

Second chance 311

Chapter 311:

“You made good time,” he said. “The garbage truck was a nice touch.”

“Where is she?” Cailin demanded.

“Upstairs. Sleeping. The nurse is with her.”

Cailin moved toward the stairs. Two massive bodyguards stepped into her path.

“Ah,” Hilliard said. “Not so fast.”

He set his glass down.

“You left me, Cailin. Again.”

“I escaped a prison,” Cailin said.

“And you walked right back into one,” Hilliard said. “Because you forgot the most important rule: never leave your assets unguarded.”

He walked toward her.

“You want to see her? You want to be with her?”

“Yes.”

“Then you stay,” Hilliard said. “Here. With me. Forever.”

“You’re insane.”

“I’m a father protecting his child,” Hilliard said. “And a husband keeping his wife.”

He was close now. Too close.

“If you try to leave again,” he whispered, “I will take her to a place you will never find. I have islands, Cailin. I have bunkers in countries you can’t even spell. Test me.”

Cailin looked into his eyes. He meant it. And in that moment, she saw the crack in his armor — he didn't want her gone, he wanted her here. A possession. A trophy. And a trophy is no good if it's broken. It was a disgusting realization, and her only leverage.

She reached into her cargo pants pocket. Her fingers closed around the packaged scalpel. She ripped it open with her teeth, the blade glinting as it came free.

Hilliard's eyes widened.

But Cailin didn't lunge at him.

She pressed the blade against her own throat, right over the carotid artery.

"Let me see her," Cailin said. "Or I bleed out on your Persian rug."

"Cailin!" Hilliard took a step forward, hands raised. "Don't be stupid."

Cailin pressed harder. A thin line of red appeared on her skin.

"I'm not bluffing, Hilliard. I'd rather die than play your game."

Hilliard stared at the blood. His face went pale. The arrogance vanished, replaced by pure panic.

“Okay!” he shouted. “Okay! Put it down!”

“Tell them to move.”

“Move!” Hilliard roared at the guards. “Get out of her way!”

The guards scrambled aside.

Cailin kept the blade at her throat as she backed toward the stairs.

“If you follow me,” Cailin said, “I press harder.”

“I’m not following,” Hilliard said, his voice shaking. “Just — please. Don’t hurt yourself.”

Cailin turned and ran up the remaining stairs.

Cailin burst into the bedroom.

Elia was there, sleeping soundly in a portable crib. A nurse sat in the corner reading a book. She jumped to her feet when she saw the scalpel and the blood on Cailin's neck.

"Get out," Cailin rasped.

The nurse didn't argue. She grabbed her book and fled.

Cailin dropped the scalpel on the floor and fell to her knees beside the crib. She reached through the bars and touched Elia's chest — rising and falling, warm and alive.

She put her head on the mattress and sobbed.

Footsteps in the doorway.

Hilliard stood there, looking at the scalpel on the floor, then at Cailin.

"You're bleeding," he said softly.

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"I'm fine," Cailin replied.

He walked into the room with a first aid kit in his hand. "Let me clean it."

"Don't touch me," Cailin warned.

"Cailin," he said, kneeling beside her. "Please."

He opened an alcohol wipe. Cailin didn't pull away. She was too tired.

He dabbed at the cut on her neck, his hands gentle. But his voice was cold as he worked. "A broken trophy has no value," he murmured, his breath warm against her skin. "Don't ever threaten what's mine again, Cailin. Not even yourself."

"Why do we have to do this?" he asked. "Why does it have to be war?"

"Because you started it," Cailin said. "You started it five years ago."

"I'm trying to end it," Hilliard said. "I want us to be a family."

"This isn't a family," Cailin said, gesturing to the room. "This is a hostage situation."

Hilliard finished cleaning the cut and pressed a small bandage over it.

"I have a proposal," he said.

"I'm listening," Cailin said.

"You stay here. With Elia. You have full access to her, the run of the house, the grounds."

"And?" Cailin prompted.

"And you give me a chance," Hilliard said. "Thirty days. If after thirty days you still want to leave, we'll talk."

"I want separate rooms," Cailin said immediately.

Hilliard hesitated. "Fine."

"And I want my phone. No monitoring. No blockers."

Hilliard's eyes narrowed — he knew she would call Kegan. "Fine," he said. "But you don't leave the property."

"Deal."

It was a lie. Cailin would leave the moment she figured out how to get Elia out safely. But she needed time.

"Good," Hilliard said. He stood and looked at Elia one last time.

"She looks like you," he said.

"She has your stubbornness," Cailin muttered.

Hilliard smiled — a genuine, sad smile.

"Goodnight, Cailin."

He walked out and closed the door.

Cailin waited until his footsteps faded. Then she pulled out the burner phone she had hidden in her bra and texted Kegan.

I'm inside. Elia is safe. Stand down. I have a plan.

The next morning, sunlight blazed off the ocean.

Cailin walked downstairs with Elia in her arms.

Hilliard was sitting at the dining table, reading a newspaper and drinking coffee. It looked like a normal domestic scene. It made Cailin sick.

"Morning," he said, glancing up at Elia. "Hi, princess."

Elia buried her face in Cailin's neck. "Bad man."

Hilliard flinched.

"I'm not bad, Elia," he said. "I'm your daddy."

“No,” Elia said. “Daddy is gone.”

She meant the imaginary father Cailin had invented for her — the pilot who died saving puppies.

Cailin sat down at the far end of the table. “Don’t confuse her,” she said.

Gavin walked in, looking stressed. “Sir, we have a situation. Someone is pinging the server — trying to get into the security grid of the Villa.”

Cailin’s heart skipped a beat. Aron. Oh, her brilliant, reckless boy.

“Trace it,” Hilliard said.

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“We did,” Gavin said. “It’s coming from a proxy in Europe. The signature is identical to the one that hit the Times Square screens.”

Hilliard stared at the screen. He looked at Elia, then at Cailin — not surprised, but determined.

“Aron,” Hilliard said, the name rolling off his tongue with a heavy mixture of pride and sorrow. “He’s checking our defenses.”

Cailin felt the blood drain from her face. “Hilliard —”

“I know they’re out there, Cailin,” Hilliard said, standing slowly. He walked toward her. “I know I have two sons. Aron and Davy.”

He stopped directly in front of her.

“I let you send them away because I needed to secure this house first. I needed to remove the threats,” Hilliard said, his voice a low, unbreakable vow. “But the threats are gone now.”

Cailin gripped Elia tighter. “You stay away from them.”

Hilliard smiled. It wasn’t a threat — it was a promise.

“Gavin,” Hilliard ordered, never taking his eyes off Cailin. “Prepare the jet. We are going to bring my sons home.”

The order to prepare the jet hung in the air, heavy and suffocating.

Cailin stood frozen near the French doors, her heart hammering a frantic rhythm against her ribs. He knows. He's not just suspecting anymore — he's acting. The thought was a shard of ice in her gut. The jet, the sudden urgency — it was all aimed at her secrets. The digital walls she and Kegan had built around Aron and Davy felt paper-thin, about to be torn down by the force of his will.

"Hilliard, you can't just —"

A scream shattered the tension.

It was high-pitched, terrified, and it came from the terrace outside.

"Help! Someone help!"

Cailin's maternal instinct overrode her panic. She spun around, blood draining from her face. That wasn't Elia's voice. It was Jakobe's.

But where was Elia?

Hilliard was already moving. He vaulted over the low sofa, his movements fluid and lethal, sprinting toward the patio doors. Cailin was right on his heels, bare feet slapping against cold marble.

They burst out into the blinding afternoon sun.

The villa's infinity pool, cantilevered over the cliff's edge, stretched out like a sheet of blue glass — usually serene. Now the water churned violently.

In the center of the deep end, a small head bobbed up and down. Pink fabric. Dark hair.

Elia.

"Mommy!" Elia choked out, her voice gurgling as water filled her mouth. She went under.

"Elia!" Cailin screamed, the sound tearing from her throat raw and jagged.

Before Hilliard could dive, a figure in yellow swim trunks leaped from the edge. Jakobe. The older boy splashed awkwardly toward Elia. To an outsider, it looked heroic. But Cailin, watching with the hyper-focus of a mother witnessing her worst nightmare, saw something else.

Jakobe reached Elia. But instead of pulling her up, his hand pressed down on her shoulder — just for a second, a subtle, vicious shove disguised as a struggle for buoyancy.

Elia's head went under again.

Hilliard hit the water.

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He swam with powerful, angry strokes, cutting the distance in seconds. He grabbed Elia by the back of her swimsuit and hauled her up, breaking the surface, then hooked his other arm around Jakobe, who was now flailing and crying hysterically. He dragged them both to the shallow steps.

Cailin was already there, falling to her knees on the wet concrete. She grabbed Elia from Hilliard's arms and pulled her shivering, coughing daughter against her chest.

"Breathe, baby. Breathe," Cailin commanded, her hands frantically checking Elia's face, her chest.

Elia retched, expelling a lungful of chlorinated water onto the pool deck. She was trembling so violently her teeth chattered, her eyes wide and blown, fixed on Jakobe.

Jakobe sat a few feet away, wrapped in a towel that a maid had rushed over, sobbing loudly with his face buried in his hands.

"I tried!" Jakobe wailed, looking up to make sure Hilliard was watching. "She wanted the unicorn float — it drifted away — I told her not to, but she fell in!"

Jeraldine came running from the main wing of the villa, heels clicking sharply on the stone. She must have been summoned earlier, a concession to the farce of family Hilliard was trying to maintain.

“Jakobe! Oh, my poor angel!” Jeraldine bypassed the gasping Elia and scooped Jakobe into her arms. “You brave boy. You jumped in? You saved her?”

“I was so scared, Grandma,” Jakobe wept, burying his face in Jeraldine’s silk blouse. “I didn’t want her to die.”

Hilliard stood. Water dripped from his suit, pooling around his expensive leather shoes. He slicked his wet hair back, grey eyes scanning the scene.

He looked at the giant unicorn float drifting innocently in the center of the pool. He looked at the distance from the edge. Then he looked at Jakobe.

“She fell?” Hilliard asked. His voice was low, cutting through Jeraldine’s cooing.

“Yes, Daddy,” Jakobe sniffled. He held up his arm, showing a fresh red scratch. “Look — I hurt myself trying to grab her.”

Cailin felt Elia stiffen in her arms. The little girl’s small fingers dug into Cailin’s biceps, pinching the skin — not a grip of comfort, but of terror.

Cailin looked at Jakobe. She saw the scratch. It was perfectly straight. Self-inflicted.

"You liar," Cailin whispered.

Jeraldine's head snapped up. "Excuse me? He just saved your child's life, and you call him a liar?"

"Elia can swim," Cailin said, her voice rising, shaking with rage. "She's been swimming since she was three. She didn't fall. She was pushed."

"How dare you!" Jeraldine shrieked.

"Enough," Hilliard barked.

He stepped between the two women and looked down at Elia, still coughing, her face pale and waxy. He reached out to touch her wet hair.

Cailin slapped his hand away.

"Don't," she hissed. "This is your house. Your family. Your fault."

Hilliard's jaw tightened. He looked at Jakobe, huddled in Jeraldine's arms, playing the victim with Oscar-worthy precision. Then he looked at Elia — silent and traumatized.

He felt a cold knot settle in his stomach. The math didn't add up.

"Get everyone inside," Hilliard ordered the staff. "Now."

He didn't look at Cailin. He couldn't. Because he knew she was right. Nowhere in this gilded cage was safe.

Chapter 315:

The study was dark, the heavy curtains drawn against the afternoon sun.

Hilliard sat behind his desk, having thrown on a dry shirt but not bothering with a tie. Water still dripped from the ends of his hair onto the crisp collar, but he didn't care.

On the other side of the desk sat Jakobe, changed into a dry white linen shirt and trousers. He looked small in the oversized leather chair. Too small. Too innocent.

"Play it again," Hilliard said.

Gavin, standing by the wall, tapped the tablet. The large screen displayed the pool feed.

The camera angle was obscured. The massive inflatable unicorn had drifted into the frame at the critical moment, blocking the view of the two children at the edge. All the camera caught was the splash.

“You can’t see anything, Daddy,” Jakobe said softly. “I told you. It was an accident.”

Hilliard paused the video and zoomed in on the seconds before the splash. Jakobe was looking around — checking the perimeter. It wasn’t the behavior of a child playing. It was the behavior of a predator checking for witnesses.

“Why did you wait?” Hilliard asked.

Jakobe blinked. “What?”

“You waited,” Hilliard said. “Five seconds. From the splash to the scream. Five seconds is a long time when someone is drowning, Jakobe.”

Jakobe’s lower lip trembled. Tears welled instantly in his big blue eyes.

“I... was scared. I froze.”

“You froze,” Hilliard repeated flatly. “But then you jumped in with perfect form.”

Jakobe slid off the chair, walked around the desk, and threw himself at Hilliard's legs, wrapping his arms around his damp trousers.

"Why do you hate me?" he wailed. "Is it because I'm not really yours? Is it because I'm the one who has always been here, trying to be the son you wanted, and now she's here and everything is ruined?"

Hilliard stiffened. He hated this. He hated emotional manipulation — and this child was a prodigy at it.

"Jakobe, stand up."

"No! You think I'm bad! You think I hurt her!" He looked up, his face a mask of tragic despair. "I try so hard to be a good Holloway. I learned piano. I learned French. Just for you, Daddy. And you still look at me like I'm trash."

The door burst open.

Jeraldine marched in, face flushed with indignation. She swooped down and pulled Jakobe away from Hilliard, cradling his head against her hip.

"He is burning up! He has a fever from the shock, and you are interrogating him like a criminal?"

“Mother, he pushed Elia,” Hilliard said, standing. “I know it.”

“You know nothing!” Jeraldine spat. “You are blinded by that woman and her brood. Jakobe is the only one in this house who respects you. Come, darling. We’re leaving.”

Jakobe buried his face in Jeraldine’s skirt. But just before they turned to go, he peeked out at Hilliard with one eye. It wasn’t a look of fear. It was a look of triumph.

Hilliard slammed his fist onto the desk as the door closed.

Chapter 316:

“Gavin,” he growled. “Get the forensic team to check the pool deck for skid marks. I want to know exactly where they were standing.”

“Yes, sir.”

Hilliard sank back into his chair and rubbed his temples. The headache was blinding.

He thought about the jet waiting on the tarmac. He thought about Aron and Davy in Europe.

“Cancel the flight,” Hilliard said.

Gavin looked surprised. "Sir? The boys..."

"I can't leave," Hilliard said, staring at the closed door. "Not while there is a snake in my house."

Down the hall, in the medical wing, Cailin sat by the bed.

Elia was wrapped in three heated blankets, her breathing steady but her eyes fixed blankly on the wall.

"Elia," Cailin whispered, stroking her damp hair. "Look at me."

Elia turned her head slowly.

"Did he push you?" Cailin asked.

Elia opened her mouth. Then closed it. She remembered the whisper in the water. The hand on her head. You little mutt.

If she told the truth, the bad Grandma would scream. Daddy would yell. Mommy would be upset.

Elia squeezed her eyes shut.

"I slipped," she whispered.

The lie hung in the sterile air of the medical room, heavy and rotten.

Cailin stopped stroking Elia's hair. Her hand froze mid-air.

"Elia," she said firmly. "Look at me. You don't have to protect anyone. Not him. Not Hilliard."

Elia opened her eyes — old eyes, eyes that had seen too much fear for a five-year-old.

"I slipped, Mommy," Elia repeated, her voice robotic. "The tiles were wet."

Cailin felt her heart break. Her daughter was already learning the first rule of survival in the Holloway house: silence is safety.

The door opened. Hilliard walked in, changed into dry clothes — a dark grey suit that made him look like a storm cloud. He walked to the foot of the bed and looked at Elia with an expression Cailin had never seen on him before. Guilt.

“Elia,” he said softly. “If he hurt you, you tell me. I will send him away. Tonight.”

Elia looked at Hilliard. She saw the tension in his shoulders, the way his hands were clenched.

“It was an accident, Daddy,” she said.

Hilliard flinched at the word Daddy. It hit him like a physical blow. He let out a long breath and ran a hand over his face.

“Okay,” he said. “Okay.”

He turned to Cailin. “Can I speak to you? Outside.”

Cailin kissed Elia’s forehead. “I’ll be right back, baby. Don’t move.”

They stepped into the hallway. The corridor was long, lined with portraits of dead Holloways staring down with judgmental eyes.

“I’m doubling the security detail on this wing,” Hilliard said immediately. “Two guards outside the door, twenty-four seven. No one enters without your permission. Not even my mother.”

“That’s not enough,” Cailin said, crossing her arms. “I want to take her out of here.”

“No.”

“She almost died, Hilliard!”

“And she won’t be touched again,” Hilliard vowed. His voice dropped to a whisper, intimate and harsh. “You think I don’t know what Jakobe is? I know he’s broken. I know he’s jealous.”

“Then why is he still here?”

Chapter 317:

“Because my mother has legally adopted him,” Hilliard said. “It’s complicated. But listen to me, Cailin — Jakobe is a prop. He isn’t blood. He isn’t a Holloway. He means nothing to me compared to Elia.”

He said it with the cold detachment of a king discussing a pawn.

“Blood is all you care about,” Cailin spat. “It’s a disease.”

“It’s legacy,” Hilliard corrected. “And I protect my legacy.”

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

He didn't see the shadow around the corner.

Jakobe stood pressed against the wall, clutching a pair of scissors he had stolen from the nurse's station. He had heard every word.

He isn't blood. He means nothing.

Jakobe's face didn't crumple. He didn't cry. His expression went completely blank.

He turned and walked silently back to his room, locked the door, and pulled a ragdoll out from under his pillow — an old, cheap thing from the orphanage.

"It's okay," he whispered to the doll. "Daddy didn't mean it."

He raised the scissors.

Snip.

The doll's yarn hair fell to the floor.

"He just needs to see," Jakobe whispered, his eyes wide and unblinking. "He needs to see that I'm the strong one. The survivor."

Snip.

He cut the doll's arm off.

"Elia is weak. Weak things break."

Jakobe smiled — a smile that didn't reach his eyes.

Dinner was a funeral for the living.

The mahogany table was long enough to land a plane on. Hilliard sat at the head. Jeraldine sat to his right. Preston, Hilliard's cousin who had flown in upon hearing news of the "accident," sat opposite, moving through the villa like a vulture circling a fresh kill — his presence a clear sign that family weakness was an opportunity.

Cailin walked in with Elia.

Hilliard gestured to the empty seat beside him. The seat of the lady of the house.

Cailin ignored him. She walked to the far end of the table and sat next to Elia.

“So,” Preston began, swirling his red wine. He had the same grey eyes as Hilliard, but where Hilliard’s were steel, Preston’s were slush. “I hear we have a little swimmer in the family. Or rather, a sinker.”

Hilliard’s knife hit his plate with a sharp clink. “Watch your mouth, Preston.”

“Just making conversation, cousin,” Preston smirked. “It’s quite the circus you’re running here. Daughter falling into pools, adopted orphans playing lifeguard. Uncle Amerigo must be rolling in his sickbed.”

Jakobe, sitting next to Jeraldine, looked down at his plate.

“I’m sorry, Elia,” he said, his voice trembling. “If I had just been faster...”

He looked around the table, waiting for the praise — waiting for Jeraldine to call him a hero again. But no one was looking at him. They were all looking at Cailin.

Cailin was cutting Elia’s steak with surgical precision.

“I have a proposal, Hilliard,” Cailin said, without looking up.

“Not the time,” Hilliard muttered.

“Perfect time,” Cailin said. She put down her knife. She felt their eyes on her, judging, but this wasn’t about greed — it was about creating a weapon. “I will stay. I will stop trying to run with Elia. For now.”

Chapter 318:

Hilliard leaned forward. “And in exchange?”

“I want the exclusive representation rights for the Blue Ocean collection,” Cailin said.

The table went silent. The Blue Ocean collection was the crown jewel of the Holloway art assets — worth hundreds of millions, requiring international travel, secure logistics, and access to a global network of the ultra-rich. It was the perfect cover.

Preston laughed. “She’s a gold digger! I told you, Hilliard! She doesn’t care about the kid — she wants the portfolio!”

Cailin looked at Preston. Her gaze was withering.

“I’m a businesswoman, Preston. Something you’ll never be.”

She turned back to Hilliard. “Do we have a deal?”

Hilliard studied her. He knew she was up to something. Cailin didn’t care about money. She needed the collection for something else — access, travel, resources.

“Done,” Hilliard said.

“You can’t be serious!” Jeraldine gasped.

“It’s my company, Mother,” Hilliard said.

Jakobe felt heat rising in his chest. They were talking about millions of dollars, about power, and he was invisible.

He reached for his water goblet. His hand shook — intentionally.

He knocked the goblet over. Preston’s bottle of red wine was right there; it spilled across the white tablecloth and splashed onto Elia’s white dress.

“Oh no!” Jakobe shrieked, jumping up. “I’m so clumsy! I’m so sorry!”

A stain. A mess. A humiliation.

Elia looked down at the red spreading across her chest. It looked like blood.

Most children would have cried.

Elia picked up her napkin and dabbed at the stain calmly.

“It’s okay, Jakobe,” Elia said, her voice clear and loud. “Red is a power color. Mommy says so.”

She looked at him — and for a second, Jakobe saw Cailin’s eyes in the little girl’s face. Cold. Unafraid.

“Maybe you should switch to a sippy cup,” Elia added.

Preston choked on his laugh. Even Hilliard’s mouth twitched.

Jakobe stood there, face burning, realizing he had just lost the round.

The playroom was a technicolor wonderland, filled with every toy money could buy. It was also a cage.

Elia sat on the plush carpet, building a tower out of Lego bricks — tall, complex, structurally sound.

Jakobe stood over her.

“You think you’re smart,” Jakobe said.

Elia didn’t answer. She placed a yellow brick.

Jakobe kicked the tower. Plastic bricks scattered across the room.

“Oops,” Jakobe sneered.

Elia didn’t flinch. She picked up a brick.

“You pushed me,” Elia said. It wasn’t a question.

Jakobe crouched down. “Yeah. I did. And next time, I’ll hold you down longer.”

“Why?”

“Because this is my house,” Jakobe hissed. “My Daddy. My Grandma. You’re just a mistake. A dirty little secret.”

Elia looked at him and tilted her head.

“Daddy said you aren’t blood,” Elia said.

Jakobe froze. His face contorted. “Shut up!”

“He said you are a prop,” Elia continued, reciting words she hadn’t heard but instinctively understood.
“He said you mean nothing.”

Jakobe screamed — a primal, animal sound. He lunged at her, nails aimed at her face.

Chapter 319:

Elia rolled backward, grabbing a heavy wooden block and holding it up, ready to strike.

“Touch me,” Elia warned, “and I will scream so loud the windows break. And this time, I won’t lie.”

Jakobe stopped. He saw the ferocity in Elia’s small body. This wasn’t a victim. This was a Holloway.

The door opened.

Gavin stood in the doorway, looking pale. “Children. Stop.”

Jakobe immediately dropped his hands and burst into tears. “She hit me! She hit me with a block!”

Gavin ignored him. He glanced at the camera in the corner — he knew Cailin was watching from the security room.

“Mrs. Holloway,” Gavin said into his earpiece. “We have a situation.”

In the study, Cailin watched the monitor, her hands shaking. She wanted to run in there and tear Jakobe apart.

“Get Elia out,” Cailin ordered into the mic. “Now.”

"I can't, ma'am," Gavin said. "We have an emergency."

"What emergency?"

"It's Mr. Amerigo," Gavin said. "The Chairman. He collapsed on the terrace. His heart."

Cailin felt the blood drain from her face.

Amerigo. The old tyrant. The man who had threatened to take her children. But also the man who was the glue holding the fractured family together.

If Amerigo died, the war for inheritance wouldn't just be about money. It would be about bloodlines. And Elia was the only legitimate heir.

"Where is Hilliard?" Cailin asked.

"He's with him. The ambulance is on the way."

Cailin grabbed her phone and typed a message to Kegan.

The King is falling. Chaos is coming. Be ready.

The VIP waiting room of Mount Sinai Hospital was a fortress. Security guards blocked every exit.

Cailin sat in the corner, wearing a hoodie and sunglasses. She had slipped out of the manor in the chaos of the ambulance departure. Hilliard hadn't stopped her — he was too busy keeping his father alive in the back of the rig.

Her phone buzzed. Kegan.

I have an extraction team on standby. A boat is waiting at the base of the cliff. Say the word.

Cailin looked at the double doors of the ICU.

"Not yet," she typed back.

She needed to know. If Amerigo died, the will would be read — and she needed to know what was in it before she ran.

The doors opened. Hilliard walked out looking shattered, his shirt stained with blood. He slumped into a chair opposite Cailin.

“He’s stabilizing,” Hilliard said, his voice gravel. “But it’s bad. Lung failure.”

Cailin didn’t offer comfort. She couldn’t.

“Preston is already calling the board members,” Cailin said. “He’s counting the votes.”

Hilliard laughed bitterly. “Let him count. He’s a vulture.”

“He’s dangerous, Hilliard. If he takes control, he’ll come for Elia. He knows she’s the threat to his succession.”

Hilliard looked up at her, eyes red-rimmed. “He won’t touch her.”

“You can’t promise that!” Cailin hissed. “You couldn’t even stop a teenage boy from pushing her into a pool!”

Hilliard flinched.

“I’m handling Jakobe.”

“By letting him stay in the house?”

“By sending him to boarding school in Switzerland. Tomorrow.”

Cailin paused. “Switzerland?”

Chapter 320:

“Yes. Far away. Secure.”

It was a good move. But it was too late.

Dr. Sterling, the chief of staff, walked over. He knew Cailin from her “Cali” days — she had donated a wing to the hospital anonymously.

“Mrs. Holloway,” he nodded respectfully, not looking at Hilliard. “He’s asking for you.”

“Me?” Cailin asked.

“Yes. Just you.”

Hilliard stood. "I'm his son."

"He was specific, sir," Dr. Sterling said. "He wants to see Cailin."

Hilliard looked at her. There was jealousy in his eyes, but also resignation.

"Go," he said.

Cailin stood and walked toward the ICU doors, feeling as though she were walking into the mouth of a beast.

Why did he want her?

She pushed through the doors. The beeping of monitors was the only sound.

Amerigo Holloway lay in the bed, looking small and withered. The lion had lost his teeth.

He opened his eyes when she approached.

"Come closer," he wheezed.

Cailin walked to the bedside.

"Closer."

She leaned down.

Amerigo grabbed her wrist. His grip was surprisingly strong. A death grip.

"Tell me," he rasped. "The truth."

The air in the ICU room smelled of antiseptic and decay.

"The truth," Amerigo repeated, his eyes boring into Cailin's. "Hilliard — does he have a son? Is there a male heir to secure the line?"

Cailin's heart hammered. He suspected. He knew Elia was Hilliard's, but he sensed there was more — sensed the void where Aron and Davy should be.

“Elia is his,” Cailin whispered. “You know that.”

“One girl,” Amerigo scoffed, coughing violently. “A girl can’t hold the empire against Preston. Preston will eat her alive. I need a king.”

He squeezed her wrist harder. His nails dug into her skin.

“Are there others? Tell me, girl. Did you hide them? Did you steal my grandsons?”

Cailin froze.

If she said yes, Amerigo would die happy. He would rewrite the will in seconds, leaving everything to Aron and Davy. But he would also put a target on their backs the size of Manhattan. Preston would hunt them down. Charla would find them. Their lives would be over.

“Tell me!” Amerigo hissed.

The door opened behind them.

Cailin spun around.

It wasn't a nurse. It was Jeraldine — and behind her, looking like a ghost in a white dress, was Charla. Jeraldine swept in as if she owned the hospital, Charla trailing like a venomous shadow. Jeraldine must have used her position on the hospital's board of directors to bypass Hilliard's lockdown.

"Get out," Cailin said.

"We are family," Jeraldine said coldly. "We have a right to be here."

Charla stepped forward. She must have bribed her way out of the transport to the Congo — a contingency Cailin hadn't accounted for. She looked at Amerigo, then at Cailin, her eyes gleaming with malice.

"Ask her about Zurich, Amerigo," Charla said softly. "Ask her about the two boys in the boarding school."