

Second chance 321

Chapter 321:

Cailin felt the blood leave her body. Hilliard, who had followed them to the doorway, froze. His eyes locked on Cailin, the single word Zurich confirming everything he already knew — a silent, loaded exchange over the dying man's bed.

Amerigo's eyes widened with desperate hope. "Zurich? Boys?"

Cailin looked at Charla and saw the trap. If she admitted it, Charla won. Charla would use the information to destroy them.

Cailin looked back at the dying man and made her choice.

Latest chapters on .com

"She's lying," Cailin said, her voice steady and cold. "There are no boys. I terminated the pregnancy five years ago. There was only Elia."

Amerigo's face fell. The light went out of his eyes.

"No," he whispered. "No."

“Elia is all there is,” Cailin said. “And I’m taking her away.”

Amerigo let go of her wrist. His hand dropped to the sheet. He looked defeated. Broken.

“Then it’s over,” he murmured. “The Holloway name... ends.”

The monitor began to beep faster.

“Get the doctor!” Jeraldine screamed.

Cailin backed away and looked at Charla.

Charla was smiling.

The corridor was chaos. Doctors rushed past Cailin into the room.

Cailin stood against the wall, shaking. She had just denied her sons to save them. It felt like a betrayal of her own soul.

Hilliard grabbed her shoulders. “What happened? What did you say to him?” His grip was tight, his eyes searching hers — not for information, but for a sign, a confirmation of the game she was playing.

AdChoices

ADVERTISING

“I told him the truth,” Cailin lied, hoping he understood. “That there’s no hope.”

Charla walked up to them, checking her nails.

“You’re a good liar, Cailin,” Charla whispered. “But not good enough.”

She pulled out her phone, tapped the screen, and held it up to Cailin.

It was a photo — grainy, taken from a distance with a telephoto lens. Two boys. Identical dark hair. Grey eyes. They were walking out of a school building in Zurich.

Aron and Davy.

Cailin felt the world tilt. She grabbed the wall to keep from falling.

“Cute,” Charla said. “They look just like Hilliard. Don’t they, Hilliard?”

She began to turn the phone toward him.

Cailin slapped it out of her hand. It skittered across the floor.

“Don’t you dare,” Cailin snarled, stepping into Charla’s space, her face inches from hers. “If you show him that — if you touch them — I will kill you. I will rip your throat out with my teeth.” She turned her head just enough to hiss at Hilliard, “It’s a deepfake. A fake. She’s been trying to ruin me for years.”

Hilliard looked between them. He saw Cailin’s feral terror. He saw Charla’s smugness.

He didn’t need to see the photo. He already knew.

“Charla,” Hilliard said, his voice low and dangerous. “Leave.”

“Or what?” Charla laughed. “You’ll banish me again? I have insurance now, Hilliard. Two little insurance policies.”

Hilliard grabbed Charla by the arm and squeezed until she winced.

"If you go near my family," Hilliard said, "I won't banish you. I will erase you."

A long, flat tone echoed from inside the hospital room.

The sound of a flatline.

Silence fell over the hallway.

Chapter 322:

Dr. Sterling walked out and looked at Hilliard. He shook his head.

"Time of death, 4:12 PM."

Amerigo was gone.

Preston, who had been lurking down the hall, let out a howl of performative grief. "My uncle! My poor uncle!" He immediately turned to his lawyer. "Seal the room! I want the will read immediately!"

Cailin looked at Hilliard. He wasn't crying. He was staring at the closed door, his face a mask of stone.

"It's starting," Cailin whispered.

Hilliard looked at her.

"No," he said. "It's ending."

The conference room at the law firm was cold. The air conditioning was set to morgue temperature.

Hilliard, Cailin, Preston, Jeraldine, and Charla sat around the table.

The executor, a man named Mr. Finch, opened the leather folder.

"The Last Will and Testament of Amerigo Holloway," he began.

He read through the minor bequests — the charities, the staff. Then came the substance.

"To my nephew, Preston, I leave the liquid assets and the real estate portfolio."

Preston pumped his fist. "Yes!"

"However," Mr. Finch continued, raising a hand. "The controlling shares of Holloway Group — fifty-one percent — are placed in a blind trust."

Preston froze. "A trust? For who?"

"The voting rights of this trust," Mr. Finch read, "are governed by the 1928 Holloway Family Charter, which stipulates that control must pass to the direct biological male heir of the primary bloodline upon his eighteenth birthday. Until such time, or if no such heir is confirmed to exist by Hilliard Holloway's fortieth birthday, the voting rights revert to the next of kin — my nephew, Preston Holloway."

Silence.

"He doesn't have a son!" Preston slammed his hand on the table and pointed a shaking finger at Hilliard. "He has a bastard daughter! That doesn't count under the charter!"

"The charter specifies 'male heir,'" Mr. Finch confirmed.

All eyes turned to Hilliard.

Hilliard sat still. He remembered Charla's taunts, Cailin's violent denial. He had no proof to present — no DNA, no birth certificates.

He looked at Cailin.

"Cailin," Hilliard said softly. "Is there anything you need to tell us?"

It was a plea. He was begging her to save his legacy. To give him his sons.

Cailin looked at Preston, drooling over the power. She looked at Charla, smiling like a shark, waiting for Cailin to expose the boys so she could hunt them.

Cailin reached into her bag and pulled out a file — Kegan's masterpiece. She slid it across the table to Mr. Finch.

"This is my medical file from the clinic in Geneva," Cailin said. Her voice was dead. "Dated five years ago."

Mr. Finch opened it and adjusted his glasses.

"It appears to be a record of a... termination," he said. "Of a multiple pregnancy. Two male fetuses."

Hilliard felt Cailin's foot press subtly against his under the table. A signal. He looked at the file, at the cold, clinical words that contradicted the fierce, protective animal he had seen in the hospital. This wasn't a confession. It was a shield.

Chapter 323:

He stared at the official stamps, the doctor's signature. He had to sell it. For them.

"No," he whispered, allowing a tremor into his voice. "That's not true."

"It is," Cailin said, holding his gaze, her own expression a mask of cold regret. "I ended the pregnancy, Hilliard. Because I knew they would end up in a room like this — fighting over money with vultures."

Hilliard let his face crumple, a performance of devastation. The hope he had so recently found, the certainty about his sons — he had to bury it under a mountain of feigned grief.

"You..." Hilliard choked, the word tasting like ash. "You did that?"

"I did," Cailin said.

"Then there is no heir!" Preston shouted, leaping to his feet. "The shares are mine! I control the company!"

Charla looked confused. She had seen the photo. But the medical records looked real. Was the photo a fake? Had she been wrong?

Hilliard stood. He looked at Cailin with what he hoped appeared to be pure horror.

"Get out," he whispered.

"Hilliard —"

"Get out!" he roared. "Get out of my sight!"

Cailin grabbed her bag and walked out of the room.

She made it to the elevator before her legs gave out. She slid down the wall and buried her face in her knees.

She had saved them. But she had destroyed Hilliard to do it.

The underground parking garage was dark.

Cailin sat in her car, doors locked, and dialed Kegan.

“Did it work?” Kegan asked.

“Yes,” Cailin sobbed. “They bought it. Even Hilliard.”

“Good. The boys are airborne. They’ll be at the safe house by morning.”

“Thank you, Kegan.”

“Cailin,” Kegan said, his voice serious. “Charla isn’t stupid. She’ll double-check. You need to get Elia out. Tonight.”

“I can’t. The funeral is tomorrow. Hilliard has locked down the estate. If I try to take Elia now, he’ll stop me. He hates me, Kegan. He really hates me now.”

“He’s grieving a lie,” Kegan said. “Better he grieves than the boys die.”

Cailin wiped her eyes and pulled up the secure video feed on her dashboard.

Aron and Davy were sitting in the private jet, playing video games. They looked happy. Safe.

“Mommy?” Aron looked at the camera. “Are we going on a spy mission?”

“Yes, baby,” Cailin managed a smile. “The biggest mission ever. You stay with Uncle Kegan. Be brave.”

“We are always brave,” Davy said.

She cut the feed.

A knock on the window made her jump.

Hilliard.

He was standing there looking like a ghost — suit rumpled, tie gone, eyes bloodshot and hollow. Not with anger, but with a terrifying emptiness. He looked like a man who had watched the world end and hadn't bothered to look away.

Cailin rolled the window down an inch.

“What do you want?”

“The funeral is tomorrow,” Hilliard said, his voice devoid of emotion. “You will attend. With Elia.”

“I’m not going.”

“You are,” Hilliard said. “You are my wife. You will stand by my side. And then —”

“And then?”

Chapter 324:

“And then you can go,” Hilliard said. “Take the girl. Take the money. Just go. I don’t want to see you ever again.”

He turned and walked away, disappearing into the shadows. As he went, he discreetly pulled out his phone and sent a single text to a secure number: Tracker active. Phase two begins tomorrow.

Cailin watched him go. It was what she wanted. Freedom.

But why did it feel like she was dying?

Up in the penthouse of the English Hotel, Charla was pacing.

“The records looked real,” she muttered. “But the photo...”

She looked at the picture of the boys again.

“If they are dead,” she whispered, “then who are these kids?”

She picked up a marker and drew a red X over the boys’ faces.

“It doesn’t matter,” she decided. “If I can’t find the boys, I’ll hurt the one thing she has left.”

She circled Elia’s face on another photo.

“See you at the funeral, little princess.”

The morning after Amerigo’s death brought no peace to Manhattan. It only shifted the battlefield.

The brutal events of the previous days — the blood, the agonizing lie about an abortion she had weaponized against herself, the sheer terror of almost losing her twin boys — still clawed at Cailin's throat. She had spent the dark hours staring at the ceiling of her temporary suite, eyes burning and dry. Grief was a luxury she could not afford. Pity was a poison. What she needed right now wasn't closure. She needed a weapon.

Morning sunlight pierced the floor-to-ceiling windows of the Obsidian Auction House. Cailin pushed open the heavy glass doors. Her red-bottomed heels clicked against the polished marble floor, a sharp, rhythmic sound that cut through the quiet hum of the lobby.

She wore a tailored charcoal suit that fit her like armor, her face a mask of absolute ice. The grief from the hospital, the terror of losing her sons — all of it was locked away in a dark box inside her chest. Right now, she needed power.

The front desk receptionist looked up. Her eyes widened. The paper coffee cup slipped from her fingers, splashing hot brown liquid across the pristine white counter.

"M-Ms. Morton?" the receptionist stammered. "I thought you were —"

Cailin didn't stop. She didn't even glance at the spilled coffee. She walked straight past the reception desk, eyes fixed on the hallway leading to the Senior Director's office.

The door was slightly ajar.

Inside, Nadine sat in the massive leather swivel chair that used to belong to Cailin, holding a small silver mirror and carefully applying a coat of bright red lipstick. She looked entirely too comfortable.

Cailin pushed the door open. The heavy wood hit the stopper with a loud thud.

Nadine jumped. She lowered the mirror, her initial shock quickly melting into a sneer.

“Well, well,” Nadine drawled, leaning back in the chair. “If it isn’t the Holloway family’s discarded trash. Did you get lost on your way to the unemployment office, Cailin? Security should have escorted you out weeks ago.”

Chapter 325:

Cailin didn’t say a word. She walked up to the mahogany desk, raised her right hand, and slammed a fifty-page document down onto the polished wood.

The heavy thud echoed in the room. Nadine flinched violently. Her hand jerked, and the red lipstick smeared a harsh, clownish line across her cheek.

Cailin leaned forward, planting both hands flat on the desk, her shadow swallowing the other woman.

“Account code 884-J,” Cailin said, her voice dangerously low. “Account code 902-X. Account code 411-B.”

Nadine's face lost all its color. The smugness vanished, replaced by raw, physiological panic. Her breathing hitched.

"Those are the hidden offshore accounts you used to place fake bids in the last three auctions," Cailin continued, tapping her manicured fingernail against the thick SEC compliance audit report. "You artificially inflated the hammer prices to boost your commission. It's a federal crime, Nadine."

Nadine's hand trembled. She lunged forward, trying to snatch the report off the desk.

Cailin was faster. She slammed her palm down on the document, pinning it, and with her other hand slapped Nadine's wrist away. The sharp smack of skin on skin rang out.

"Don't touch my property," Cailin warned.

Heavy footsteps pounded down the hallway. Zach, the Regional Director and Nadine's current boyfriend, burst into the office with two burly security guards flanking him.

Nadine instantly burst into tears. She leaped out of the chair and threw herself at Zach, burying her face in his chest.

"Zach! She just barged in here!" Nadine sobbed, pointing a shaking finger at Cailin. "She hit me! Get her out of here!"

Zach wrapped an arm around Nadine and puffed out his chest, adopting the arrogant posture of a Wall Street executive.

“Cailin, you are trespassing,” Zach barked. “You were terminated. Grab your things and get out, or I’m having the guards physically throw you onto the street.”

Outside the glass walls of the office, a crowd of employees had gathered. Jo, a junior appraiser, stood at the front, her hands clenched into tight fists, looking terrified for Cailin.

Cailin stood up straight and reached into the inner pocket of her blazer. She pulled out a single sheet of heavy parchment paper. The gold foil seal of the Holloway Group Legal Department gleamed in the sunlight.

She held it up directly in front of Zach’s face.

“As of eight o’clock this morning,” Cailin said, her voice carrying through the open door, “I am the sole authorized representative for the Blue Ocean Collection. I hold the exclusive proxy for over one billion dollars in art assets.”

Zach’s eyes darted to the gold seal. His jaw dropped. The color drained from his face so fast he looked sick, pupils dilating as the reality of that number hit his brain. One billion dollars — the account that kept the entire regional branch afloat.

“According to Obsidian’s corporate compliance policy,” Cailin said, her eyes locking onto Zach’s terrified face, “any employee caught manipulating bids must be immediately stripped of their title and access. Do it, Zach. Or I take the Blue Ocean portfolio to Sotheby’s.”

Zach swallowed hard. His Adam's apple bobbed.

Chapter 326:

He looked at the billion-dollar seal. Then he looked at Nadine.

Without a moment's hesitation, he peeled Nadine's arms off his chest and took a large step back, physically distancing himself from her.

"Zach?" Nadine whispered, her voice cracking. "What are you doing?"

"Security," Zach ordered, his voice completely devoid of warmth. "Pack Ms. Nadine's personal items. Move her desk down to the basement archives. Immediately."

Nadine let out a high-pitched shriek and lunged at Zach. The two security guards grabbed her by the arms and hauled her backward. She thrashed wildly, her expensive heels dragging across the carpet, leaving deep grooves, screaming obscenities all the way down the hall until her voice faded with her dignity.

The employees outside the glass wall took a collective step back, staring at Cailin with wide, fearful eyes. The shift in power was absolute.

Jo practically ran into the office and grabbed a tissue, frantically wiping the smeared lipstick and spilled coffee off the mahogany desk.

“Welcome back, Ms. Morton,” Jo whispered, her hands shaking with adrenaline.

“Thank you, Jo. Close the door on your way out,” Cailin said.

She walked around the desk and sat down in the heavy leather chair. The leather was still warm from Nadine. Cailin let out a long, slow breath. Her stomach muscles finally unknotted.

She booted up the computer, bypassed the standard auction files, and opened the encrypted logistics network. She needed to find a private, untraceable flight corridor to get Elia out of the country. The clock was ticking.

Her phone vibrated on the desk. The screen lit up — a text from Hilliard.

I am picking you up. Do not make me wait.

Cailin stared at the screen. Her pulse spiked. The battle in the office was over. But the war with her husband was just beginning.

By five-thirty, the Manhattan sky had bruised purple and black. A cold, relentless rain began to fall, turning Fifth Avenue into a slick river of neon reflections.

Inside the lobby of the Obsidian building, a crowd of employees huddled near the revolving doors, waiting for the downpour to ease.

The elevator dinged. Nadine stepped out.

She was holding a battered cardboard box filled with cheap office supplies and a dying potted plant. She had spent the last eight hours in a dusty, windowless basement. Despite the humiliation, she had reapplied her makeup perfectly and kept her chin high, desperate to salvage a scrap of pride.

A sleek black Porsche Panamera pulled up to the curb, its tires hissing against the wet asphalt. The driver rolled down the window and honked twice. It was Zach.

Nadine's face instantly lit up with a triumphant, artificial smile. She turned to the group of junior appraisers standing nearby.

"Excuse me," Nadine said loudly, making sure her voice carried across the lobby. "My boyfriend is taking me to Le Bernardin for dinner. Some of us don't have to worry about the rain."

Chapter 327:

Her colleagues exchanged uncomfortable glances and forced tight, polite smiles, intimidated by Zach's position as Regional Director even if they despised Nadine.

The elevator dinged again.

Cailin stepped into the lobby wearing a sharp khaki trench coat belted tightly at her waist, a sleek leather portfolio in hand. Her face was calm, her posture completely relaxed.

Nadine saw her. The jealousy in her chest flared hot and toxic. She shifted her cardboard box and stepped directly into Cailin's path, blocking the exit.

"Leaving so soon, Cailin?" Nadine sneered, her eyes raking over the trench coat. "It's pouring out there. It's a shame you have to walk to the subway in this weather. I guess that billion-dollar portfolio doesn't come with a car service."

Cailin stopped. She didn't look angry. She looked bored. She glanced down at her silver wristwatch, her brow furrowing slightly.

Outside, Zach honked the Porsche's horn again, leaning over the passenger seat. "Nadine! Get in the car! You're letting the rain in!" He paused, eyes catching Cailin through the glass doors. His gaze lingered — a sleazy, appreciative look that made Nadine's stomach churn with rage.

Nadine opened her mouth to hurl another insult.

Before she could speak, a sound ripped through the street.

It was a low, guttural roar — a mechanical scream that vibrated in the chest of everyone in the lobby.

A deep blue Bugatti Centodieci, a car so rare it looked like an alien spaceship, tore down Fifth Avenue. It didn't slow down. It violently cut the wheel, slashing through the rain, and slammed its brakes directly in front of the building, boxing the Porsche in completely.

The Porsche looked like a cheap plastic toy parked next to a predator. Zach slammed his hands against his steering wheel, face draining of blood. He didn't dare honk. He didn't dare move.

Everyone in the lobby stopped breathing. Eyes locked onto the ten-million-dollar hypercar.

The driver's door swung upward like a dark wing.

Hilliard stepped out into the storm.

He wore a bespoke, pitch-black Tom Ford suit. He didn't rush. He opened a massive black golf umbrella, his face a mask of cold, aristocratic fury carved from marble. The sheer, oppressive weight of his presence seemed to suck the oxygen out of the street.

He ignored the gaping crowd. He ignored Zach's trembling Porsche. He walked straight to the glass doors.

Cailin pushed through the revolving door to meet him.

Hilliard immediately stepped close and tilted the umbrella entirely over her head. The cold rain instantly soaked his left shoulder, darkening the expensive wool of his suit, but he didn't flinch.

"I told you to wait inside," Hilliard murmured, his voice low and vibrating with a dark, possessive anger. "You're getting damp."

"I didn't want to ruin their lobby carpet," Cailin replied, her tone flat.

Hilliard's jaw ticked. He didn't argue. He reached out, smoothly took the heavy leather portfolio from her hands, and with his other hand gripped her waist, his fingers digging into the fabric of her trench coat and pulling her flush against his side.

He guided her toward the Bugatti.

Chapter 328:

As they passed Nadine, Hilliard stopped for a fraction of a second. He turned his head. His cold grey eyes swept over her, taking in the cardboard box and the smeared red lipstick.

He looked at her the way a man looks at a dead rat on the sidewalk. Total, absolute disgust.

Nadine froze. Her lungs seized. The sheer humiliation burned her skin like acid. Her fingernails dug so hard into the cardboard box they pierced the paper.

Hilliard opened the passenger door of the Bugatti, shielded Cailin as she slid into the low leather seat, and shut the door with a solid, expensive thud. He walked around to the driver's side, got in, and revved the engine.

The Bugatti let out a deafening roar. The tires spun on the wet pavement, kicking up a massive wave of dirty street water that crashed directly against the driver's door of Zach's Porsche.

The hypercar shot down the avenue and disappeared into the rain.

Inside the lobby, the silence shattered. The employees erupted into shocked whispers, their eyes wide. Cailin wasn't a discarded wife. She was a queen guarded by a monster.

Nadine stood in the rain, hair plastering to her face. She walked to the Porsche, yanked the back door open, and hurled her cardboard box onto the leather seats, then climbed into the passenger side, chest heaving with ragged breaths.

Her hands shook as she pulled her phone from her purse. She opened her photo gallery — she had snapped a picture through the glass doors just as Hilliard wrapped his arm around Cailin's waist.

She opened an encrypted messaging app and selected a contact named Charla English. She attached the photo.

I thought you said he threw her out, Nadine typed, her thumbs hitting the screen with vicious force. He just picked her up in a Bugatti. Are you losing your grip, Charla?

She hit send.

Three seconds later, the screen lit up.

Charla replied with a short, chilling message: Let them have their little parade. The best surprises always come at the end.

Nadine stared at the screen. A cold shiver ran down her spine that had nothing to do with the rain.

The Bugatti cleared the heavy iron gates of the Holloway estate. Before the car even came to a complete stop in the circular driveway, Cailin shoved her door open.

She didn't wait for Hilliard's umbrella. She stepped out into the freezing drizzle, her heels sinking slightly into the wet gravel, and practically ran toward the massive oak front doors.

Her heart hammered a frantic rhythm against her ribs. She had been away from Elia all day. Leaving her daughter in this house, surrounded by vipers, twisted Cailin's stomach into painful, tight knots.

She bypassed the grand staircase and hurried down the long, carpeted corridor toward the second-floor playroom. As she neared the room, she slowed her pace. The heavy door was cracked open just an inch.

Cailin held her breath, crept closer, and peered through the narrow gap.

Chapter 329:

Inside, Elia sat quietly on the thick Persian rug, meticulously snapping colorful Lego bricks together to build a massive, intricate European castle. Her small face was a picture of intense concentration.

From the corner of the room, Jakobe approached. Jeraldine's adopted golden child — whose banishment to Switzerland had been violently delayed by his mother's hysterical hunger strike over the past two days — was clutching a giant, fluffy teddy bear. His eyes were fixed on Elia's castle, a dark, calculating glint flashing in them.

Jakobe took two steps forward. Then he deliberately hooked his own foot behind his ankle.

With a theatrical gasp, he threw his entire body weight forward and crashed directly into the castle.

Crash.

The sharp, plastic shattering sound echoed in the room. The beautiful castle exploded into hundreds of pieces, scattering across the rug.

Elia's small hands froze mid-air. Her chest hitched. Her big eyes instantly filled with tears of frustration, but she bit down hard on her lower lip and refused to let them fall.

Jakobe pushed himself up onto his knees. "Oops," he said. His voice held zero remorse.

The nanny, sitting by the window, had her back turned, folding a blanket.

Seeing she wasn't looking, Jakobe reached out. His fingers clamped down hard on the soft flesh of Elia's upper arm and twisted the skin with vicious force.

Elia let out a sharp gasp of pain. Her survival instinct kicked in. She shoved Jakobe's shoulder, trying to pry his grip loose.

It was a weak push, but Jakobe used it.

He threw himself backward onto the rug and opened his mouth in a blood-curdling, ear-piercing scream.

"Ahhh! Help! She hit me!" Jakobe wailed, thrashing on the floor.

Outside the door, blood rushed to Cailin's head, pounding in her ears. The rational part of her brain snapped in half.

Cailin kicked the heavy door. It flew open, slamming against the wall with a deafening bang. The nanny jumped up, screaming. Jakobe stopped thrashing for a second, his eyes wide with shock.

Cailin marched across the room, grabbed Elia by the waist, and tucked her securely behind her own legs. She glared down at Jakobe, her eyes burning with murderous, maternal rage.

Footsteps pounded down the hall. Jeraldine rushed into the playroom, her silk robe fluttering.

“Jakobe! My sweet boy!” Jeraldine cried, dropping to her knees and pulling the fake-sobbing boy into her arms. She whipped her head around and glared at Cailin. “What is wrong with you? Your feral child attacks my son, and you just stand there?”

Jakobe buried his face in Jeraldine’s neck. Over her shoulder, he looked straight at Cailin — and the corners of his mouth twitched upward into a sickening, triumphant smirk.

Cailin felt her stomach heave. She reached down, grabbed Jakobe’s wrist, and yanked the boy’s arm away from Jeraldine’s neck.

Jakobe let out a real yelp of pain.

“Look at her arm,” Cailin snarled, pointing a shaking finger at Elia.

On Elia's pale skin, a dark, angry red welt was already forming in the exact shape of a pinch.

Chapter 330:

Jeraldine's eyes flicked to the mark, but her expression hardened. "Children play rough. It was an accident. But pushing someone to the ground is violence."

Cailin felt a wave of pure disgust wash over her. The toxicity of this house was suffocating. She didn't say another word. She scooped Elia up into her arms, holding her tight against her chest, and turned on her heel.

She marched out of the playroom and headed straight for the third floor. She didn't knock on Hilliard's study door — she turned the brass handle and shoved it open.

Hilliard was sitting behind his massive mahogany desk, reviewing a stack of legal documents. He looked up, his brow furrowing at the violent intrusion.

Cailin walked to the desk, set Elia down gently, then grabbed her daughter's small arm and thrust it toward Hilliard.

"Look at this," Cailin demanded, her voice shaking with adrenaline. "Look at what your mother's pet just did to her."

Hilliard's eyes dropped to the red welt. His jaw tightened instantly. The muscle in his cheek ticked.

“I want full, sole custody of Elia,” Cailin said, her words clipping the air like scissors. “I am taking her out of this house tonight. We are leaving.”

Hilliard stood slowly. His towering frame cast a long shadow over the desk. The air in the room grew heavy, oppressive.

“No,” Hilliard said. His voice was flat and absolute.

“You can’t keep us here!” Cailin yelled, her hands balling into fists.

“Charla has hired professionals,” Hilliard said, stepping around the desk. “There are people watching the perimeter of this estate right now. If you leave these gates, you are a target. Elia is a target. This house is a fortress.”

“This house is a prison!” Cailin fired back, stepping into his space and refusing to back down. “The danger isn’t outside, Hilliard. It’s downstairs — your delusional mother and that vicious little sociopath she adopted.”

Hilliard stopped inches from her. He looked down into her furious eyes. He could smell the rain on her coat.

“I will handle my mother,” Hilliard said softly, dangerously. “But you are not taking my daughter out of my sight. Not ever again.”

They stood chest to chest, the air between them crackling with hostility, neither willing to yield an inch.

The silence in the study was suffocating. Cailin pulled Elia closer to her legs, her hand resting protectively on the back of the little girl's head.

"She woke up screaming last night, Hilliard," Cailin said, her voice dropping to a harsh whisper. "She's having night terrors. She's five years old, and she's developing severe psychological trauma from living in this warzone."

Hilliard stared at her. The concept of psychological trauma didn't compute for him — he was a man raised by wolves, taught that money and force solved every human equation.

He rubbed the bridge of his nose and exhaled a sharp breath.

"I will hire four ex-Navy SEALs," Hilliard said, his tone purely transactional. "They will stand outside her bedroom door. They will escort her to the playroom. No one will touch her."