please welcome... Charla English!”

The spotlight swung to the side entrance.