

Second chance 451

Chapter 451:

“Ahhhhh!” Charla let out a blood-curdling shriek. The force of the punch lifted her stilettos off the marble floor, and she flew backward like a broken doll, crashing heavily onto her back. Her expensive sunglasses flew off and shattered against the wall.

Thick, dark red blood gushed instantly from Charla’s flattened nose. It poured over her lips and dripped from her chin, rapidly staining the collar of her haute couture mourning dress.

“You hit me?!” Charla screamed, her voice nasal and gargling with blood. She clutched her ruined face, tears of pure agony streaming from her eyes.

Ashely shook out her right hand, her knuckles bruised and throbbing. She stepped forward and planted her boot firmly on the hem of Charla’s dress, pinning her to the floor.

“I will beat you to death right here,” Ashely growled, her eyes burning with lethal intent.

Charla’s four bodyguards finally reacted, shouting and lunging forward to grab Ashely.

Ashely did not retreat. She ducked under the outstretched arm of the lead bodyguard. A flash of memory surged through her mind — a grimy boxing gym, the sting of sweat in her eyes, a self-defense instructor yelling “leverage, not strength!” — and with the speed honed not in a dojo but in desperate, ugly necessity, she grabbed his wrist, twisted it sharply outward, and drove her elbow directly into his radial nerve. The man gasped, his grip failing.

In a fluid, seamless motion, Ashely snatched the heavy solid-steel telescopic baton from his tactical belt. A sharp flick of her wrist snapped it open to its full length with a terrifying metallic crack.

She leveled the tip of the baton at the throat of the second bodyguard.

“Take one more step,” Ashely hissed, her stance perfectly balanced for a lethal strike. “I will crush your windpipe.”

The bodyguards froze. They were highly paid corporate security, not street fighters, and the absolute absence of hesitation in Ashely’s eyes paralyzed them.

Preston Holloway stepped forward. “Ms. Trevino. Put the weapon away. Now.”

“Tell your rabid dog to stay on her leash,” Ashely spat, keeping the baton raised. “If she touches Cailin again, I will cave her skull in.”

Cailin pushed herself upright in the wheelchair. She wiped the blood from her mouth with the back of her hand and looked down at Charla sobbing and choking on the floor. A cold, dark satisfaction flickered in her dead eyes.

Charla’s lawyers scrambled to help her up. Her face was a horrific mess of smeared makeup and blood.

“You will rot in a cell for this!” Charla screamed, pointing a shaking, bloody finger at Ashely and Cailin. “I will destroy you!”

“We will see who rots first,” Cailin whispered, her voice chilling the air. “When they drag your body from the bottom of the ocean.”

A sudden, microscopic flash of panic crossed Charla’s eyes at the mention of the ocean. She masked it quickly with rage.

Before she could scream another threat, a loud synthetic chime echoed through the corridor.

Chapter 452:

The massive flat-screen television mounted on the waiting room wall switched abruptly from a muted news channel to a live breaking broadcast. The volume was high. The camera showed the grand lobby of the hospital’s first floor, where Preston Holloway stood behind a podium bristling with microphones. The flashbulbs of fifty cameras strobed relentlessly against his face.

“To address the malicious rumors regarding the Holloway Group,” Preston’s voice boomed from the television speakers, filling the VIP corridor.

“I, as Acting Chairman of the Board, am here to clarify the situation. Mr. Hilliard Holloway’s medical condition is stable. Furthermore, the rumors regarding his marital status are entirely false.”

Preston looked directly into the camera.

“Mr. Holloway and Ms. Cailin Morton finalized their divorce agreement days ago. They have no legal ties.”

He gestured to his right. “I am proud to officially announce that Charla English is the sole, legally recognized fiancée of Hilliard Holloway, and the future matriarch of our family.”

The blinding white light of fifty camera flashes strobed across Preston Holloway’s face in the hospital lobby.

Financial reporters shoved their digital recorders toward the podium, shouting over one another like a pack of starving wolves.

“Mr. Holloway! Is it true the corporate servers were hit by a ransomware attack?” a reporter from Bloomberg yelled. “Are the English family funds being used to plug a liquidity black hole?”

Preston held up both hands, projecting a mask of absolute, unshakeable confidence.

“The Holloway Group’s digital infrastructure is currently undergoing a scheduled, high-level security migration,” Preston said smoothly, not a single muscle in his face twitching. “This strategic alliance with the English family is a merger of equals. Once Hilliard recovers from his cardiac event, the wedding will proceed. It is a union of love, and a union of unparalleled capital.”

The reporters furiously typed on their tablets. The narrative of a multi-billion-dollar corporate marriage saving a sinking stock price was exactly the kind of headline Wall Street devoured.

Upstairs in the VIP corridor, Charla wiped the blood from her chin. She looked at the television screen, a grotesque, bloody smile stretching across her broken face. She had won. The capital had protected her.

Down in the lobby, the manufactured applause from Preston's paid PR plants was just beginning to swell.

Then a harsh, grating laugh cut through it from the back of the room.

"A union of love? Try a conspiracy with a child murderer."

The voice was amplified by a portable bullhorn. It sliced through the camera clicks and the murmurs, instantly freezing the entire room.

Every head in the lobby whipped around toward the entrance.

Gavin Thorne stood just inside the revolving doors. He wore a dark, rain-soaked trench coat, his face pale and his eyes sunken from severe sleep deprivation, but his posture was rigid with absolute fury. He clutched a thick black encrypted folder tightly against his chest.

He marched straight down the center aisle toward the podium.

Preston's confident smile vanished. His face turned a dangerous shade of purple. He pointed a shaking finger at Gavin.

"Security!" Preston roared into the microphone. "Remove that lunatic from the premises immediately!"

Two massive hospital security guards lunged forward and reached for Gavin's shoulders.

Gavin did not fight them. He stopped dead in his tracks and raised the folder high above his head.

Chapter 453:

"Reporters! This folder contains proof that Charla English orchestrated the kidnapping and murder of Hilliard Holloway's daughter!" Gavin yelled, his voice raw. "Preston is trying to bury it to save his stock price!"

The reporters smelled blood. The word "murder" sent a jolt of electricity through the room. They surged forward like a tidal wave, their cameras and microphones forming a human barrier between Gavin and the security guards.

"Let him speak!" a journalist from the Times shouted, shoving his camera into a guard's face.

The guards hesitated, unwilling to assault members of the press on live television. The media frenzy was Gavin's shield.

“Back off!” Gavin shouted, his voice echoing through the cavernous lobby. “I am the legally appointed Chief Executive Assistant to Hilliard Holloway. Until he wakes up, I speak with his authority!”

The reporters, sensing the story of a lifetime, tightened their circle around him, effectively escorting him to the podium.

Preston gripped the edges of the podium, his knuckles turning white. “Gavin Thorne! You were suspended by the board! You speak for no one!”

“I speak for the truth,” Gavin snarled, stepping up onto the first step of the podium and glaring directly into Preston’s eyes.

He turned to face the sea of cameras and raised the black folder high in the air.

“Hilliard Holloway never signed a prenuptial agreement with Charla English!” Gavin’s voice boomed. “His final executive order, before his collapse, was to utilize every single asset of this company to hunt her down!”

The lobby erupted into absolute chaos. Reporters screamed questions.

“Hunt her down for what?!” a journalist shouted.

“You are slandering her! Where is your proof?!” Preston yelled, lunging forward to grab the folder.

Gavin sidestepped him easily. He ripped the folder open, pulled out three large high-resolution photographs, and slammed them face-up onto the podium directly beside the microphones.

“This is the proof!” Gavin roared.

The cameras zoomed in. The photographs were screenshots of a dark web transaction ledger, alongside a gruesome image of a heavily tattooed man crucified to a concrete wall in a Swiss basement.

“Hilliard Holloway discovered the truth,” Gavin announced, his voice trembling with rage. “Charla English wired three million euros to an underground broker to hire the mercenaries who kidnapped and murdered his five-year-old daughter!”

The words struck the room like a physical shockwave. The silence that followed was absolute, deafening, and terrifying. The corporate fairy tale had been violently torn apart, exposing a horrific and bloody reality beneath.

The chaos in the lobby was cut short by a hospital-wide security lockdown. The live feeds died. Within minutes, Preston’s guards had cleared the press and dragged Gavin Thorne upstairs.

Before the emergency board meeting began, Preston paused outside the conference room. He looked at Cailin, still in her wheelchair — a ghost haunting his pristine hospital corridor. A cruel, calculating thought formed in his mind.

“Bring her in,” he commanded a guard. “I want her to watch this. I want her to see how real power works.”

The guard hesitated. “Sir, she’s the one who—”

“She is a neutralized threat,” Preston cut him off, his voice like ice. “And a useful prop. Do it.”

Chapter 454:

The heavy oak doors of the executive conference room swung open. Two armed guards shoved Gavin Thorne inside. Another guard pushed Cailin’s wheelchair in behind him, positioning her in the darkest corner of the room like a piece of unwanted furniture. Ashely stood guard behind her. Cailin’s face was an emotionless mask as she watched the rats turn on each other.

Preston Holloway sat at the head of the long table, his hands resting flat on the polished mahogany. Three senior board members sat rigidly beside him, their loyalties entirely bought and paid for.

Charla sat next to Preston. A hospital nurse had taped a white splint across her broken nose, but her eyes darted around the room with the frantic energy of a cornered rat.

Gavin stumbled forward, caught his balance, and slammed the black folder down onto the center of the table.

“Look at the woman you are trying to make the matriarch of this family,” Gavin spat, glaring at Preston.

He opened the folder and spread the documents across the polished wood.

Preston picked up the photograph of the crucified man and adjusted his glasses, his expression grim.

“Hilliard led the assault on that Swiss bunker himself,” Gavin stated, his voice hard. “The man on the wall is Bloodhound, a dark web logistics broker. Before he died, he confessed that the client who ordered the hit on Elia used the alias ‘Black Swan.’”

Gavin tossed a thick stack of financial routing documents toward Preston.

“We traced the cryptocurrency payments,” Gavin continued. “The funds bounced through seven offshore proxy servers, but the origin point was a shell corporation registered in the Cayman Islands.”

He pointed a finger directly at Charla. “A corporation where Charla English is listed as the sole beneficial owner.”

The senior board members shifted uncomfortably. The physical paper trail was devastating.

“If the FBI subpoenas these records,” one of the elders whispered, his face pale, “the Holloway Group will be indicted as an accessory to murder.”

Charla stared at the bank routing numbers. A cold spike of terror pierced her stomach, but her survival instinct was absolute. She slammed her hands on the table and stood up.

“This is an absurd fabrication!” Charla shrieked, her voice muffled by the splint on her nose. “You think you can frame me with a few printed spreadsheets?”

She turned to Preston, forcing tears into her eyes. “Preston, my personal accounts were compromised by hackers three months ago. I filed a cyber-theft report with the FBI. Someone stole those funds to set me up!”

“I loved Hilliard!” Charla sobbed, playing the victim with practiced precision. “Why would I kill a child?”

Gavin let out a harsh, mocking laugh. “Hackers? Then explain why the IP address used to authorize the final transfer pinged from a luxury hotel in Geneva on November 4th — the exact day you were supposedly in New York?”

Charla did not miss a beat. “I was in Geneva. I flew there privately to attend the Sotheby’s autumn preview for impressionist art. I have the flight logs and the hotel receipts.”

She glared at Gavin. “I was looking at paintings, not hiring assassins. Your evidence is circumstantial garbage.”

Chapter 455:

The room fell silent. Charla's lie was remarkably well-constructed. In the digital age, IP addresses could be spoofed, and stolen funds were a plausible defense. The board members exchanged glances, clearly wanting to believe her in order to save the merger.

Preston leaned forward. "Gavin, this is not enough for a conviction. You are destroying our stock price over a conspiracy theory."

Charla smirked behind her hands. She was going to get away with it.

"Sotheby's autumn preview?"

A cold, raspy voice drifted from the shadows in the corner of the room.

Cailin slowly pushed her wheelchair forward. She rolled toward the table, her bare feet silent on the metal footrests. The harsh overhead light fell across her pale face and the bloodstains on her gown.

She stopped across from Charla. Cailin's eyes were like two black holes, absorbing all the light in the room.

"That is a very interesting alibi," Cailin whispered, a cruel, mocking smile touching her lips. "Because as the owner of The Vault, I happen to have the exclusive VIP guest list for that exact Sotheby's preview."

Cailin leaned forward and placed her hands flat on the table.

“Your name was not on it.”

The silence in the conference room was absolute. The air felt heavy and suffocating, as though the oxygen had been drained from the room entirely.

Charla’s face froze. The smug confidence shattered, replaced by a twitching, desperate panic.

“You... you are lying!” Charla stammered, her voice rising an octave. “It was a private viewing! A black-market broker like you wouldn’t have access to those records!”

Cailin did not raise her voice. She reached down and picked up the stack of financial routing documents Gavin had provided. Her pale fingers flipped through the pages until she found a specific sheet.

“November 4th,” Cailin read, her tone clinical and flat. “Three million euros transferred out of the Cayman shell account.”

Cailin slowly turned her head toward Gavin. “Gavin. The encrypted file Kegan intercepted and sent to your secure server three hours ago. Project it on the main screen.”

Gavin did not hesitate. He pulled a specialized decryption drive from his pocket, jammed it into the conference table’s interface port, and bypassed the room’s local firewall. The massive OLED screen on the wall flickered to life.

A high-resolution digital receipt illuminated the darkened room — a verified, time-stamped transaction log.

“On that exact same day,” Cailin said, pointing a pale finger at the glowing screen, “at the exact same hour the transfer was authorized, you walked into the Bulgari boutique on the Rue du Rhône in Geneva.”

“You used the black card linked directly to that Cayman account to purchase a two-hundred-thousand-dollar diamond necklace.”

Cailin tilted her head, her eyes boring into Charla’s. “Did the hackers who stole your money decide to buy you a diamond necklace as a thank-you gift?”

Charla stared at the digital receipt. Her physical presence and financial authorization were documented on the screen in inescapable detail. The sharp glare of the display seemed to mock her.

The board members gasped. Preston’s face turned ashen. The logic loop was closed. The evidence was absolute.

Chapter 456:

Preston Holloway closed his eyes and let out a long, heavy sigh. He gripped the edge of the table.

“Ms. English,” Preston said, his voice devoid of any warmth. “It appears you will need to explain the origin of that necklace to federal investigators.”

Charla looked around the room. She saw the disgust in the eyes of the board members. She watched Preston physically inch his chair away from her.

She was trapped. The walls were closing in.

The terror in Charla’s chest suddenly mutated into a wild, psychotic rage. She threw her head back and let out a shrill, hysterical laugh.

“Evidence?!” Charla screamed, pointing a shaking finger at Cailin. “You are going to believe this whore and her lapdog assistant?!”

She slammed her hands on the table and leaned aggressively toward Preston. “Preston, open your eyes! This is a setup!”

Charla swung her manic gaze toward Gavin. “Cailin just forced Hilliard to sign a divorce agreement giving her half the Holloway Trust! That is billions of dollars!”

“Gavin Thorne makes a pathetic salary,” Charla spat, her words dripping with toxic manipulation. “Do you really think he wouldn’t forge a few dark web screenshots for a fifty-million-dollar bribe from her?”

Gavin's face flushed with violent anger. He slammed his fists on the table. "You lying bitch! My loyalty to Hilliard cannot be bought!"

"Loyalty?!" Charla laughed mockingly. "Hilliard is a vegetable. He is never waking up. You are securing your own future by helping her destroy the only person who can stop her from liquidating this company!"

She turned to the board members, playing expertly on their capitalist paranoia. "She stabbed the CEO! She hacked your servers! And now she is using forged documents to frame me so she can take everything!"

The board members froze. Their eyes darted between Gavin, Cailin, and Charla.

In the twisted, paranoid world of high finance, Charla's lie made terrifying sense. Billions of dollars were more than enough motive to buy a man's soul and forge digital records.

Gavin looked at Preston, desperation in his eyes. "Preston, the blockchain ledgers are immutable. You can hire any independent cybersecurity firm to verify the data."

Preston did not answer. He stared at the documents on the table, his jaw muscles clenching.

Cailin watched Preston's eyes. She saw the hesitation. She saw the cold, calculating arithmetic running behind the Acting Chairman's gaze.

Her heart turned to solid ice. She understood, with absolute clarity, that the truth did not matter in this room. The only thing that mattered was which version of the lie protected the stock price.

The heavy silence in the conference room stretched for a full sixty seconds. The only sound was the faint hum of the air conditioning vent.

Preston Holloway finally moved. He stood up, adjusted the cuffs of his expensive suit, and walked slowly to the center of the table.

He looked down at the dark web photographs, the bank routing numbers, and the digital interface Gavin had connected. The absolute proof of a child's murder.

Chapter 457:

Preston reached out and gathered the physical papers into a neat stack. Then he yanked Gavin's decryption drive from the port, plunging the screen back into darkness.

"Preston! What are you doing?!" Gavin yelled, taking a step forward.

Two bodyguards instantly seized Gavin's arms, locking him in place.

Preston walked to the heavy-duty office shredder in the corner of the room. He flipped the power switch. The machine hummed to life. Without a moment's hesitation, he fed the entire stack of evidence into the metal teeth. He then set the decryption drive on the table and smashed it into plastic shards with a heavy crystal ashtray.

The loud, grating whine of the shredder filled the room. The physical proof of Charla's guilt was chewed into thousands of meaningless white ribbons.

"I am saving the Holloway Group," Preston stated, his voice completely devoid of emotion. He brushed a speck of paper dust from his lapel.

He turned to face Gavin. "The ransomware attack has already wiped out fifteen percent of our market capitalization. If the SEC discovers we are merging with a woman under investigation for murder, the stock will crash to zero. We will be bankrupt by Friday."

Preston's eyes were dead. "A dead five-year-old girl cannot save this company. The English family's fifty-billion-dollar capital injection can." His voice dropped to a lethal whisper. "As for any digital backups on Kegan's servers, our legal team will classify them as malicious forgeries and corporate libel. Without a physical chain of custody, a digital file is just a ghost. It is worthless in court."

Preston looked at the senior board members. "Do you concur, gentlemen?"

The oldest board member kept his hands folded in his lap. He stared blankly at the wall. "The survival of the family supersedes all individual tragedies. History will forgive our methods."

Charla let out a long, shuddering breath. Her shoulders dropped. A massive, triumphant smile spread across her face. She had literally gotten away with murder.

“You disgusting parasites,” Gavin whispered. His eyes were red, tears of absolute rage spilling over his lashes. “If Hilliard wakes up, he will kill every single one of you.”

“He is not waking up,” Preston replied coldly. “And a man on life support cannot vote on the board.”

Preston pointed at the door. “Gavin Thorne, you have violated your non-disclosure agreement by fabricating evidence against Ms. English. As Acting Chairman, I am terminating your employment immediately. Hand over your security badge.”

Gavin stared at the men he had served for a decade. The rot was absolute.

He let out a short, bitter laugh. He reached up, grabbed the lanyard around his neck, and ripped it off with one violent motion. He threw the plastic ID badge directly at Preston’s chest.

“Burn in hell,” Gavin spat.

He turned and walked toward the door. As the guards shoved him toward the exit, his eyes locked onto Cailin. In a fraction of a second, years of corporate espionage training took over. He stumbled deliberately, his shoulder slamming hard into Ashely.

“Watch it!” a guard yelled, yanking Gavin backward.

Chapter 458:

But in that microsecond of chaotic physical contact, Gavin's hand brushed the side of Cailin's wheelchair. With the practiced sleight of hand of a ghost, he slipped a small, matte-black encrypted USB drive into her palm, concealed beneath the folds of her gown. Her fingers closed around it instantly.

It contained the master backdoor access codes to the Holloway Group's physical security grid.

Gavin caught his balance and turned his head to look at Cailin one last time.

"I am sorry, Ms. Morton," Gavin whispered, his voice cracking. "I couldn't get justice for Elia."

"You did your job, Gavin," Cailin replied softly, her fingers tracing the sharp edges of the drive hidden in her fist. "I will do mine."

The guards shoved Gavin out into the hallway. The heavy oak doors slammed shut behind him.

Preston walked over to Charla and extended his hand. "Ms. English, I apologize for the misunderstanding. I trust this will not delay the capital transfer?"

Charla took his hand, smiling sweetly. "Of course not, Preston. We are family."

Cailin did not say another word. Ashely turned the wheelchair around and pushed her out of the conference room.

As they rolled down the VIP corridor, leaving the rot of the boardroom behind, Cailin opened her hand slightly. The sharp plastic edges of the USB drive pressed into her palm, drawing a fresh drop of blood.

The legal battle was over.

The harsh fluorescent lights of the VIP corridor cast a sickly pale glow over the polished marble floor.

Cailin sat motionless in the wheelchair, her pale fingers locked in a death grip around the matte-black encrypted USB drive Gavin had slipped into her hand. The sharp plastic edge pierced the fragile skin of her palm. A thick drop of dark red blood welled up, sliding down her wrist and dripping onto the white fabric of her hospital gown.

She stared at the blood, but her brain registered no physical pain. Her nervous system was completely numb, overloaded by the sheer magnitude of the betrayal she had just witnessed inside the boardroom.

Ashely dropped to her knees on the cold floor beside the wheelchair and pulled a small first-aid kit from the bottom rack of the chair.

“Open your hand, Cailin,” Ashely ordered, her voice tight with suppressed rage.

Cailin did not move. Her knuckles were bone-white.

Ashely reached out and physically pried Cailin's rigid fingers apart, one by one. She took the USB drive and slipped it safely into her own pocket, then pressed a brown iodine swab hard against the open cut on Cailin's palm.

The heavy, arrogant thud of expensive leather shoes echoed from the far end of the corridor, shattering the suffocating silence.

Preston Holloway marched toward them in a perfectly tailored charcoal suit, not a single thread out of place. Four massive bodyguards in black tactical gear flanked him in perfect synchronization. Julian Holloway trailed lazily behind his older brother, flipping a solid silver lighter open and shut, the sharp metallic click echoing off the walls. A mocking, highly entertained smirk stretched across his face.

The bodyguards fanned out immediately, physically blocking both ends of the hallway and shoving two hospital nurses back through the double doors, locking them out.

Chapter 459:

Preston stopped directly in front of Cailin's wheelchair and looked down at her. The smug, victorious arrogance from the boardroom was gone. His jaw muscles twitched with barely concealed anxiety.

"Ms. Morton. You are coming with me to the trauma ICU," Preston stated. It was not a request. It was a cold, mechanical command.

Cailin did not even blink. She kept her eyes on Ashely's hands, watching the white gauze wrap around her bleeding palm.

Ashely tied off the bandage and stood up, placing herself directly between Preston and the wheelchair.

“Are you out of your mind?” Ashely snarled, her chest heaving. “You just shredded the evidence that proves who murdered her daughter. You protect a killer, and now you want her help? Back the hell up.”

Preston’s face twisted in disgust. He did not look at Ashely. He flicked his fingers toward his lead bodyguard.

“Remove this woman from my path,” Preston ordered.

Two bodyguards lunged forward, reaching out with thick, muscular arms to grab Ashely by the shoulders.

Cailin finally moved.

She slowly lifted her head. Her eyes were two black voids, devoid of any human warmth, holding nothing but the promise of absolute violence. She looked directly at the lead bodyguard.

“Touch her,” Cailin whispered. Her voice was weak and raspy from the breathing tube she had endured days earlier, but the concentrated malice in her tone was paralyzing. “And I will open your throat.”

The bodyguard froze. His hands stopped an inch from Ashely's jacket. The survival instinct in his brain recognized a predator with nothing left to lose.

Preston forced his rising panic down with a harsh breath.

"Hilliard's organs are failing," Preston said, his voice hard and rapid. "The chief surgeon just informed me that his brain activity is dropping. He has completely lost the will to live."

Preston leaned closer, his eyes wide. "The short sellers on Wall Street have already smelled the blood in the water. If Hilliard does not show signs of neurological recovery before the opening bell tomorrow, the Holloway Group stock will hit a circuit breaker. We will lose billions."

Cailin stared at him. A slow, terrifyingly cold smile crept onto her pale lips.

"And?" Cailin asked.

"You just destroyed the truth to protect your capital," she said, her voice dripping with pure acid. "Now you want me to go in there and save him?"

"That was a necessary corporate compromise!" Preston yelled, his composure cracking. "I don't care if you hate him! Go stand by his bed. Whisper in his ear. Lie to him. Tell him you forgive him. Just make his heart rate spike so he survives the night!"

Julian clicked his lighter open. The small blue flame illuminated his twisted smile.

“Come on, Cailin,” Julian mocked, taking a step forward. “Go perform your final duty as the loyal ex-wife. After all, he took a knife to the chest just for you.”

Chapter 460:

Cailin placed her good hand on the metal armrest of the wheelchair. Her abdominal muscles screamed in agony, the fresh stitches pulling taut as she forced her weak body upward. Her legs, wasted from muscle atrophy, trembled violently and refused to hold her weight. She sank back down, but she locked her elbows and forced her upper body rigidly straight. The oversized hospital gown hung off her emaciated frame, making her look like a ghost — but her posture was an unbreakable wall of defiance.

She looked at Preston as though he were a rotting corpse on the sidewalk.

“Whether he lives or dies means absolutely nothing to me,” Cailin stated. The temperature in the hallway seemed to drop ten degrees.

“You chose Charla’s fifty billion dollars,” Cailin whispered, not moving an inch closer to him. “So take that blood money, stack it around his hospital bed, and let it keep him warm in hell.”

Preston’s face turned purple with rage. All professional restraint abandoned him. He lunged forward and grabbed Cailin by her fragile shoulder.

“You crazy bitch!” Preston roared, his fingers digging into her collarbone. “If this company goes bankrupt, your little underground auction house will be liquidated right along with us! I will destroy you!”

Ashely did not hesitate. She lifted her heavy combat boot and drove it directly into the center of Preston’s shin bone with maximum force.

The loud crack of bone bruising echoed through the hall.

Preston let out a sharp cry of pain. His leg buckled, and he released Cailin, stumbling backward into his guards.

The bodyguards instantly drew their black steel tactical batons. The heavy metal snapped into place with a terrifying clatter. The corridor was seconds away from a brutal brawl.

“Don’t waste your energy,” Cailin said calmly, reaching up to smooth the wrinkled fabric of her gown where Preston had grabbed her.

She looked at the raised batons, then back to Preston’s sweating face.

“You could put a gun to my head,” Cailin said softly. “And I still would not walk into that room to save a traitor.”

Cailin turned her back on the Acting Chairman of the Holloway Group. With Ashely's help, she turned the wheelchair around.

Together, they moved slowly down the corridor toward her negative pressure isolation room, never looking back.

Julian, watching the physical standoff completely devolve, let out an entertained whistle. "Well, good luck explaining this to the board, big brother," he mocked, turning on his heel and sauntering lazily down the corridor, leaving Preston to face the disaster alone.

Preston watched her go. His chest heaved with panicked breaths. He slammed his fist into the marble wall, the dull thud reverberating through the floor.

The heavy glass door of the VIP suite clicked shut, sealing Cailin and Ashely inside.

Cailin walked slowly to the edge of the hospital bed and sat down. She stared out the reinforced window at the grey, suffocating smog hanging over the Manhattan skyline. Her eyes were dark, calculating, and entirely devoid of peace.

Ashely walked to the water dispenser, filled a small paper cup with warm water, and held it out.

"You did the right thing," Ashely said, her voice firm. "Let that bastard rot in the ICU. He deserves to die alone in the dark."

Cailin did not take the cup. She slowly turned her head.