

Second chance 331

Chapter 331:

Cailin let out a laugh that sounded like breaking glass. The sheer absurdity of his logic made her stomach churn.

“SEALs?” Cailin mocked, her eyes blazing. “Are your snipers going to shoot your mother when she calls Elia a bastard? Are your bodyguards going to tackle Jakobe when he whispers death threats in her ear? You can’t put a bullet in emotional abuse, Hilliard!”

Hilliard’s jaw ticked. He hated feeling incompetent, and Cailin’s words were slicing right through his armor. He adjusted his cuffs — a nervous tic he only displayed when losing control of a situation.

“This is my mother using children to fight a proxy war, Cailin,” Hilliard said, his voice dropping into a cold, clinical register. His corporate ruthlessness took over. “You cannot solve this with emotional outbursts. I will go down there and crush it using my rules. Right now.”

He marched past her and threw the study door open.

Cailin scooped Elia into her arms and followed him. She needed to see this. She needed to see him fail.

Downstairs in the grand living room, the scene was perfectly staged. Jakobe sat on the edge of the velvet sofa, holding an ice pack to his head — though he hadn’t hit it. Jeraldine stroked his hair, cooing softly.

Hilliard descended the grand staircase. His heavy footsteps made the crystal chandelier tremble slightly. The room fell instantly silent.

He walked to the sofa and looked down at Jakobe.

“What happened?” Hilliard asked, his voice a deep, authoritative rumble.

Jakobe looked up, eyes wide and brimming with fresh, perfectly timed tears. He scrambled off the sofa and threw his arms around Hilliard’s leg, burying his face in his trousers.

“I’m so scared, Daddy,” Jakobe whimpered, his voice trembling. “I just wanted to play with her. I’ll give her all my toys. I’ll give her my room. Just please don’t let her hurt me again.”

It was a masterclass in manipulation. The absolute submission, the offering of his own possessions — it hit Hilliard right in his blind spot. He was programmed to protect the weak, and Jakobe was playing the ultimate victim.

Hilliard sighed. He gently patted Jakobe’s head, then turned to look at Elia, who was standing on the bottom step of the stairs, holding Cailin’s hand.

“Elia,” Hilliard said, softening his voice and trying to sound like a mediator. “Jakobe is offering to share. You need to compromise. Shake his hand. Tomorrow I will take you both to FAO Schwarz and buy you anything you want. You can have the whole store.”

Elia didn't move. She stood perfectly still on the marble step and stared at Hilliard. Her grey eyes — his exact eyes — were completely devoid of warmth. There was a profound, chilling disappointment in her gaze. It was the exact same look Cailin had given him five years ago, right before she vanished.

Hilliard's chest tightened painfully. His lungs felt as though they were filled with wet sand.

"I don't want your gifts," Elia said. Her voice was crystal clear, ringing through the silent room. "I just want my Mommy."

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The words hit Hilliard like a physical slap. He flinched.

Sensing the shift in the room, Jakobe decided to push his luck. He let go of Hilliard's leg and took a step toward Elia, holding out his hand.

"Let's be friends, Elia," Jakobe said sweetly, reaching for the fabric of her dress.

Elia's survival instinct flared. She remembered the vicious pinch. She jerked backward violently and swatted her hand out to bat Jakobe's arm away.

Jakobe didn't resist the swat. Instead, he threw his arms up and hurled himself backward.

He collapsed toward the heavy glass coffee table. The side of his forehead clipped the sharp brass edge.

A loud thwack echoed through the room.

Jakobe hit the floor. A thin line of bright red blood welled up on his forehead and trickled down his temple.

Jeraldine let out a blood-curdling scream. “Oh my God! He’s bleeding! You little monster!” She pointed a shaking finger at Elia. “You have your mother’s psychotic blood in your veins!”

Hilliard’s face became a mask of cold fury, his temples throbbing. His sharp, analytical mind had processed the entire sequence in a fraction of a second — Elia’s weak, defensive swat and Jakobe’s highly calculated, theatrical dive into the table. But the truth was utterly meaningless against the deafening pitch of his mother’s shrieks. In this toxic ecosystem, weaponized emotions and staged victimhood always overpowered cold facts. He wasn’t trapped by a logical nightmare; he was paralyzed by the suffocating chains of his own bloodline.

“Mother, stop screaming,” Hilliard barked, but his voice lacked conviction. He stared at the blood, his hands opening and closing helplessly at his sides.

Cailin didn’t yell. She didn’t argue. She knelt down and clamped her hands over Elia’s ears, shielding her daughter from the toxic noise.

She looked up at Hilliard. Her eyes were dead.

“This is your safety,” Cailin whispered.

She picked Elia up, turned her back on the chaos, and walked up the stairs.

Hilliard stood in the center of his billion-dollar mansion, surrounded by his shrieking mother and a bleeding child. He realized with chilling clarity that brute force and logic were useless here. This was a war of whispers and poison — and for the first time in his life, he felt the terrifying limits of his power.

The next morning, the air in Holloway Manor was thick with unresolved tension.

Hilliard stood in the second-floor hallway, his hands shoved deep into the pockets of his slacks, staring at the closed door of Elia’s bedroom. At his feet sat a massive, velvet-lined box containing a set of antique porcelain dolls — a collector’s item worth more than most people’s homes. Resting on top of the box was a limitless black Centurion card.

It was a pathetic, desperate peace offering.

The bedroom door clicked open. The nanny peeked out. She looked at Hilliard, then down at the box.

“Take it inside,” Hilliard ordered quietly.

The nanny hesitated. "Sir... Miss Elia gave me specific instructions."

"What instructions?"

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The nanny swallowed hard. She reached down, picked up the velvet box and the black card, walked three steps down the hall, and dumped the entire fortune into the brass trash receptacle.

Hilliard closed his eyes. A sharp pain radiated behind his sternum. The rejection was absolute. He turned and walked away, his shoulders heavy with defeat.

An hour later, Cailin walked out of the manor's front doors wearing a dark, oversized trench coat and large black sunglasses.

"I need a dress for the memorial reception tonight," she told the head of security, her voice flat. "I'll take the SUV."

She climbed into the back of the armored Cadillac Escalade. As the vehicle rolled out of the estate, she didn't direct the driver toward the high-end boutiques on Madison Avenue.

"Take the RFK Bridge," Cailin instructed. "Head to Queens."

The driver looked confused in the rearview mirror but obeyed.

Forty minutes later, the SUV pulled into a grimy, dimly lit underground parking garage beneath an abandoned strip mall. Cailin told the driver to wait, slipped out of the car, and made her way to the back of the garage. She pushed open a rusted metal door marked Utility.

Beyond it was a narrow staircase leading down. At the bottom, a heavy steel vault door. Cailin pressed her thumb to the biometric scanner. The heavy bolts retracted with a mechanical clunk.

She stepped into the safe house — a stark contrast to the garage above. It was brightly lit, climate-controlled, and lined with high-tech server racks.

Silas, Kegan's top operative, stood in the center of the room wearing a tactical black sweater and a shoulder holster. A sleek silver titanium briefcase rested at his feet.

He nodded respectfully and handed Cailin a thick encrypted satellite phone.

Cailin pressed it to her ear. "I'm here."

"Did you get my present, my Queen?" Kegan's voice crackled through the speaker, low and laced with dark amusement.

Cailin walked to the titanium case and knelt down. The lock required a six-digit code. Her fingers hovered over the dial. She inputted a sequence of numbers that represented her entire world — the exact dates belonging to the two deeply guarded secrets she had hidden across the ocean.

Click.

The latches popped open. Cailin lifted the lid.

Inside, resting on custom-cut shock-absorbent foam, was a canvas. The vibrant, swirling colors of water lilies and morning mist seemed to glow under the harsh fluorescent lights.

The Lost Monet.

Cailin pulled a pair of white cotton gloves from her coat pocket and slipped them on. She gently traced the edge of the antique wooden frame. The texture of the dried oil paint was unmistakable. It was real.

“One hundred and twenty million euros on the dark web,” Kegan said over the phone. “I originally bought it to bribe you into marrying me. But I suppose using it to bludgeon the Holloway family is a decent backup plan.”

Cailin ignored the flirtation. Her chest tightened with a mix of awe and adrenaline. “Is the provenance clean?”

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Silas stepped forward and handed her a manila envelope. Inside was a stack of flawlessly forged auction records and a certificate of authenticity. The buyer's signature at the bottom read: Cali.

"It's bulletproof," Kegan assured her. "Burn them to the ground, Cailin."

Cailin ended the call. She carefully closed the titanium case, the metal snapping shut with a sound like a guillotine. She had her weapon.

When Cailin returned to Holloway Manor, the sun was beginning to set.

She walked into her massive walk-in closet. The room buzzed with activity — Hilliard had hired a team of top-tier stylists, and racks of haute couture gowns and trays of diamond jewelry covered every surface.

Hilliard leaned against the doorframe, a glass of bourbon in hand, watching her walk in. His eyes immediately locked onto the silver titanium briefcase. It looked entirely out of place among the silk and lace.

"What is that?" Hilliard asked, his brow furrowing.

Cailin didn't miss a beat. She set the case down and kicked it gently under a rack of dresses.

“A tribute for the reception,” Cailin said, her voice smooth and unbothered.

Hilliard took a sip of his bourbon. “That case looks serious. What’s inside, Cailin? Don’t tell me you’re gifting Preston state secrets.”

Cailin turned to face him and unbuttoned her trench coat, letting it slip off her shoulders. She looked at Hilliard, her lips curving into a slow, razor-sharp smile — a smile that promised absolute devastation.

“Don’t worry about Preston,” Cailin whispered, her eyes gleaming with cold fire. “I guarantee you, no one in this family will ever forget tonight.”

The night air outside The Plaza Hotel was electric.

Police barricades held back a surging crowd of paparazzi. Flashbulbs exploded like strobe lights, turning the red carpet into a blinding runway. Tonight was the memorial reception for Amerigo Holloway, hosted by his nephew and interim successor, Preston. The entire ecosystem of New York’s old money and Wall Street elite had descended upon the hotel to pay their respects — and to witness the first bloody battle of the succession war.

A massive, midnight-blue Rolls-Royce Phantom glided to a stop at the head of the carpet. A white-gloved valet rushed forward and pulled the heavy door open.

Hilliard stepped out first. He wore a custom Tom Ford tuxedo that fit his broad shoulders flawlessly. The sharp cut of the lapels and the stark white of his shirt made him look like a predator dressed for a kill.

He didn't walk toward the cameras. He turned back to the dark interior of the car and offered his hand.

A slender ankle, strapped into a pair of glittering Jimmy Choo stilettos, emerged from the shadows.

Cailin placed her hand in Hilliard's. As she stepped out into the blinding light, the collective roar of the paparazzi suddenly died. For one full second, the entire street fell into a stunned, breathless silence.

Then the cameras erupted in a frantic, deafening frenzy.

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Cailin was wearing a piece of fashion history — an archival haute couture gown, a vintage masterpiece that could not be bought, only borrowed by the absolute elite. The dress was made of deep emerald-green velvet that clung to her curves like a second skin. The neckline plunged dangerously, and the hem was heavily encrusted with raw black diamonds that caught the flashbulbs and threw off cold, lethal sparks of light.

She didn't look like a grieving widow. She looked like a dark queen arriving to conquer.

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The socialites standing near the entrance gasped. Whispers of vicious jealousy rippled through the crowd.

Hilliard's hand moved instantly from Cailin's palm to her waist. His fingers splayed wide against the velvet, gripping her with a possessive, territorial heat that burned right through the fabric. He pulled her flush against his side, so tight their hips bumped.

He leaned down, his lips brushing the shell of her ear.

"You look so beautiful it makes me want to kill everyone looking at you," Hilliard murmured, his voice a dark, vibrating threat. "I should have locked you in the manor."

Cailin kept her face perfectly composed for the cameras. She tilted her head, maintaining a flawless, icy smile.

"Keep your hands steady, Hilliard," Cailin whispered back, her tone laced with venom. "Don't ruin my armor. Your hand is shaking. Are you afraid of what I'm going to do tonight?"

The tension between them was palpable. To the cameras, they looked like a couple burning with passion. In reality, they were two soldiers locked in a trench.

A bold reporter shoved his microphone over the barricade. "Mr. Holloway! You were seen publicly dismissing Ms. Morton just two days ago! Are you two back together? Is this a reconciliation?"

Cailin stopped walking. She slowly turned her head.

She looked at the reporter. She didn't say a single word — just stared at him, her chin tilted up, her eyes sweeping over him with such absolute, crushing disdain that the man physically shrank back and lowered his microphone.

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Hilliard smirked. He guided her up the marble steps and into the grand ballroom.

The moment they crossed the threshold, the loud chatter died. The symphony orchestra playing on the balcony seemed to fade into the background.

Hundreds of eyes locked onto Cailin.

In the corner, Nadine stood next to Zach. Her bright red dress suddenly looked cheap and desperate. She gripped her champagne flute so hard her knuckles turned white while Zach stared openly at Cailin, his mouth slightly open, earning a vicious elbow to the ribs from Nadine.

Near the center of the room, Charla stood in a pure white, angelic gown. When she saw Cailin's emerald dress, her smile froze. Her perfectly manicured fingernails dug so deeply into her own palms they left crescent-shaped indentations. She had been outclassed before the night even began.

Preston, holding a glass of scotch, plastered a fake, welcoming smile on his face and walked over.

"Cailin, my dear!" Preston boomed, his eyes darting to the black diamonds on her dress. "What a stunning gown. A bold choice for a night of mourning. I must admit, I was worried about you. Five years in Europe on a tight budget — I'm glad Hilliard gave you an allowance for tonight."

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Cailin didn't flinch. She picked up a glass of champagne from a passing waiter's tray and raised it, clinking it against Preston's scotch glass. The crystal rang out sharply.

"Don't worry about my budget, Preston," Cailin said, her lips curving into a cold smile. "The air in Europe is much cleaner than New York. It does wonders for the skin. You should try it — you're looking a bit weathered."

Preston's fake smile twitched.

The battle lines were drawn.

The air in the ballroom was thick with expensive perfume and suffocating hypocrisy. After thirty minutes of parrying passive-aggressive insults from Hilliard's relatives, Cailin felt a dull ache building behind her temples.

Hilliard noticed her rigid posture. He placed a hand on the small of her back.

“You need to touch up your lipstick,” Hilliard said smoothly to a group of investors, cutting off their conversation. “Excuse us.”

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He guided her away from the crowd and up the sweeping marble staircase to the second floor. He pushed open the heavy oak doors of a VIP lounge.

The room was dimly lit, paneled in dark mahogany, and smelled of old leather. The heavy doors shut with a solid click, instantly muffling the symphony orchestra below. The sudden silence was jarring.

Hilliard walked to a crystal decanter on a side table, poured two fingers of amber whiskey into a glass, and brought it back to where Cailin sat on a plush emerald-green velvet sofa. He didn’t hand her the drink. He set it on the coffee table.

Instead, he reached into the inner breast pocket of his tuxedo and pulled out a small, worn, dark red velvet jewelry box. It looked ancient.

He stepped closer to the sofa. Slowly, deliberately, Hilliard dropped to one knee.

Cailin's breath hitched. Her stomach plummeted.

Hilliard opened the box. Resting on the faded white silk was a massive, flawless emerald bracelet. The gold setting was intricately carved and heavy with history.

"This belonged to my grandmother," Hilliard said, his voice dropping to a low, intimate register. "It is the traditional heirloom for the lady of the Holloway house. I should have given it to you on our wedding day."

He reached out and gently took Cailin's left hand. His large, warm fingers wrapped around her slender wrist. He lifted the heavy emerald bracelet from the box.

The cold, heavy stone pressed against the sensitive skin of her inner wrist.

A violent wave of nausea hit Cailin. The physical sensation triggered a visceral flashback.

She yanked her hand back.

The sudden movement knocked the bracelet from Hilliard's grip. It fell onto the velvet sofa with a dull, heavy thud.

Hilliard froze, his hand suspended in the air. The muscle in his jaw ticked furiously. He looked up at her, his grey eyes darkening with confusion and rising anger.

"What is wrong with you?" Hilliard demanded, his voice tight. "I am trying to give you the respect you deserve."

Cailin stood. She looked down at him, her chest heaving, her hands trembling slightly.

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"Respect?" Cailin let out a harsh, bitter laugh. "Is that what you call it? Tell me, Hilliard — did you get down on one knee like this five years ago? When you fastened your mother's ruby necklace around Charla's neck?"

Hilliard's anger vanished. His face went completely slack, genuine shock radiating from his eyes.

He slowly stood. "What are you talking about?"

"Don't play dumb," Cailin spat, her voice cracking with old pain. "The day before I left. Charla came to my apartment. She was wearing the Holloway ruby necklace. She told me you put it on her. That it was your promise to her."

Hilliard looked as though he had been physically struck. He took a step back, shaking his head.

“Cailin,” Hilliard said, his voice raw and bewildered. “That ruby necklace has been locked in a biometric safe at the UBS bank in Zurich since my mother died. I have never taken it out. I swear to God, I have never given Charla a piece of family jewelry.”

Cailin’s mind raced as a sickening realization took hold. Charla had always been obsessed with the official family portraits hanging in the estate’s gallery. She must have hired a master jeweler to forge a replica based on the high-resolution archival photos. The sheer malice of Charla’s long game made Cailin’s stomach churn.

But the damage was already done. The scar tissue was too thick.

“It doesn’t matter if the necklace was fake,” Cailin whispered, her voice trembling. “Your favoritism was real. You still chose to believe her tears over my pain, every single time.”

Hilliard stepped forward, desperate to grab her shoulders, to shake the past out of her. “Cailin, if she lied to you about that — if she built our entire separation on a lie — don’t you see what that means?”

“It means I was a fool,” Cailin countered, her voice ice. “And you let me be one. Why didn’t you ever tell me? Why didn’t you deny it then?”

“Because you never asked.” Hilliard’s voice cracked with rare, raw agony. “You never confronted me. You just looked at me with those dead eyes and vanished. You sentenced me without a trial, Cailin.”

Knock, knock.

The heavy oak door swung open. Gavin stood in the doorway, keeping his eyes on the floor.

“Sir,” Gavin said. “Mr. Preston is beginning the presentation of tributes in the main hall. He expects you both at the front table.”

Hilliard closed his eyes and let out a ragged breath, forcing his emotions back into their iron box. He reached down, picked up the emerald bracelet from the sofa, and snapped the velvet box shut. He shoved it into Cailin’s small clutch purse.

“Put your mask back on,” Hilliard ordered, his voice returning to its cold, executive deadpan. “We have a war to fight downstairs.”

Cailin turned to the mirror. She smoothed her hair, locked her jaw, and buried the revelation deep in her chest. When she turned back and took Hilliard’s arm, they were the perfect, untouchable power couple once again.

The main ballroom had been rearranged. The center of the dance floor was now occupied by a long, velvet-draped display table.

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Cailin and Hilliard walked down the grand staircase, the spotlight tracking their descent. They took their seats at the primary table, directly across from Preston.

Preston stood at the microphone, his face flushed with alcohol and ego, delivering a long-winded speech about his uncle's legacy and his own solemn duty to uphold it.

Waiters in white tuxedos wheeled in silver carts, piling the display table with somber but extravagant tributes from the various mafia bosses, Wall Street titans, and old-money patriarchs in attendance.

At the next table, Jeraldine reached out and grabbed Charla's hand, patting her knuckles affectionately and making sure everyone in the vicinity saw the intimate gesture. It was a calculated, physical insult aimed directly at Cailin — a silent declaration of who the true daughter-in-law was.

Charla sat tall in her white gown. She looked like a saint, but her eyes glittered with toxic anticipation.

Preston finally finished his speech. The crowd clapped politely.

"And now," Preston announced, rubbing his hands together. "Let us honor Amerigo's memory by appreciating the cultural treasures our family and friends have brought to share in his name."

The room buzzed with excitement. This was the true sport of the elite: out-spending and out-flexing each other under the guise of grief.

Charla stood. She smoothed her white skirt and walked gracefully to the center of the room. A hush fell over the crowd.

She held a flat, glass-encased frame.

“In honor of Amerigo, who appreciated history above all else,” Charla said, her voice amplified by the room’s acoustics and dripping with false sweetness, “I present this tribute. This is an original eighteenth-century French Royal Deed to a château in the Loire Valley, signed by King Louis XVI.”

The crowd erupted into genuine gasps and enthusiastic applause. Preston’s eyes widened with greed as he took the frame, practically drooling over the aged parchment.

Charla smiled, soaking in the adoration. Then she turned and locked eyes with Cailin, who sat quietly in the shadows of the main table.

“I know it’s a hard act to follow,” Charla said, her voice carrying clearly across the silent room. She tilted her head, feigning sympathy. “Cailin, darling. We know you’ve been living a very... modest life in Europe these past five years. If you couldn’t offer a tribute tonight, please don’t feel embarrassed. We completely understand your tight budget.”

The insult was a precision strike. It stripped Cailin of her dignity in front of the most powerful people in New York.

A low murmur of amusement rippled through the crowd. Near the back, Nadine raised her champagne glass, a vicious smirk on her face.

Beside Cailin, Hilliard's body went rigid. The muscles in his thighs bunched. His jaw ticked so hard it looked like the bone might snap. He placed his hands on the table, preparing to stand and verbally eviscerate Charla in front of the entire city.

Under the tablecloth, Cailin's hand shot out. She clamped her fingers hard over Hilliard's wrist.

Hilliard looked at her, his eyes burning with fury.

Cailin gave him a microscopic shake of her head. Wait.

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She stood. She didn't rush. She calmly smoothed the heavy emerald velvet of her skirt and drew herself to her full height, her posture radiating absolute, terrifying authority.

"You are right, Charla," Cailin said. Her voice wasn't loud, but it possessed a cold, piercing clarity that cut through the room like a scalpel. "My tribute doesn't have the... historical weight of a piece of paper."

Charla's smile widened. She thought Cailin was surrendering.

"Because," Cailin continued, her lips curving into a predatory smirk, "the true value of art is never measured by the weight of the paper it's printed on."

She raised her right hand and snapped her fingers. The sharp crack echoed through the silent ballroom.

From the shadows near the kitchen entrance, Silas emerged, dressed in a sharp black security suit with an earpiece coiled around his neck. In his right hand he carried the heavy silver titanium briefcase. He walked with military precision, his footsteps thudding against the hardwood floor, bypassing Preston and heading directly to the display table.

Jeraldine leaned away, her face twisting in disgust. "What on earth is that?" she muttered loudly. "It looks like a bomb casing. How vulgar."

Cailin walked to the display table. Silas handed her the briefcase and stepped back, assuming a guard stance.

Cailin laid the titanium case flat on the velvet cloth and looked out at the sea of faces, her eyes locking onto Charla's confused expression. A rush of pure adrenaline surged through her. The trap was set.

She placed her thumbs on the dual combination locks and spun the dials rapidly.

Clack. Clack.

The heavy metal latches popped open with a loud, mechanical snap. Cailin grabbed the handle and slowly lifted the lid, exposing the contents to the harsh light of the chandeliers.

The titanium lid swung back.

Two of the hotel's white-gloved art handlers immediately stepped forward. With excruciating care, they lifted the canvas from the shock-absorbent foam and placed it upright on a mahogany display easel.

The harsh light of the crystal chandeliers hit the oil paint.

It was a masterpiece of light and shadow. The swirling blues, greens, and soft pinks of the water lilies seemed to breathe on the canvas. The brushstrokes were frantic yet perfectly controlled, capturing the ephemeral morning mist over the Seine.

For three seconds, there was absolute silence.

Then an elderly man in the front row — a billionaire hedge fund manager known for his obsessive art collection — dropped his champagne flute. The glass shattered on the floor.

"Good God in heaven," the old man gasped, his voice trembling. He stumbled forward, pointing a shaking finger at the easel. "That... that is The Lost Monet!"

The name hit the room like a shockwave. Pandemonium erupted. Guests shoved each other to get a better look. The painting had been a ghost in the art world, missing since World War II — a mythical artifact, a holy grail.

Preston's face transformed. The smugness vanished, replaced by rabid, drooling greed. He took a step toward the painting, his hands twitching.

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Charla's face went completely slack. The color drained from her cheeks until she looked like a corpse. Her Royal Deed was suddenly worthless garbage by comparison.

Just as the awe reached its peak, a shrill, grating voice sliced through the noise.

"It's a fake!"

Nadine shoved her way to the front of the crowd. Her red dress was crumpled, her face twisted in an ugly mask of spite and desperation. She wasn't on the guest list — she had spent a small fortune she couldn't afford bribing a catering manager to slip her through the service elevator, wearing a cheap red dress bought off the rack, desperate for one final, explosive act of vengeance. She pointed an accusing finger at the canvas.

"It is a forgery!" Nadine screamed, her voice echoing off the high ceilings.

The ballroom fell dead silent. Everyone stared at the disgraced auction house director.

Hilliard's eyes darkened to the color of a storm front. He took a menacing step toward Nadine. "Who let you in here?" he snarled, his voice vibrating with violence.

In the back of the room, Zach — who had explicitly banned her from coming and dumped her hours ago — physically ducked behind a pillar, terrified that her psychotic intrusion would be blamed on him.

Nadine ignored Hilliard. She was riding a manic high, desperate to destroy Cailin. She marched to the microphone Preston had abandoned.

"I am the former Senior Director of Obsidian Auction House," Nadine announced, using her dead title as a shield. "I track global art movements. The real Lost Monet surfaced exactly one month ago. It was sold at The Vault, an underground auction in Europe."

Nadine turned and glared at Cailin with pure hatred.

"It was purchased by a European arms dealer for one hundred and twenty million euros," Nadine declared. "Do you really expect us to believe that a woman who has been living off scraps in Europe managed to secure a masterpiece from a billionaire warlord? It's a cheap, high-quality replica!"

The logic was devastating. The crowd, always eager to tear down someone on a pedestal, instantly turned.

Whispers of "fraud" and "embarrassment" hissed through the room.

Charla's color returned. She seized the moment and stepped forward with a look of profound disappointment. "Cailin, how could you? To bring a counterfeit painting to a memorial for our patriarch — it's not just tacky, it's an insult to the Holloway name."

Jeraldine slammed her hand on the table. "She is a pathological liar! Get that garbage out of my sight!"

Preston's face turned purple with rage. He looked at Cailin as if she had handed him a bag of trash.

Through the barrage of insults, Cailin stood perfectly still. Her back was straight. Her breathing was steady. She didn't even blink.

Hilliard moved. He stepped directly in front of her, his broad shoulders physically shielding her from the hostile crowd. He looked down at her.

"Cailin," Hilliard whispered, his voice so low only she could hear it. "Tell me the truth. Is the painting real?"