

Second chance 461

Chapter 461:

"No, Ashely," Cailin said. Her voice was a low, terrifying vibration in her chest. "If he dies right now, in a coma, he feels nothing. He escapes."

Cailin looked down at her hands. "That is too easy. I want him awake. I want him fully conscious so he can watch me tear his precious empire apart, brick by brick."

Ashely froze, the water cup trembling slightly in her hand. "What are you saying? You are going to do what Preston wants? You are going to save him?"

"I am going to wake him up," Cailin said. She pushed herself off the mattress, her bare feet hitting the cold floor. "Using the cruelest method possible."

Cailin pointed toward the tall wooden wardrobe in the corner of the room.

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"Open the black duffel bag Kegan's men dropped off last night," Cailin ordered. "He used his contacts in the hospital's logistics department to have it smuggled in with the medical supplies."

Ashely walked to the wardrobe and unzipped the heavy canvas bag. She reached inside and immediately pulled her hand back, her eyes widening in absolute shock.

It was not clean hospital clothes. It was a Valentino Haute Couture gown.

Ashely drew the fabric out into the harsh hospital light. It was a floor-length, backless silk dress in a shade of brilliant, aggressive crimson red. Inside the bag she also found a small cosmetics case and a pair of perfectly matching blood-red velvet flat loafers.

“Cailin,” Ashely breathed, staring at the dress. “You want to wear this into a trauma ICU? This is a massive slap in the face to the entire Holloway family. It is the color of celebration.”

“That is exactly the point,” Cailin said.

She reached up and unbuttoned the top of her hospital gown. She let the sterile fabric fall to the floor, exposing her pale, emaciated body. Thick white bandages wrapped tightly around her abdomen, covering the surgical staples holding her stomach together.

Ashely bit her lip. She did not argue. She stepped forward and carefully helped Cailin step into the expensive silk.

The fabric slid over Cailin’s skin like cold water. The deep V-cut of the open back fully exposed the jagged, ugly scar from the gunshot wound on her left shoulder blade. The visual contrast between the flawless, vibrant red silk and her broken, scarred flesh was physically jarring.

Ashely wheeled her to the small mirror above the sink. Cailin gripped the edges of the porcelain, leaning forward from the chair to steady her trembling reflection.

She picked up a tube of Tom Ford lipstick in a dark, blood-red shade. Her hand shook violently, but she forced her wrist to lock. She applied the color to her pale, cracked lips with slow, surgical precision.

Ten minutes later, the door to the isolation room swung open.

Cailin emerged into the corridor, seated in the wheelchair with Ashely pushing her steadily forward. Instead of stilettos, she wore the blood-red velvet flat loafers — the only footwear her atrophied muscles could manage. But the visual impact was no less devastating. The red shoes matched her dress perfectly, a glaring symbol of her intent.

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The two Holloway security guards stationed outside the door physically flinched. Their jaws dropped. They were so stunned by the sight of a woman dressed for a gala rolling forward through a terminal ward like a queen on a throne that they forgot entirely their orders to restrict her movement.

The smooth, deliberate roll of the wheelchair's tires echoed against the marble tiles, each rotation sounding like a hammer striking an anvil.

She didn't roll. She glided down the long corridor toward the trauma ICU.

Outside the heavy airtight doors of the unit, Jeraldine Holloway sat slumped in a wheelchair. Despite Preston's order to have her committed, she had leveraged the last ounces of her matriarchal authority, threatening the hospital board until a terrified nurse agreed to wheel her there. She pressed a crumpled tissue to her eyes, sobbing loudly. Charla English stood beside her, gently rubbing the older woman's shoulder, playing the role of the devoted future daughter-in-law.

The sharp sound of the approaching tires cut through Jeraldine's crying.

Both women turned their heads at the exact same moment.

When Jeraldine saw Cailin approaching in the blinding red dress, her pupils dilated in absolute horror. She gripped the armrests of her wheelchair so hard her knuckles popped.

"You... you venomous whore!" Jeraldine shrieked, her voice cracking as her chest heaved with sudden, violent hyperventilation. "My son is dying in that room, and you parade in here wearing red?! You came to celebrate his death?!"

Charla immediately stepped in front of Jeraldine, puffing her chest out.

"Have you lost your mind, Cailin?" Charla yelled, pointing a manicured finger. "This is a hospital. Not one of your filthy underground nightclubs. Have you no human decency left?"

Cailin stopped two feet from them. She looked down at the two women without raising her voice.

“Decency?” Cailin whispered. A cold, dead smile touched her red lips.

“My daughter is rotting at the bottom of the freezing ocean,” Cailin said, her voice slicing through the air like a scalpel. “And the two of you are planning a fairy-tale wedding with her murderer.”

Cailin looked directly into Jeraldine’s terrified eyes. “I wore red today to celebrate Hilliard’s descent into hell.”

Jeraldine gasped, clutching her chest. Her face turned a dangerous shade of grey, and she slumped back in the wheelchair, struggling to pull oxygen into her lungs.

“Shut your mouth!” Charla screamed. She raised her hand and aimed a vicious slap directly at Cailin’s face.

Cailin’s eyes tracked the movement perfectly. Anticipating the strike, she raised her left arm early, using the angle of her wheelchair to her advantage, and solidly blocked Charla’s descending wrist with her forearm before twisting her fingers to lock around the delicate bones with bruising force.

“If you ever try to touch me again,” Cailin whispered, leaning in close enough that Charla could feel her breath, “I will snap your wrist and shove the bone down your throat.”

Charla gasped in pain. The homicidal intent radiating from Cailin’s eyes paralyzed her. She yanked her arm back and stumbled away in genuine fear.

Cailin turned away from them and faced the heavy frosted glass door of the ICU.

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She raised her right hand and pressed her thumb against the biometric scanner on the wall. Because the final divorce papers had not yet been processed through the state supreme court, her biometric data was still registered as Hilliard's primary medical proxy.

The scanner beeped green. The heavy airtight doors hissed and slid slowly open, releasing a blast of freezing, sterile air into the hallway.

The heavy airtight doors hissed shut behind Cailin, instantly cutting off Jeraldine's hysterical sobbing and Charla's outraged shouts.

The trauma ICU was a tomb. The temperature was kept near freezing to slow tissue decay. The only sounds were the aggressive mechanical pumping of the ventilator and the slow, agonizingly spaced beeps of the cardiac monitor.

Ashely pushed Cailin toward the center of the room. The rubber wheels squeaked softly against the linoleum floor.

Hilliard lay flat on the narrow bed. His skin was a horrifying shade of ash grey. A thick plastic endotracheal tube was shoved down his throat, taped aggressively to his cheeks. Heavy drainage tubes protruded from the bandages wrapped around his chest, pulling dark, coagulated blood from his injured heart.

The green line on the monitor was barely moving — a sluggish, pathetic wave that looked seconds away from going completely flat.

Cailin parked her chair beside the bed. She looked down at his ruined face. There was no pity in her eyes. Only a cold, clinical hatred.

“You think you can just die?” Cailin whispered. She leaned over the metal bedrail, bringing her face inches from his ear.

“You think you can dump all your sins and your rotting empire on my shoulders and slip away into the dark?”

Her breath brushed against his cold skin. “It doesn’t work that way, Hilliard. You don’t get to escape.”

She straightened her back. She reached out and grabbed the glowing red pulse oximeter clipped to his index finger. With a sharp, violent jerk, she ripped it off his hand and dropped it onto the floor.

The monitor emitted a sharp, high-pitched warning tone. Because the room was soundproofed, the nurses at the central station would only see a flashing yellow light on their screens, giving her a few precious seconds.

Cailin raised her right hand high into the air. She locked her wrist, put the full weight of her shoulder behind the motion, and swung.

SMACK.

The sound of her palm striking his face was deafening in the quiet room. The force of the blow snapped Hilliard's head violently to the side. Five bright red finger marks bloomed instantly across his pale, grey cheek.

But physical pain was useless against a brain starved of oxygen. He did not flinch.

She grabbed the collar of his hospital gown with both hands. Knowing her torn abdominal muscles would tear open if she tried to lift his torso, she instead used her grip to pull herself downward, leaning so heavily over the bedrail that her face was practically pressed against his. She gave his collar a sharp, violent shake, ignoring the agonizing pull against her own sutured stomach.

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"Did you really think Elia was the only blood you had in this world?" Cailin hissed. Her voice was a venomous whisper sliding directly into his ear, hunting for the deepest, most primal fears buried in his subconscious.

"Five years ago, I didn't get an abortion."

A microscopic, involuntary twitch moved through the muscle of Hilliard's neck.

"I had three babies," Cailin whispered, her voice saturated with cruel satisfaction. "I had two boys. Aron and Davy. They have your exact eyes. They carry the pure Holloway blood you are so obsessed with."

She tightened her grip on his collar and shook him slightly.

“But they will never know your name,” Cailin said, driving the psychological blade straight into his soul. “They are going to call Kegan their father. Kegan is going to raise your sons. And when they grow up, they are going to use your money to burn the Holloway Group to the ground.”

“Your own blood is going to dig your grave.”

The words acted like a massive dose of adrenaline injected directly into his brainstem. The absolute, primal horror of another man claiming his sons and his legacy shattered the neurological block.

BEEP — BEEP — BEEP — BEEPBEEPBEEP!

The cardiac monitor exploded into a frantic, chaotic alarm.

The sluggish green wave on the screen violently spiked. His heart rate shot from a dying forty beats per minute to a massive, panicked one hundred and thirty.

Hilliard’s body convulsed on the mattress. His back arched off the bed. A horrific, guttural choking sound erupted from his throat around the plastic breathing tube. His fingers curled into tight fists, the knuckles turning white.

The massive spike in his sympathetic nervous system triggered the hospital's code blue protocol. The red lights above the door began to flash violently.

The airtight doors slammed open.

The chief trauma surgeon sprinted into the room, followed by four nurses pushing a heavy defibrillator cart.

"His sympathetic nervous system is hyper-arousing! He's fighting the vent!" the surgeon shouted, shoving Cailin hard out of the way. "Push fifty of propofol! Hold him down before he rips his chest tubes out!"

Ashely quickly pulled Cailin's wheelchair backward, clearing the path for the medical team.

Cailin sat near the wall and watched Hilliard's chest heave violently as the nurses pinned his arms to the bed.

A slow, chilling smile spread across her face.

She reached down and smoothly adjusted the fabric of her red silk dress. Like an artist contemplating a completed, gruesome painting, she turned her wheelchair around and rolled out of the ICU, the quiet glide of her tires fading into the screaming alarms behind her.

Three days later.

Cailin sat on the edge of her hospital bed, staring blankly at the neon lights of the Manhattan skyline cutting through the dark window. The heavy plastic IV catheter had finally been removed from the back of her hand, leaving a dark purple, swollen bruise over the vein.

The door pushed open. Ashely walked in carrying a plastic tray holding a bowl of lukewarm soup and a cup of water. Her face was tight with anger.

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“He survived,” Ashely said, slamming the tray down onto the rolling table. The water sloshed over the rim of the cup. “The bastard actually stabilized. They moved him out of the trauma ICU to a standard VIP recovery suite an hour ago.”

Cailin did not look away from the window. Her face remained a mask of stone.

“Cockroaches always survive,” Cailin murmured, her voice flat.

“But that isn’t the worst part,” Ashely said, grabbing the television remote from the nightstand. She pointed it at the flat-screen mounted on the wall and hit the power button.

The screen flickered to life, showing a live broadcast from the grand ballroom of the St. Regis Hotel on Wall Street.

Preston Holloway stood at a podium bristling with microphones. His face was flushed with victory, completely devoid of the panic he had shown in the hospital corridor three days ago.

“Thanks to the world-class medical team, Mr. Hilliard Holloway has made a miraculous recovery,” Preston’s voice boomed through the television speakers. “He is awake, alert, and resuming his duties.”

Preston smiled broadly for the flashing cameras. “To celebrate this miracle, and to solidify the unbreakable bond between the Holloway and English families...”

He stepped back and gestured to the side of the stage.

Charla English walked into the frame. She wore a stunning, custom-fitted white silk gown. Her broken nose was expertly concealed beneath heavy stage makeup. She smiled with perfect, practiced elegance.

“I am honored to announce,” Charla said, leaning into the microphone, “that Hilliard and I will be holding our engagement ceremony next month at the Long Island estate.”

The financial reporters in the crowd erupted into applause. The ticker tape running across the bottom of the screen flashed bright green. The Holloway Group stock had surged twelve percent in the last ten minutes.

Charla raised her left hand toward the cameras. A massive, flawless pink diamond ring sat on her finger, catching the harsh stage lights and throwing blinding sparks across the screen.

“The very first thing Hilliard did when he opened his eyes,” Charla said, her voice trembling with practiced emotion, “was ask me to be his wife.”

Ashely let out a scream of pure frustration. She hurled the remote control directly at the television.

The plastic casing shattered against the screen with a loud crack. The picture glitched for a second, but Charla’s smiling face remained.

“Those disgusting animals!” Ashely yelled, pacing the room. “He just woke up, and he is already marrying the woman who drowned his daughter?!”

Cailin stared at the pink diamond on the screen. A cold, heavy knot formed in her stomach, twisting her healing ulcer and sending a sharp spike of pain through her abdomen. She pressed her hand hard against her ribs.

“Hilliard didn’t propose,” Cailin said, her voice eerily calm. “Preston bought that ring. Preston staged this press conference to stop the stock market circuit breakers.”

“As for Hilliard,” she sneered, “he is just a paralyzed prop. A mascot Preston is using to calm the hedge funds.”

“So we just sit here and watch them celebrate?” Ashely demanded, her fists clenched.

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“Let them climb as high as they want,” Cailin said, reaching over to switch off the television. “The higher the pedestal, the more bones they will break when I shatter it.”

Despite her cold logic, the image of Charla wearing that ring worked like a slow poison in Cailin’s bloodstream.

Hours passed. The hospital grew dead quiet.

Cailin lay in the dark, staring at the ceiling. Every time she closed her eyes, she saw Elia’s small body sinking into the black water — and then the image was immediately swallowed by the blinding flash of Charla’s pink diamond. Her heart hammered against her ribs, her breathing shallow and rapid.

She sat up, her hands shaking. She opened the drawer of her nightstand and pulled out a small, unmarked white pill bottle — a high-grade prescription sleeping aid, Ambien, smuggled in by Kegan’s men.

Cailin poured two white pills into her palm. She didn’t bother with water. She threw them to the back of her throat and swallowed hard, the dry chalk scraping her esophagus.

She lay back down. Fifteen minutes later, the heavy chemical weight of the drugs dragged her brain down into a dark, dreamless, and completely defenseless sleep.

2:00 AM

The isolation room was pitch black, save for the faint clinical glow of the humidifier in the corner, which emitted a low, continuous hiss. Pale moonlight sliced through the gaps in the window blinds, painting sharp white lines across the linoleum floor.

The heavy metal door handle let out a microscopic click. The door pushed slowly inward, its hinges completely silent.

A massive, dark silhouette slipped into the room. The figure immediately reached back and locked the deadbolt with a soft thud.

It was Hilliard.

He wore a standard grey hospital gown and was completely barefoot, his toes gripping the freezing tiles to avoid any sound.

His massive chest was wrapped tightly in thick, restrictive bandages. His sternum had been cracked open by a bone saw days earlier. Every time he inhaled, the severed bone and torn muscle fibers screamed in blinding, white-hot agony. Cold sweat poured down his face, soaking the collar of his gown.

He had bribed a night-shift resident with a blank bearer bond, having the doctor loop the security camera footage outside his door and manually override the telemetry data on his heart monitor to make it appear as though he was still in a deep, unresponsive sleep.

Hilliard dragged his heavy, agonizing legs forward and stopped beside Cailin's bed.

Cailin lay flat on her back. Her breathing was deep and unnaturally slow. The heavy dose of Ambien had paralyzed her central nervous system, trapping her in a chemical void.

Hilliard slowly braced his hands on the bedrail, lowering his weight with excruciating care. The movement pulled the stitches in his chest, and a sharp, involuntary groan built in his throat — he bit down on his tongue so hard he tasted copper, forcing the sound back down.

He leaned over the bed, his face inches from hers.

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In the pale moonlight, he stared at her. He devoured the sight of her pale skin and the steady rise and fall of her chest. In the endless, suffocating darkness of his coma, her voice had been the only thing that had reached him.

He raised his right hand. His fingers trembled violently. He wanted to touch her cheek, to feel the warmth of her skin, but he stopped his hand a fraction of an inch from her face.

He was covered in the invisible blood of their daughter. He felt too filthy, too monstrous to touch her.

The heavy medication in Cailin's system shifted. She let out a soft, distressed murmur in her sleep. Her brow furrowed, and she turned her head slightly on the pillow.

The tiny sound shattered Hilliard's restraint.

A wave of absolute, crushing despair and desperate hunger hijacked his brain. He leaned forward, burying his face into the curve of her neck.

The familiar, clean scent of her skin — a mixture of sterile hospital soap and her own natural warmth — flooded his senses. It was the only oxygen he had breathed in days.

"Cailin... I'm sorry," Hilliard whispered. His voice was a broken, gravelly rasp, destroyed by the breathing tube.

Tears, hot and uncontrollable, spilled from his eyes and dripped from his lashes, landing on Cailin's exposed collarbone.

Cailin's drugged brain struggled to process the sensory input. She felt a heavy, crushing weight pressing down on her shoulder and the warm, wet moisture on her skin. She tried to open her eyes, but her eyelids felt sealed with lead. Her vision was a blurry, swimming grey haze. She could make out only the dark shape of broad shoulders hovering above her.

"I heard you," Hilliard sobbed, his lips brushing against her earlobe. "In the ICU. I heard everything."

"Aron... Davy." He choked out the names of the sons he had never met. The physical pain in his chest was nothing compared to the agony in his soul. "Our boys."

He lifted his head slightly and looked at her parted lips.

“I am not going to die,” Hilliard swore, his voice trembling with a terrifying, obsessive conviction. “I will not let him take them.”

He leaned down and pressed his mouth hard against hers.

It was a desperate, punishing kiss. He poured every ounce of his regret, his self-hatred, and his psychotic possessiveness into the contact. His cracked lips bled, smearing a faint trace of copper against her mouth.

The sudden pressure spiked Cailin’s adrenaline. She gasped against him. Her drugged muscles twitched, and she weakly raised her hands, trying to push against the solid wall of his chest.

“Get... off...” she mumbled, her words slurred by the Ambien.

Hilliard felt her weak resistance. It struck him like a knife twisting in his gut. He immediately pulled back, breaking away from her.

“Wait for me,” Hilliard whispered fiercely into the dark. “I will slaughter every single person who hurt you. I will take it all back.”

Heavy footsteps echoed in the hallway outside. The night nurse was doing her rounds.

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Hilliard forced his agonizing body away from the bed. He took one last, desperate look at her face, then turned and moved silently toward the door, slipping out into the corridor like a ghost.

The room fell dead silent.

The next morning, harsh sunlight pierced through the window blinds. Cailin gasped and shot upright in bed, her heart racing. She raised her hand immediately, her fingers touching her lips and the side of her neck.

The morning sun flooded the isolation room, illuminating dust motes drifting lazily through the air.

Cailin sat perfectly still on the edge of the mattress, her fingers pressed hard against her lower lip. The skin felt raw, slightly bruised. She ran her tongue over her teeth and tasted the distinct, metallic tang of dried blood that did not belong to her.

She looked down at her collarbone. There was a faint, dried watermark on her skin.

Her eyes moved to the white pillowcase. Resting near the edge of the fabric was a single, short strand of coarse black hair.

Her heart hammered against her ribs. The heavy fog of the Ambien burned rapidly out of her system. The crushing weight on her chest, the desperate voice whispering names, the taste of blood — it had not been a drug-induced hallucination.

Someone had been in her room.

The door swung open. Ashely walked in carrying a cardboard tray with two cups of black coffee.

“You look terrible,” Ashely said, frowning as she set the tray down. “Did the pills not work? You look like you saw a ghost.”

Cailin didn’t answer. She threw the blankets off her legs and stood up, ignoring the sharp pull in her abdomen.

“Get my wheelchair,” Cailin ordered, her voice tight. “Take me to the VIP recovery wing. Now.”

Five minutes later, Ashely pushed Cailin down the corridor and stopped outside the glass wall of Hilliard’s new suite.

Cailin leaned forward. Inside, Hilliard lay perfectly still. The breathing tube was gone, replaced by a clear oxygen mask over his nose and mouth. His eyes were closed. The cardiac monitor showed a slow, perfectly rhythmic, and completely docile heartbeat.

A floor nurse walked out of the room holding a chart.

“Ms. Morton,” the nurse said politely. “Mr. Holloway is still completely unresponsive. His neurological activity hasn’t changed since the transfer.”

Cailin stared at Hilliard’s hands resting on the blanket. There were no fresh bruises, no signs of movement. The medical illusion was flawless.

Doubt crept into her mind. A man with a cracked sternum could not possibly walk down a hallway, bypass security, and break into her room. It was physically impossible.

She turned the wheelchair around. “Take me back.”

When Ashely pushed her back into the isolation room, a tall, imposing figure was standing by the window, blocking the sunlight.

Kegan Aguirre turned around. He wore a tailored black trench coat over a dark suit. He smelled faintly of aviation fuel and the cold, metallic scent of a recently fired weapon.

“You’re back from Europe,” Cailin said, her muscles instinctively tensing.

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“When I heard you were in the ICU, I grounded my operations and took the jet,” Kegan said. His dark eyes swept her pale face, lingering on the bruised IV mark on her hand. A flash of dangerous, possessive anger crossed his features.

He walked slowly toward the bed. As he stepped into the light, Cailin took in his broad shoulders and his short black hair.

The blurry, dark silhouette from her drugged memory superimposed itself perfectly over Kegan’s physical frame.

Cailin’s breath hitched. She looked directly into his eyes.

“Kegan,” Cailin said, her voice dropping to a cautious whisper. “Were you... did you come into my room last night?”

Kegan froze.

He had indeed bypassed the hospital’s exterior security at 2:00 AM. But when he reached her door, his trained ears had picked up the sound of ragged breathing inside. He had hidden in the stairwell and watched Hilliard Holloway — bleeding and broken — drag himself out of Cailin’s room.

Kegan understood immediately what Cailin was asking. The dying man had kissed her.

A violent surge of jealousy erupted in his chest. He had spent five years protecting her, and Hilliard was still haunting her mind. He would not allow Hilliard to gain a single inch of emotional ground.

Kegan took a step closer, invading her personal space.

"Why do you ask?" Kegan said, his voice smooth, giving nothing away.

"Someone kissed me," Cailin said, her eyes narrowing, searching his face for a tell. "Someone was crying. They said something about the boys. Was it you?"

Kegan looked at her defensive posture and the confusion in her eyes. He made a ruthless, tactical decision.

A slow, predatory smile curved his lips.

"If I say yes?" Kegan murmured. He reached out, his thumb gently brushing against her bruised lower lip, the contact deliberate and intimate.

"Seeing you lying there, completely defenseless..." Kegan said, his eyes darkening. "I lost control, Cali. I couldn't help myself."

Cailin's pupils dilated in shock. She slapped his hand away and pushed her wheelchair backward, putting three feet of distance between them. A sudden, inexplicable surge of disappointment crashed through

her chest — a horrific realization that, for one insane fraction of a second, her subconscious had desperately wanted it to have been Hilliard fighting his way out of a coma just to reach her. The thought made her physically nauseous.

“Do not cross that line, Kegan,” Cailin warned, her voice trembling with revulsion at her own fleeting hope. “We are business partners. Nothing else.”

Kegan let out a low chuckle and stepped forward again. “Partners? Cali, you will eventually realize that I am the only man capable of protecting you and those three children.”

Before Kegan could close the distance, the heavy door to the isolation room was violently shoved open, slamming against the wall with a deafening crash.

Two massive private security contractors wearing the English family crest on their lapels shoved their way into the room and immediately took up positions on either side of the door, their hands resting aggressively on their holstered weapons.

Charla English strutted in behind them.

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She wore a blindingly sparkly Chanel tweed suit and a pair of limited-edition stilettos. The white splint was still taped across her nose, but she carried herself with the arrogant, untouchable swagger of a newly crowned queen.

Her eyes swept the room and landed briefly on Kegan. A flicker of genuine fear crossed her face — she remembered his brutality in Europe — but the massive pink diamond on her finger gave her a false sense of absolute invincibility.

“Oh, my,” Charla sneered, her voice dripping with venomous sarcasm. “Did I interrupt a little hospital rendezvous? How romantic.”

Kegan’s posture shifted instantly. The relaxed, predatory ease vanished, replaced by the rigid, coiled tension of a trained killer. His right hand moved smoothly to rest on the grip of the Glock 19 concealed beneath his trench coat.

Cailin raised her left hand and shot Kegan a sharp look, silently ordering him to stand down.

She turned her dead eyes toward Charla.

“Did you force your way into my room just to show off the fake prop Preston bought for you?” Cailin asked. Her voice was flat and completely bored — the ultimate insult.

Charla’s face flushed a furious, ugly red beneath her makeup. She stomped her stiletto against the floor.

“Hilliard put this ring on my finger himself!” Charla shrieked, thrusting her hand forward. “You are nothing but a discarded piece of trash! He holds my hand every single night. He tells me how grateful he is that you are finally out of his life!”

Cailin didn't even blink. Her breathing remained perfectly steady. "Are you done? The smell of your perfume is making me nauseous. Get out."

The absolute dismissal shattered Charla's ego. Her lies weren't landing. She needed a sharper weapon. She needed to draw blood.

Charla walked slowly toward the hospital bed and leaned over it, a sick, twisted smile stretching across her face.

"You know, Cailin," Charla whispered, her voice dropping to a sickeningly sweet coo. "I had the most vivid dream last night."

Cailin's hands, resting on her lap, slowly curled into tight fists.

"I dreamed about your precious little Elia," Charla said, her eyes glowing with sadistic pleasure. "I dreamed about her thrashing around in the freezing water off Montauk Point."

Cailin's fingernails dug so hard into her palms that the fresh scabs broke open. Warm blood began to pool in her hands.

"She was so small," Charla continued, panting slightly as she fed off the cruelty. "The water must have been so cold. I bet she swallowed so much salt water. Her lungs must have burned. I bet she was screaming for her mommy right until the water filled her throat—"

“Shut your mouth,” Kegan roared.

In a blur of motion, he drew the Glock, racked the slide, and pressed the hot steel barrel directly against the center of Charla’s forehead.

The two English bodyguards instantly drew their weapons, aiming squarely at Kegan’s chest. The atmosphere in the room plummeted to absolute zero. A bloodbath was seconds away.

But Charla just laughed — a hysterical, manic sound. She knew Kegan wouldn’t fire first with two guns pointed at him.