

## **Second chance 291**

Chapter 291:

Charla emerged in a white gown that looked conspicuously like a wedding dress. She waved, expression arranged into something between demure and triumphant.

Preston had moved the pieces. He was forcing the narrative.

"This is an ambush," Hilliard snarled under his breath.

"Let go of me," Cailin tried to pull her arm back. "I'm not part of your harem."

"You are my wife." Hilliard tightened his grip. "Come with me."

He pulled her toward the stage.

Charla saw him approaching and her face lit up. She extended her hand, expecting him to step up beside her.

Hilliard walked straight past her.

He lifted a magnum of champagne from a passing waiter's tray, stepped onto the stage, and without a word, hurled it at the projector screen.

CRASH.

The bottle shattered against the electronics. Sparks flew. The image of Hilliard and Charla flickered, then collapsed into static.

The crowd gasped. Screams erupted across the ballroom.

Hilliard walked to the center of the stage, Cailin's hand still locked in his — tight enough to numb her fingers.

He snatched the microphone from his mother's hand. Jeraldine looked as though she were about to have a stroke.

"Turn off the lights," Hilliard commanded.

The room fell silent.

“There seems to be some confusion.” His voice rolled through the speakers like thunder. “Charla English is a criminal currently out on bail for the attempted murder of my daughter.”

Charla’s smile vanished. She stood frozen in her white dress, a ghost in the spotlight.

“This,” Hilliard raised Cailin’s hand, “is Cailin Holloway. My wife. The mother of my child. The only woman who will ever hold this name.”

He held Preston’s gaze from across the room.

“Anyone who disrespects her, disrespects me. And I will destroy you.”

He dropped the mic.

Thud.

He pulled Cailin against him and pressed his lips to her forehead in front of five hundred cameras.

“I told you,” he murmured into her hair. “I protect what is mine.”

Cailin's heart hammered against her ribs. It was a grand gesture — violent and possessive and impossible to look away from.

But her eyes drifted past his shoulder, scanning the blur of faces and flash-lit tuxedos. And then she felt it. A cold prickle at the back of her neck. A gaze — not random, not curious, but specific and heavy and chillingly familiar. She couldn't locate its source in the crush of bodies, but she knew with a certainty that defied logic exactly who it belonged to.

It was the same feeling she'd had at the bar. The ghost of cloves and danger.

He wasn't supposed to be here. He was supposed to be stranded in Zurich.

Kegan.

Chapter 292:

The scent of clove cigarettes was a ghost from a past life, but the man walking through the parted crowd was terrifyingly real.

Kegan Aguirre moved like smoke. He wore a tuxedo that cost more than most people's houses, the black velvet absorbing the ballroom's light. He didn't look at the shattered screen. He didn't look at the screaming guests.

His eyes, dark as obsidian, were locked on Cailin.

Security guards stepped forward, hands reaching for earpieces, chests puffing out. Kegan didn't even slow down. He simply lifted a hand — a lazy flick of his fingers — and four men in nondescript suits materialized from the shadows of the ballroom pillars, intercepting the guards with quiet, brutal efficiency. Hilliard recognized them instantly: not Kegan's usual corporate security, but ghost operatives from a network so deep it didn't officially exist. It was a chilling confirmation of how Kegan had bypassed international watchlists to be standing here.

Hilliard felt the shift in the air before he saw him. He felt Cailin's body go rigid against his side. Her pulse, which had been hammering against his ribs, skipped a beat.

He turned. His grip on Cailin's waist tightened until it bordered on painful.

"Aguirre." Hilliard's voice was a low growl, vibrating with a history of violence. "What the hell are you doing here?"

Kegan stopped three feet away. He ignored Hilliard entirely.

"Cailin." Kegan's voice was smooth, like velvet wrapped around a blade. "The air in here is stale. My car is outside."

He extended a hand, palm up. An invitation. A lifeline.

The ballroom went silent. The cameras, which had been feasting on Charla's humiliation, now swung toward this new, dangerous variable.

Cailin stared at that hand. It represented Zurich. It represented the twins. It represented a world where she wasn't Mrs. Holloway, but the woman who ran the Vault.

She took a step forward. It was instinct.

Hilliard moved faster. He stepped in front of her — a wall of muscle and fury — blocking Kegan's view.

"She is my wife," Hilliard spat, his grey eyes turning into storms. "Put your hand down before I break it."

Kegan finally looked at Hilliard. A slow, mocking smile spread across his face. It didn't reach his eyes.

"Wife?" Kegan chuckled darkly. He tilted his head toward the shattered screen behind them. "That slideshow suggested otherwise, mate. You treat her like a secret, then claim her like a prize. It's pathetic."

The words hit Hilliard like a physical slap. His jaw clenched so hard a muscle feathered in his cheek.

"Security!" Hilliard roared.

“They’re busy,” Kegan said calmly. He stepped around Hilliard, his focus returning to Cailin. He reached out, his fingers brushing her bare arm. “Come on, love. Let’s go home.”

Hilliard grabbed Cailin’s other arm.

She gasped as she was jerked between them — two titans pulling her apart. She felt like a ragdoll. The stitches in her abdomen twinged with a sharp, hot pain.

“Let go,” Hilliard snarled.

Chapter 293:

“You first,” Kegan countered.

“Stop it!” Cailin cried out. “Both of you!”

Suddenly, a high-pitched wail pierced the tension.

“Hilliard... my heart...”

Charla, who had been standing frozen on the stage in her ridiculous white dress, crumpled to the floor. She clutched her chest, her breathing coming in ragged, theatrical gasps.

“I can’t... breathe...”

It was a classic Charla move. Weaponized frailty.

Hilliard’s head snapped toward the stage.

In that split second of distraction, Kegan pulled. Cailin stumbled toward him.

But seeing Hilliard look back at Charla — even for a single second — snapped something inside Cailin. He was still looking at her. After everything.

“Don’t touch me,” Cailin hissed. She ripped her arm from Kegan’s grip. Then she shoved Hilliard away.

She backed up, chest heaving, her silver dress shimmering like armor.

“You make me sick,” she said, her voice trembling not with fear, but with revulsion. “Both of you. I am not a trophy to be fought over.”

She turned and ran.

She gathered the silk of her skirt and bolted toward the service exit.

“Cailin!” Kegan shouted, lunging forward.

Hilliard didn't shout. He moved. He saw Kegan's attention lock onto Cailin's fleeing form — a momentary vulnerability — and pure, primal instinct took over. He threw a right hook. The punch seemed to travel in slow motion; he saw Kegan's eyes flicker toward the blow, a subtle shift of weight indicating he could have easily avoided it. But he didn't. Kegan took the full force of the punch on his jaw, staggering back a step, the surprise in his dark eyes expertly feigned — a calculated performance. Before Kegan's men could retaliate, Hilliard was already gone, sprinting after Cailin.

Glass shattered somewhere in the chaos.

He caught her just as she pushed through the heavy double doors into the cool night air.

“Let me go!” Cailin screamed, swinging her fists at his chest.

Hilliard didn't speak. He grabbed her arm, his grip like steel, and propelled her forward, half-dragging, half-shielding her from the erupting chaos behind them. His body was a hard, unyielding barrier between her and the world. “We're leaving,” he bit out, his voice raw.

“You're hurting me!” she cried, the pressure of his grip sending a spike of pain through her side.

He marched to the waiting black SUV as paparazzi flashbulbs exploded around them like lightning. He threw the back door open and practically pushed her onto the leather seat, then slid in after her, shoving his bewildered driver aside. "Get out!" he snarled, before getting behind the wheel himself and slamming the door.

The locks clicked down with a sound of finality.

The SUV tore through the streets of Manhattan, running two red lights in the first minute.

Cailin sat pressed against the passenger door, rubbing her wrist where Hilliard had grabbed her. The skin was red.

"You're insane," she whispered. "You assaulted him. In front of everyone."

Chapter 294:

Hilliard gripped the steering wheel so hard the leather creaked. He needed to be in control, needing the physical act of driving to burn off the viper's nest of rage and jealousy coiling in his gut.

"He touched you," Hilliard said. His voice was terrifyingly calm. "He walked in there and tried to take you."

"He is my friend," Cailin said. "He is my boss."

“Boss?”

Hilliard slammed on the brakes. The heavy car screeched to a halt at a deserted intersection. The seatbelt cut into Cailin’s collarbone.

He unbuckled his belt and turned on her. The interior light cast deep shadows over his face, making him look skeletal. Predatory.

“What kind of boss flies across the Atlantic to crash a gala?” Hilliard demanded. “What kind of boss calls you ‘love’?”

Cailin looked away. “It’s none of your business.”

“It is my business!” Hilliard roared, slamming his hand against the dashboard. “You are my wife! Did you sleep with him?”

The question hung in the air, heavy and suffocating.

Cailin looked at him. She saw the jealousy eating him alive. It wasn’t love — it was ownership. He didn’t care about her heart; he cared that someone else had played with his toys. A cold, reckless fury bloomed in her chest. Hurt him. Make him feel a fraction of the pain you’ve felt for five years.

“Yes,” she lied.

Hilliard flinched. His eyes widened, the pupils contracting into pinpricks.

“What?”

“I slept with him,” Cailin said, her voice steady, though her heart was galloping. “Many times. He knows me, Hilliard. He knows how I take my coffee. He knows I hate the cold. He knows my scars.”

Every word was a dagger.

“He touched me in ways you never did,” she continued, twisting the knife. “Because he listened to me.”

Hilliard let out a sound that was half-growl, half-sob.

He lunged across the center console. His hand clamped around her jaw, forcing her to look at him. His fingers were hot, shaking with restrained violence.

“Stop talking,” he whispered.

“Why? Does the truth hurt?” Cailin stared defiantly into his eyes. “I love him. I don’t love you.”

Hilliard stared at her. For a moment, she thought he might strangle her. The violence in his eyes was a living thing.

Then the light behind his eyes died.

He released her face as if she were toxic, turned back to the wheel, shifted the car into gear, and floored the accelerator. The engine roared like a wounded beast.

They drove in silence — a thick, poisonous silence that filled the cabin.

When they reached the Manor, Hilliard didn’t wait for the valet. He left the car running at the foot of the stairs, came around to her side, ripped the door open, and dragged her out.

“Walk,” he commanded.

He marched her up the stairs, past the shocked staff, past the portrait of his father. He didn’t stop until they reached the master bedroom. He shoved her inside.

Cailin stumbled, catching herself on the edge of the bed.

“What are you doing?” she gasped, backing away.

Hilliard began to unbutton his shirt, his movements jerky and uncoordinated.

Chapter 295:

“You say you love him?” He threw his shirt to the floor. “You say he knows you? Let’s see if he can erase me.”

He advanced on her.

“Hilliard, stop!” Cailin backed into the wall. “Don’t do this!”

He trapped her. His hands slammed against the wall on either side of her head, and he pressed his body against hers, hard and demanding. He smelled of sweat and expensive cologne and rage.

“You are mine,” he muttered against her neck. “My name is on your papers. My ring should be on your finger.”

He grabbed her hand, checking for a ring that wasn’t there.

Cailin began to shake — not with anger, but with genuine, primal fear.

“Please,” she whispered. Tears welled in her eyes. “Please, Hilliard. You’re scaring me.”

The plea cut through the red haze in his mind.

Hilliard froze.

He looked down at her and saw the terror in her eyes, saw her flinching away from him. He wasn’t her husband. He was the monster in the dark. He looked at his own hands pressing her against the wall.

He pushed himself away, stumbling back as if he had been burned.

“God,” he breathed, running a hand through his hair and gripping the strands tight.

He looked at her one last time — a look of utter defeat.

“I’m sorry,” he rasped.

He turned and walked into the bathroom, slamming the door so hard the frame rattled.

Cailin slid down the wall, wrapped her arms around her knees, and finally let the tears fall.

Hilliard stood under a freezing shower, fully clothed. The water soaked his suit trousers, plastering the fabric to his legs, but he couldn't feel the cold.

He could only feel the phantom sensation of Cailin's trembling skin beneath his hands.

He had almost crossed a line. He had almost become the very thing he despised.

He turned off the water and leaned his forehead against the wet tiles.

"I love him." Her words echoed in the tiled room.

She was gone. He had lost her five years ago, and he had just lost her again tonight.

He walked out of the bathroom, dripping wet.

Cailin was sitting on the edge of the bed, dressed in a simple robe. She looked small. Fragile.

"Get out," she said softly, without looking at him.

Hilliard crossed to the mini-bar, poured a glass of scotch, and downed it in one swallow. The burn was grounding.

"Is it true?" he asked, his back to her. "Do you really love him?"

"It doesn't matter," Cailin said. "Look at us, Hilliard. We are toxic. We destroy each other."

She looked up at him, her eyes dry now, resigned.

"Let me go. Give me my dignity. Give yourself some peace."

Hilliard gripped the empty glass and squeezed until the crystal groaned.

He turned to face her.

"Fine."

Cailin blinked. "What?"

“You want a divorce?” Hilliard’s voice was hollow. “You have it.”

He walked to the door.

“I’ll have the lawyers draw it up tonight. You can leave tomorrow.”

“What about Elia?” Cailin stood.

Chapter 296:

“She stays in the country until her treatment is done,” Hilliard said. “But you — you can have whatever you want. The house. The money. Half the company. Just take it.”

“I don’t want your money,” Cailin said.

“Take it!” Hilliard shouted, losing his composure for just a moment. “Take it and go to him. Show him that I gave you the world, and he can only give you stolen art!”

He stormed out of the room.

He marched down the hall to his study and snatched up the phone, dialing Gavin.

“Wake up the legal team,” Hilliard barked. “Draft a divorce settlement. Now.”

“Sir? It’s 2:00 AM.”

“I don’t care. Give her half. The Hamptons estate, the liquid assets, the controlling shares in the media division. I don’t care if the total valuation is five billion or ten. Just do it.”

“Sir, that’s — that’s catastrophic.”

“Do it!” Hilliard slammed the phone down.

He collapsed into his leather chair, water dripping from his clothes onto the expensive rug, and buried his face in his hands.

Outside in the hallway, a shadow moved.

Charla stood in her nightgown, ear pressed against the heavy oak door. She had heard the shouting. She had heard the numbers.

Billions.

He was giving that woman billions.

Charla's fingernails dug into the wallpaper.

"Over my dead body," she whispered.

She watched as Gavin hurried down the hall ten minutes later, clutching a laptop and a portable printer, and disappeared into the study. Charla waited. She knew Gavin's routine — he would print the documents, then slip off to the kitchenette for espresso. He couldn't function without caffeine.

She settled into the shadows, a viper in silk, and waited for her moment to strike.

The hum of the laser printer was the only sound in the study.

Gavin rubbed his eyes and hit Print on the final document: Settlement Agreement and Asset Division — Draft 1.

"I need coffee," he muttered to himself.

He stood, walked out of the room, and left the door slightly ajar. The moment he turned the corner toward the kitchen, Charla slipped inside.

She moved quickly, her bare feet silent on the carpet. She went straight to Gavin's laptop, still logged in, the screen glowing with the final pages of the agreement.

She opened the document file and scrolled to the compensation clause. Her eyes widened at the dizzying list of assets and the final liquid compensation figure. It wasn't a number — it was a kingdom.

"He's insane," Charla hissed. "He's actually giving her half the kingdom."

Her fingers flew across the keyboard. She deleted entire paragraphs detailing the transfer of properties and stock portfolios, then highlighted the final, astronomical sum.

She hit backspace.

She typed: \$1,000.

She smiled. It wasn't enough. She needed to twist the knife.

She added a clause: In light of the recipient's demonstrable emotional instability and abandonment of the Holloway family, this sum is a symbolic gesture of goodwill.

She hit Print.

The printer whirred to life.

Charla paced, her heart hammering. She collected the original, multi-page document from the output tray and fed the entire stack into the heavy-duty office shredder by the desk.

Chapter 297:

Whirrrrrr.

The evidence turned to confetti.

Footsteps echoed in the hall.

Panic seized her. Gavin was coming back too soon. Thinking fast, she pulled out a burner phone, typed a pre-written text, and hit send. A second later, Gavin's personal phone buzzed with an urgent alert from the desk where he'd left it.

Gavin came running back in, coffee sloshing in his mug. He glanced at his phone screen and his face went white. "What? Amerigo had a stroke?"

“What’s wrong?” Charla asked, feigning concern from the doorway.

“It’s from the hospital,” Gavin said, his voice tight with panic. “I have to — I have to call the head nurse.” He ran out of the study, completely forgetting the newly printed documents sitting in the printer tray.

Charla darted to the printer, collected the freshly printed, altered agreement, and placed it neatly in the center of Hilliard’s desk. Then she slipped back into the shadows of the hallway.

Gavin returned a moment later, looking furious and confused. “It was a hoax. A wrong number. The hospital says he’s fine.” Annoyed and rattled, he noticed the pristine stack of papers on the desk and assumed it was the original print job he’d left. He didn’t think to check it.

He slid the documents into a manila envelope.

“Done,” he sighed.

He walked out.

Charla waited a full minute before slipping away. Her heart was pounding a frantic rhythm against her ribs as she crept back to her guest room, a wicked smile playing on her lips.

The next morning, sunlight flooded the master suite.

Cailin hadn't slept. She sat in the armchair, fully dressed in jeans and a sweater, her bags packed by the door.

A knock.

Gavin entered. He looked tired.

"Ms. Morton," he said formally. "Mr. Holloway has prepared the agreement."

He handed her the envelope.

"He has already signed his copy," Gavin said. "Once you sign, it will be notarized at the courthouse at 10:00 AM."

Cailin took the envelope. It felt heavy.

She opened it. She didn't care about the houses. She didn't care about the stocks. She flipped to the financial page.

She froze.

\$1,000.

She blinked and read the clause below it. Symbolic gesture... emotional instability.

The air left her lungs.

She looked up at Gavin. "Is this a joke?"

Gavin frowned. "I assure you, Mr. Holloway takes this very seriously."

Cailin looked back at the paper.

One thousand dollars.

After five years of hiding. After the surgery. After the pain.

He thought she was worthless. He was paying her off like a cheap fling.

A laugh bubbled up in her throat. It started low, then rose into a hysterical cackle. Tears streamed down her face.

“Perfect,” she gasped, laughing until her stomach hurt. “It’s absolutely perfect.”

Gavin took a step back, unnerved by her laughter. It sounded jagged, like glass breaking.

“Is the settlement... acceptable?” he asked cautiously.

Cailin wiped a tear from her cheek. Her eyes were suddenly dry, hard as diamonds.

Chapter 298:

“Acceptable?” she said. “It’s illuminating. It tells me exactly who he is.”

She walked to the desk and grabbed a pen. She didn’t hesitate. She signed her name at the bottom of the page — Cailin Morton — pressing so hard the pen tore through the paper on the final stroke.

She shoved the document back into the envelope and threw it at Gavin.

“Take it,” she said. “Tell him I said thank you. Tell him I’ll spend it all in one place.”

Gavin caught the envelope, looking confused. "I will relay the message."

He left quickly.

The moment the door closed, Cailin's mask crumbled. She sank to the floor, pulling her knees to her chest.

One thousand dollars.

It wasn't about the money. It was the disrespect. It was the final erasure of her existence as his wife.

She looked at her packed bag, crossed the room, and unzipped the side pocket. She took out her wallet and counted the cash inside. Three hundred dollars.

She went to the safe in the closet. The code was still her birthday. Inside, Hilliard kept emergency cash. She took out seven hundred dollars and added it to her three hundred.

One thousand dollars.

She placed the stack of bills into a plain white envelope.

"You want to pay me off?" she whispered to the empty room. "I'll give you your change."

She pulled out the burner phone and dialed Kegan.

"Cailin?" His voice was tight with worry. "Where are you? I'm coming to get you."

"No," Cailin said, her voice ice cold. "Meet me at the courthouse at ten. And call the press."

"The press? Cailin, are you sure? Hilliard will bury you."

"Let him try," Cailin said. "I want every camera in New York there. I want the world to see what a Holloway divorce looks like."

"What are you planning?"

"I'm planning to return a gift."

She hung up.

Downstairs, Gavin placed the envelope on Hilliard's desk. Hilliard stood at the window, watching the gardeners prune the roses. He looked like a man waiting for an execution.

"She signed?" Hilliard asked without turning.

"Yes, sir."

"Did she... say anything?"

"She laughed, sir," Gavin said. "She said it was perfect. And that she would spend it all in one place."

Hilliard's jaw tightened.

She laughed? At billions of dollars? Of course. It was just money to her. She probably had Kegan's billions lined up already. She was laughing because she had won — stripped him of his assets and his pride.

"Good," Hilliard said bitterly. "Get the car. We're going to court."

In the hallway, Charla pressed herself against the wall, a hand over her mouth to stifle a giggle.

They both hated each other. It was beautiful.

Before the courthouse, there was one last stop.

Cailin slipped out of the Manor through the servants' entrance. The guards let her pass — they knew she was leaving tomorrow anyway.

She took a taxi to Holloway corporate headquarters, bypassed the receptionist, and rode the private elevator to the top floor.

Chapter 299:

Amerigo Holloway sat behind his massive desk, perfectly healthy, examining a financial report. He looked up, his eyes sharp as flint.

"Cailin. Have you come to beg for a larger settlement?" Amerigo sneered.

"I came to look you in the eye before I leave," Cailin said, standing tall. "To tell you that your money means nothing to me."

Amerigo scoffed. "You are a fool. But you breed well. We will take good care of the children once you are gone."

“You will never touch my children,” Cailin said.

The office doors opened. Jeraldine walked in, holding the hand of a terrified blonde boy.

“This is Jakobe,” Jeraldine announced, her voice dripping with triumph. “Hilliard needs an heir. Since the one you produced is so... defective... we are adopting Jakobe. He is a distant cousin. Pure blood.”

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Cailin looked at the boy. He wasn't an heir. He was a pawn — just like she had been.

“He's a child, Jeraldine,” Cailin said coldly. “Not a breeding horse.”

“He is the future of Holloway Enterprises,” Jeraldine snapped. “Something you will never be part of.”

Cailin held the boy's gaze for a moment. She thought of Aron and Davy — her brilliant, wild, free sons. They would never be subjected to this.

“Good luck, kid,” Cailin said quietly. “You're going to need it.”

She stepped into the elevator.

Her hand found her pocket, fingers curling into a fist.

She had the true heirs. And Jeraldine would never get her claws on them.

The dining room at Holloway Manor was a cavern of silence.

Hilliard sat at the head of the long mahogany table, a single place setting before him — a steak, rare, bleeding onto the china.

The double doors swung open.

Jeraldine marched in, Charla trailing behind her like a lost puppy, and the boy, Jakobe, dragged by the hand.

“Hilliard,” Jeraldine announced. “We need to talk about the future.”

Hilliard didn’t look up. He cut a piece of meat. “I’m eating.”

"This is Jakobe," Jeraldine continued, ignoring him. She shoved the boy toward the table. "He is from the Vermont branch. Good stock. Intelligent."

Jakobe stood beside Hilliard's chair, trembling.

"Say hello to Father," Jeraldine hissed.

"Father?" Hilliard stopped chewing.

He slowly turned his head, looked at the boy, then at his mother.

"What did you just say?"

"You are divorcing that woman tomorrow," Jeraldine said. "You need a son. Charla has agreed to adopt him with you. It's a perfect solution."

Charla stepped forward, smiling nervously. "He's a sweet boy, Hilliard. We could raise him together."

Hilliard stood. The chair legs screeched against the floor.

He towered over the boy. Jakobe flinched. Then Hilliard knelt down, bringing himself to eye level with the child.

“What’s your name?” Hilliard asked, his voice surprisingly gentle.

“Jakobe,” the boy whispered.

“Jakobe,” Hilliard said. “Do you want to be here?”

The boy’s lip quivered. He glanced at Jeraldine, then back at Hilliard, and slowly shook his head. A single tear rolled down his cheek.

Hilliard stood. He turned to his mother.

“You kidnapped a child?”

Chapter 300:

“I facilitated a transfer!” Jeraldine argued. “For the good of the family! Your daughter is weak. She might not survive the year. We need insurance!”

Hilliard's hand shot out and seized the heavy silver candelabra from the table. With a roar of pure rage, he swept it across the surface.

CRASH.

Crystal glasses, plates, the wine decanter — everything shattered onto the floor.

Jakobe screamed and covered his ears.

"Get out!" Hilliard bellowed. "Get out of my house!"

"Hilliard!" Jeraldine gasped.

"My daughter is not weak." Hilliard advanced on her. "She is a fighter. And she is my only heir. If you ever try to replace her again, I will cut you off from the trust. You will be destitute."

He leveled a shaking finger at Charla.

"And you — if I see you near a child again, I will revoke your bail."

“No!”

Jeraldine grabbed Jakobe and fled. Charla ran after them, sobbing. The doors slammed shut.

Hilliard stood in the wreckage of his dinner. Red wine stained the white tablecloth like blood.

He was alone.

He sank back into his chair and put his head in his hands.

He had defended Elia. But tomorrow, he was signing away her mother.

He looked at the empty chair at the far end of the table. Cailin’s chair.

It would stay empty.

The hospital corridor smelled of antiseptic and despair.

It was 8:00 PM — the night before the court hearing.

Hilliard and Cailin stood outside the specialist's office. They had to sign consent forms for Elia's transfer to a better clinic, a provision Hilliard had insisted on to ensure she received the best care.

Cailin stood by the window, staring at the city lights. She was shivering; the air conditioning was blasting.

Hilliard watched her. She looked thin.

He took off his suit jacket, walked over, and draped it around her shoulders. The silk lining was warm from his body.

Cailin reacted instantly. She shrugged her shoulders violently, letting the jacket slide to the floor.

"Don't," she said.

Hilliard looked at the jacket on the dirty linoleum. "You're cold."

"I'd rather freeze," Cailin said. "Your gestures are undervalued."

"What?"

“Nothing.” She kicked the jacket aside with her sneaker. “Just keep your things to yourself.”

The doctor opened the door. “Mr. and Mrs. Holloway? We’re ready.”

They walked in and sat in chairs separated by three feet of empty space. They signed the papers — Hilliard Holloway. Cailin Morton.

“Excellent,” the doctor said. “We’ll arrange the transport for next week.”

They walked back out to the elevator bank.

“Tomorrow at ten,” Hilliard said, watching the numbers on the elevator display count up without looking at her.

“I’ll be there,” Cailin said, clutching her purse. Inside was the envelope with the cash. “I have a surprise for you.”

Hilliard let out a dry, humorless laugh. “Another surprise? What — are you going to tell me you slept with the entire auction house?”

Cailin turned to him, her eyes burning. “No, Hilliard. I’m going to give you exactly what you gave me. Value for value.”