

Second chance 471

Chapter 471:

“What’s wrong?” Charla taunted, ignoring the gun against her skull and staring directly at Cailin. “Does the truth hurt? It’s your fault she’s dead! If you hadn’t tried to steal Hilliard from me, she wouldn’t have been thrown into the ocean. She died screaming because of you!”

Something inside Cailin’s brain snapped. The last remaining thread of her restraint vaporized.

Her hands clamped down on the wheels of her chair. Driven by a massive, unnatural surge of adrenaline, she didn’t try to stand. Instead, she shoved the wheels forward with violent force. The heavy metal wheelchair lunged like a battering ram, bypassing Kegan entirely, the footrests slamming directly into Charla’s shins.

Charla shrieked as her legs buckled and she fell backward. Cailin drove the chair forward again, pinning Charla spine-first against the heavy stainless-steel medical cart. Metal trays, glass vials, and surgical tools cascaded to the floor with a deafening clatter. Charla let out a choked scream as the edge of the cart dug into her kidneys.

Cailin’s right hand snatched a pair of heavy stainless-steel surgical scissors from the falling tray. Without a microsecond of hesitation, she leaned out of her chair and pressed the razor-sharp tips directly against Charla’s carotid artery.

The metal pierced the skin. A thick drop of bright red blood welled up and slid down the blade.

“Make them drop the guns,” Cailin hissed, turning to glare at the two bodyguards. Her eyes were completely black, devoid of sanity. “Or I will sever her artery and watch her bleed out on this floor.”

The bodyguards froze. They saw the blood on the scissors. They saw the absolute certainty of death in Cailin’s eyes. They lowered their weapons slowly.

Charla was paralyzed with terror. She felt the cold steel pressing into her pulse. She could not breathe.

Then a loud, sharp gasp echoed from the hallway.

Someone was standing in the partially open doorway, staring at the scene.

The squeak of rubber wheels on linoleum broke the frozen tension in the room.

Jeraldine Holloway sat in her wheelchair, parked perfectly in the gap of the partially open door. Her private nurse stood behind her, hands trembling on the push handles.

Jeraldine’s face was the color of wet ash. Her entire body shook with violent, uncontrollable tremors. Her wide, horrified eyes were locked onto Charla, who was pinned against the metal cart with scissors at her throat.

Just sixty seconds earlier, Jeraldine had rolled up to the doorway and sat there in silence, listening. She had heard every single word.

She had heard the woman she championed — the woman she had wanted to make the matriarch of the Holloway family — gleefully describing the agonizing death of her own five-year-old granddaughter. She had heard the psychotic, joyful laugh as Charla mocked Elia drowning in the freezing ocean.

The pristine, elegant illusion of Charla English shattered into a million filthy pieces. A wave of profound, physical nausea struck the older woman's stomach.

Charla saw Jeraldine in the doorway. The arrogant malice vanished from her face, instantly replaced by sheer, desperate panic.

"Jeraldine... Aunt Jeraldine!" Charla choked out, her voice high and tight from Cailin's grip on her throat. "Help me! She attacked me! She's trying to kill me!"

Chapter 472:

Cailin let out a low, dark chuckle. She slowly opened her fingers, releasing Charla's throat, and tossed the bloody surgical scissors onto the floor. They landed with a sharp metallic clatter.

"Go ahead, Charla," Cailin said, pushing her wheelchair back a few feet and crossing her arms. "Explain to her how you were the victim just now. Tell her again how funny it was that Elia choked on salt water."

Charla stumbled forward, rubbing her bruised neck. She rushed toward the door, reaching out to grab Jeraldine's hands.

“Aunt Jeraldine, please, you have to understand,” Charla babbled, tears streaming down her face. “I was just angry! She provoked me! I didn’t mean any of it—”

“Do not touch me!” Jeraldine shrieked.

She violently slapped Charla’s hands away as if they were covered in acid. Her voice cracked, completely stripped of its usual aristocratic polish.

“You monster,” Jeraldine sobbed, her chest heaving. “You stood there and laughed about a child drowning. You laughed about Hilliard’s flesh and blood dying in the dark.”

“She deserved it!” Charla suddenly snapped, realizing the victim act was finished. Her face twisted into an ugly, hateful sneer as she leaned toward Jeraldine. “If that little bastard hadn’t existed, Hilliard would have married me years ago! She was a mistake!”

SMACK.

Jeraldine swung her arm with every ounce of strength she possessed. Her palm struck Charla’s cheek with a resounding crack, leaving a bright red welt directly beside the surgical splint on her nose.

“Get out,” Jeraldine hissed, her eyes burning with pure hatred. “Get out of my sight. You will never set foot in a Holloway property again.”

Charla touched her stinging cheek and let out a harsh, mocking laugh.

“You think you have any power left, old woman?” Charla spat. “Preston runs the company now. Preston needs my family’s money. You are nothing but a crazy old widow.”

She turned to her bodyguards. “Let’s go.” She marched out of the room, her stilettos clicking aggressively down the hall.

Jeraldine slumped back in her wheelchair. The burst of adrenaline faded, leaving her looking frail and utterly broken. She motioned for her nurse to push her fully into the room.

She looked at Cailin. She swallowed hard, her pride in ruins.

“Cailin,” Jeraldine whispered, her voice trembling. “I was blind. I am so sorry.”

Cailin stared at her. Her expression was carved from solid ice.

“Hilliard is awake,” Jeraldine continued, tears spilling over her wrinkled cheeks. “But he refuses to eat. He refuses the IVs. The doctors say he is trying to starve himself to death. He is punishing himself.”

She bowed her head, staring at the floor. “I am begging you. Go to him. If you tell him to live, he will. I will give you anything. I will transfer my personal trust to you. Just save my son.”

The mighty matriarch of the Holloway family was groveling.

Chapter 473:

As Jeraldine begged, that same inexplicable surge of disappointment from the morning flared in Cailin's chest. She remembered the phantom touch in the dark, the desperate hope she had felt before Kegan claimed the act. She forced herself to swallow that absurd hesitation, ruthlessly crushing the last remnant of her lingering affection into absolute dust. There was nothing left but the monster he had made of her.

Cailin rolled her wheelchair to the sink. She pulled a chemical disinfectant wipe from the plastic dispenser and slowly, methodically cleaned her fingers, as if scrubbing away the contaminated air she had just shared with the two women.

"Mrs. Holloway," Cailin said, dropping the dirty wipe into the biohazard bin. "Do you really believe your family can buy their way out of everything?"

She turned around. "My daughter is dead. You tried to buy my silence with fifty million dollars. Now your son wants to die, and you want to buy his life?"

Jeraldine opened her mouth, but no sound came out. She was suffocating under the weight of her own sins.

"Go back to his room," Cailin commanded, her voice dropping to a lethal, absolute zero. "Tell Hilliard that if he truly feels guilty, he should hurry up and stop breathing. It is the only useful thing he can do for Elia now."

Kegan stepped forward. He looked at the nurse and pointed at the door. “You heard her. Roll her out.”

The nurse quickly turned the wheelchair around and pushed the sobbing Jeraldine out into the hallway.

Cailin sat alone with Kegan. She looked at the empty doorway, her jaw clenched tight. The Holloway family was broken — but the scent of blood in the water was bound to attract other predators.

3:00 PM.

Kegan received an urgent, encrypted call regarding a breach in his European network. His face hardened. “I have to deal with this,” he told Cailin, his voice low. “My men are on the floor below. Don’t hesitate.” With a final, possessive look, he was gone, leaving the room in a tense silence.

The brief quiet was violently shattered by a loud commotion in the hallway.

“Get out of my way! I am her family!” a shrill, demanding voice echoed through the door.

Ashely walked over and pulled it open. Before she could react, three people shoved past her, forcing their way into the cramped isolation room. They had apparently bullied a junior staff member at the main security desk, claiming a family emergency requiring immediate access.

Leading the pack was Eleanor Morton, Cailin's grandmother. She wore a heavy mink coat despite the indoor heating, leaning on a custom cane encrusted with small diamonds. Behind her stood Arthur, Cailin's uncle, his suit looking slightly frayed at the cuffs, and Chlo  , Cailin's cousin, whose face was twisted into a permanent sneer of jealousy.

"Cailin, my dear granddaughter," Eleanor said, her lips stretching into a tight, entirely false smile. "I heard the wonderful news. You finally finalized the divorce from that awful Holloway man."

Cailin was sitting in her wheelchair, a tablet resting on her lap. She didn't even look up from the screen.

"Who let the parasites in?" Cailin asked the empty air.

Chapter 474:

Arthur stepped forward, rubbing his hands together nervously. "Now, Cailin, there's no need for hostility. We are family. The Morton estate is facing a severe liquidity crisis. The banks are threatening foreclosure. Since you are a free woman now, you have a duty to help us."

"Family?" Cailin finally looked up. She let out a short, humorless laugh. "Five years ago, when the Holloways threw me out on the street, you published a full-page statement in the Times legally severing all ties with me."

"That was a necessary maneuver to protect the Morton brand!" Eleanor snapped, slamming the rubber tip of her cane against the linoleum floor.

“Things are different now,” Eleanor said, reaching into her expensive leather handbag. She pulled out a thick stack of legal documents bound in a blue folder and tossed it onto Cailin’s bed.

“This is a prenuptial agreement from Richard Vance,” Eleanor announced, her eyes gleaming with naked greed.

“The hedge fund billionaire?” Ashely asked, her face twisting in disgust. “He is seventy-two years old. His wife died three months ago.”

“He appreciates Cailin’s... artistic background,” Arthur interjected quickly. “If Cailin signs this three-year marriage contract, Mr. Vance will immediately wire two hundred million dollars into the Morton family holding account. It saves us all.”

Cailin stared at the blue folder. The sheer, unadulterated audacity of the request was staggering.

“You want to sell me to a seventy-year-old widower to pay off your bad debts,” Cailin stated, her voice dangerously calm.

“Oh, stop acting like you’re some pure maiden,” Chloé sneered from the corner, crossing her arms. “You’re a discarded, barren ex-wife who runs a shady underground auction house. Marrying Richard Vance is a massive step up for you. You should be thanking us.”

Cailin reached out and picked up the blue folder. She didn’t open it. She gripped the thick stack of paper with both hands and violently ripped it in half.

The sound of tearing paper cut through the small room. She dropped the shredded pieces onto the floor like garbage.

"Take your delusions and get out of my room," Cailin said, her eyes locking onto Eleanor's.

Eleanor's false smile vanished, replaced by a vicious, ugly scowl.

"You ungrateful little bitch," Eleanor hissed. "I have already signed the preliminary letter of intent with Mr. Vance on your behalf. If you back out now, the breach of contract penalty will bankrupt you!"

"On my behalf?" Cailin's eyes narrowed into dangerous slits. "You have no legal power of attorney over me."

"I am the primary executor of your late mother's trust," Eleanor smiled, showing her teeth. "Under the archaic clauses of that trust, I have broad discretionary powers over your moral and financial standing."

Ashely had heard enough. She marched toward Arthur and pointed at the door. "Security is on the way. Get your family out of here before I throw you out myself."

Arthur's face flushed red. He lunged forward and shoved Ashely hard in the chest. "Shut up, you hired help! This is Morton family business!"

Ashely stumbled backward into the wall. She instantly regained her footing and was about to lunge at Arthur, but a low, sharp word from Cailin stopped her cold.

Cailin's eyes had fallen on Arthur's hands. A switch flipped in her brain.

Chapter 475:

She did not rip anything out. Instead, she dug the fingernails of one hand directly into the raw, bruised flesh where her IV had been. Fresh blood welled up immediately, pouring down her knuckles and dripping onto the floor. The pain was a grounding anchor in a storm of rage. She ignored it entirely. Knowing her atrophied legs would betray her if she tried to stand, she leaned heavily forward in her wheelchair instead, her bare feet planting firmly on the tiles.

"What are you doing?" Arthur stammered, taking a step back as he watched the blood drip from her hand.

Cailin gripped the wheels and shoved herself forward, closing the distance in a fraction of a second. Positioning the wheelchair perfectly, she violently twisted her torso, raised her bloody right hand, and slapped Arthur across the face with every ounce of kinetic force her upper body could generate.

The crack echoed like a gunshot. Arthur cried out and stumbled sideways, crashing into the medical cart.

"I said," Cailin whispered, pointing her bloody finger at the door. "Get. Out."

Eleanor watched her son get struck. She trembled with rage. She reached into her coat pocket and pulled out a small, black velvet pouch. She held it high in the air.

“You think you can hit my son?” Eleanor screamed. “Look at what I have, Cailin!”

Eleanor yanked the drawstrings of the black velvet pouch and turned it upside down, dropping a heavy, antique brass key into her wrinkled palm. The metal was engraved with intricate, centuries-old Swiss watchmaker patterns.

Cailin saw the key. Her pupils contracted instantly. Her body froze, her bloody hand hovering in the air.

It was the physical master key to the Sotheby’s maximum-security underground vault in Geneva — and more importantly, the only piece of her late mother’s legacy the Morton family hadn’t managed to liquidate and gamble away.

“Ah, I see you remember it,” Eleanor smiled maliciously, her fingers closing tightly around the brass. She took a step backward, positioning herself behind Arthur’s recovering bulk.

“Give it to me,” Cailin demanded. The cold detachment was gone. A low, volcanic rage vibrated in her chest.

“Give it to you?” Eleanor scoffed, tapping her diamond cane against the floor. “Your mother’s will was very specific. This key, and the contents of the vault, are only to be transferred to you upon the completion of a ‘suitable and stable’ marriage.”

She raised her chin arrogantly. "As the trust executor, I have legally deemed your marriage to Hilliard Holloway a catastrophic failure. Therefore, the key remains in my custody."

"However," Eleanor continued, her eyes gleaming with extortion, "if you sign the new contract with Mr. Vance, I will gladly hand over this key and whatever your mother locked away in Switzerland."

Chloé laughed from the corner. "Don't be dramatic, Cailin. It's probably just old diaries and cheap jewelry. Sign the paper and marry the old man."

Cailin looked down at her right hand. Blood from the self-inflicted wound dripped steadily onto the pristine white floor, forming a small, dark red puddle.

A low, dark, utterly terrifying laugh escaped her lips.

She raised her head slowly. The last trace of the obedient granddaughter vanished from her face. Her eyes were completely hollow, burning with the pure, unadulterated instinct of an apex predator.

"Ashely," Cailin said. She didn't turn her head. Her voice was flat and dead. "Get them."

Chapter 476:

Ashely reached into her pocket and pressed the panic button on her encrypted radio transmitter.

Less than a minute later, the heavy thud of tactical combat boots shook the hallway from the nearby stairwell. Kegan had kept them stationed on the floor below to avoid hospital security, but they moved like ghosts. Four massive mercenaries — former Special Forces operatives on Kegan’s payroll — stormed into the isolation room.

They wore unmarked black tactical gear and drew no weapons, but the suffocating aura of professional violence they carried into the room instantly dropped the temperature to freezing.

“What is this?!” Arthur shrieked, his voice cracking in terror as a mercenary twice his size blocked the exit. “You can’t do this! This is a hospital! We live in a society of laws!”

“Lock the door,” Cailin commanded.

The lead mercenary slammed the heavy acoustic door shut and threw the deadbolt. The sharp metallic click sealed the Morton family inside. There was no escape.

Cailin turned to the medical tray beside her bed and picked up a pair of heavy stainless-steel surgical hemostats.

She rolled slowly toward Eleanor.

“Stay back! I am your grandmother!” Eleanor yelled, swinging her diamond cane wildly at Cailin.

One of the mercenaries stepped forward, caught the cane in midair with one hand, snapped the expensive carbon fiber shaft over his knee without effort, and dropped the pieces to the floor.

Cailin stopped her wheelchair in front of Eleanor. She reached out with her bloody left hand, grabbed the old woman's jaw, and forced her head up.

"A society of laws?" Cailin whispered, tapping the cold steel tip of the hemostats against Eleanor's trembling cheek.

"In this room," Cailin said, her eyes black and soulless, "I am the law."

She clamped the cold steel jaws of the hemostats directly onto the thin, fragile fold of skin on the back of Eleanor's wrinkled hand. She squeezed the handles until the metal locked and twisted sharply.

"AGHHHH!" Eleanor let out a blood-curdling, agonizing scream. The intense, localized pain short-circuited her brain. Her fingers spasmed involuntarily and flew open.

The antique brass key dropped from her hand, striking the linoleum with a sharp, heavy clatter.

Cailin released the hemostats. Ashely stepped forward, picked up the key, and placed it carefully in Cailin's outstretched, uninjured hand. Cailin used the hem of her hospital gown to wipe a speck of dust from the brass, handling it like a holy relic.

She turned her back on her screaming grandmother.

“Throw this garbage out the service elevator,” Cailin ordered the mercenaries, her voice completely bored. “If any of them come within fifty feet of me again, shatter their kneecaps.”

Arthur and Chloé began to scream and beg as the massive mercenaries grabbed them by their collars, dragging them out of the room like sacks of dead weight.

The door slammed shut, leaving the room in absolute silence.

Cailin sat in her wheelchair by the window. She gripped the brass key tightly in her fist. The real storm was about to break in Geneva.

Chapter 477:

The heavy antique brass key hit the stainless steel workbench with a dull, heavy clatter.

A smear of Eleanor Morton’s fresh blood still clung to the intricate grooves of the metal, shining beneath the harsh fluorescent lights of the Manhattan underground safe house.

Cailin sat in her wheelchair, her breathing shallow to protect her torn abdominal muscles. She stared coldly at the key.

The underground appraiser adjusted the heavy jeweler's loupe over his right eye. He used sterilized tweezers to carefully lift the brass key, treating it like an unexploded bomb. He placed it inside a high-precision 3D scanner resting on the edge of the table.

The machine hummed. A beam of pale blue laser light swept back and forth across the brass surface.

Three minutes passed in absolute silence.

Suddenly, the computer monitor flashed. A harsh red warning box appeared on the screen.

Authentication Incomplete.

Cailin's brow furrowed instantly. The muscles in her jaw tightened until her teeth ground together. Her dead, black eyes locked onto the appraiser.

"Explain," Cailin demanded. Her voice was a flat, terrifying whisper.

The appraiser swallowed hard. A bead of cold sweat rolled down his temple.

"Ms. Morton," he stammered, pointing a shaking finger at the screen. "This is absolutely the authentic physical shell key for the Sotheby's maximum-security vault in Geneva. But it is only half of a dual-verification system."

He typed frantically on his keyboard, pulling up a dark web blueprint. "Based on this, these older systems employ a dual-verification protocol."

"You also need a digital cipher," he continued, his voice tight. "A customized drive containing a biometric encryption code. Without it, this brass key is nothing but a useless piece of scrap metal."

Ashely slammed her palms down on the stainless steel table. The bang made the appraiser flinch.

"That old witch actually held something back?!" Ashely roared, her chest heaving with rage. "She gave you the physical key just to buy time!"

Cailin did not yell. She did not throw anything. The temperature in her eyes simply dropped to absolute zero.

She reached into her pocket and pulled out her encrypted phone. She dialed the direct line to Kegan's security captain, who was currently dealing with her family.

"Take Eleanor out of the service elevator," Cailin ordered, her voice completely devoid of human emotion. "Conduct a secondary interrogation. Break whatever you have to break. Find out where the digital cipher is."

Ten minutes later, the encrypted phone buzzed.

Cailin pressed the speaker button. The audio file began to play.

The sound of Eleanor Morton screaming in sheer, agonizing pain filled the safe house, followed by the clinical, terrifying sound of a joint being methodically dislocated and a man's cold voice counting down.

"I sold it!" Eleanor shrieked through the speaker, sobbing hysterically. "I used the digital cipher as collateral! I gave it to Richard Vance!"

Eleanor's voice dropped into a pathetic, desperate whine.

"He wanted the cipher, and he wanted the girl! I sold Cailin's first night rights to him along with the code! He has it in his penthouse!"

The audio clicked off.

Chapter 478:

Ashely kicked a metal folding chair across the room. It crashed against the concrete wall.

"Those sick, soulless animals!" Ashely screamed, her face turning purple. "They actually sold you like a cheap prostitute to a seventy-year-old pervert to pay off their debts!"

Cailin slowly lowered the phone. There was no fear in her eyes — only cold, calculated, lethal intent.

“Richard Vance,” Cailin murmured.

She knew the name well. He was a notorious Wall Street ghoul, a billionaire who specialized in using his capital to prey on bankrupt, desperate socialites.

“We call the cops,” Ashely paced frantically. “Or better yet, we call Kegan. We have his mercenaries rip that old bastard’s head right off his neck!”

“No,” Cailin said immediately, her tone leaving no room for argument.

“Vance has presidential-level security,” Cailin explained, her mind already forming a tactical blueprint. “If Kegan’s men breach the lobby, Vance will have ten minutes to react. He will destroy the digital cipher just to spite us.”

She gripped the armrests of her wheelchair.

“That cipher holds the only truth my mother left me in this world,” Cailin said. “I cannot risk it.”

She gripped the armrests with white knuckles and used every ounce of her remaining upper body strength to drag herself upright. The movement sent a tearing agony through her stitched abdomen, but she ignored it, leaning her full weight against the cold concrete wall for support. She dragged her numb legs forward, step by agonizing step, toward the safe house wardrobe.

“Are you insane?” Ashely rushed forward, grabbing Cailin’s arm. “Look at your body. You can barely stand. Going up to his penthouse alone is literally walking into a tiger’s cage.”

Cailin turned her head. Her eyes were sharp, focused, and deadly.

“I am the hunter, Ashely,” Cailin whispered. “Not the sheep.”

Cailin stripped off her clothes and reached into the wardrobe, pulling out a custom-made black silk evening gown. It was form-fitting, clinging to every curve of her body, with no metal zippers or buttons — designed to make her look like the perfect, fragile, submissive prey.

She sat on the edge of a chair. She strapped a specialized matte-black ceramic folding knife into a hidden sheath on her inner thigh, the ceramic blade completely invisible to standard metal detectors. Next, she took a micro-signal transmitter and a high-explosive flashbang the size of a lipstick tube, sewing them seamlessly into the thick hem of the silk dress. Finally, she reached into a hidden compartment in the wardrobe and pulled out an emergency psychological warfare kit Kegan had prepared for her weeks earlier — a collection of perfectly forged documents for any conceivable scenario.

At 8:00 PM, a low-profile black Maybach pulled into the underground VIP parking garage of the St. Regis Hotel on Wall Street.

Cailin stepped out of the car alone, her movements stiff and deliberate. The cold garage air hit her bare shoulders.

Chapter 479:

Two massive private bodyguards wearing earpieces immediately stepped into her path, holding military-grade security wands. They patted her down with aggressive, invasive precision, sweeping the wands over her thighs, her waist, and her chest.

The ceramic knife and the micro-transmitter did not emit a single beep.

The lead bodyguard sneered at her tight silk dress, then stepped aside and gestured toward the private gold-plated elevator leading directly to the penthouse.

Cailin walked in. The doors slid shut. Each step had been a carefully controlled battle against the screaming muscles in her abdomen.

As the floor numbers above the door climbed higher, Cailin closed her eyes. She forced her heart rate down, controlling her breathing with absolute discipline.

Ding.

The doors opened.

The penthouse was a sickening display of baroque luxury. The entire Manhattan skyline crawled beneath massive, bulletproof floor-to-ceiling windows.

Richard Vance sat on a custom leather sofa, holding a crystal glass of Louis XIII cognac. His wrinkled, sagging face twisted into a grotesque, greedy smile as he looked Cailin up and down.

“The former Mrs. Holloway,” Vance chuckled, the sound wet and revolting in his throat. “That old hag Eleanor finally delivered a piece of art that actually satisfies me.”

Cailin walked into the room, her face a mask of perfect, submissive blankness.

Behind her, the heavy mahogany double doors slammed shut. The loud click of a deadbolt sliding into place echoed through the room. The bodyguards had locked her in from the outside.

The absolute second the locks engaged, Cailin’s highly trained senses flared.

She stopped walking. Her nostrils flared slightly.

Beneath the smell of expensive leather and cognac, there was a strange, heavy, sickeningly sweet scent pumping through the penthouse ventilation system.

Her heart immediately began to race, beating a frantic, unnatural rhythm against her ribs.

The sweet, heavy scent flooded Cailin's lungs.

Within three seconds, the edges of her vision began to blur. The luxurious baroque furniture seemed to stretch and warp. A sudden, violent rush of heat exploded in her chest, sending uncontrollable tremors down her legs.

Her tactical instincts identified the chemical signature instantly.

It was a weaponized, highly concentrated variant of Devil's Breath — a lethal hallucinogen mixed with a severe aphrodisiac.

Richard Vance stood up slowly. He swirled the amber liquid in his crystal glass, his eyes gleaming with predatory excitement.

"Don't be so tense, my dear," Vance said, his voice a sickening purr. "The air in here is just a little mood enhancer. It helps melt the ice off beautiful, stubborn women like you."

Cailin felt the blood in her veins begin to burn. Her knees buckled slightly.

She immediately bit down on the tip of her own tongue — hard enough that her teeth sliced through the muscle. The sharp, metallic taste of hot blood flooded her mouth. The blinding physical pain acted like a lightning strike to her brain, forcing her central nervous system to maintain a fragile grip on reality.

She did not stumble backward. She did not run for the locked door.

Instead, Cailin forced her trembling legs to move forward. Her flat velvet loafers clicked against the marble as she walked directly toward Vance.

Chapter 480:

His eyes widened in pleasant surprise. He assumed the drug had already shattered her willpower. He eagerly set his glass down and opened his arms, ready to receive the compliant prey walking toward him.

Just as his wrinkled hands reached out to touch her waist, Cailin moved.

She reached into her small designer clutch and pulled out an ultra-thin encrypted tablet — the centerpiece of the psychological warfare kit Kegan had provided. With a sharp, aggressive motion, she slammed the screen against Vance's chest, forcing him to take it.

"Before you put your hands on me, Mr. Vance," Cailin whispered, her voice raspy and thick with the blood in her mouth, yet terrifyingly calm. "I highly suggest you read that."

Vance frowned, annoyed by the interruption. He looked down at the glowing screen.

It was a classified medical dossier. The background bore the unmistakable official watermark of the CDC — the Centers for Disease Control and Prevention.

“What the hell is this?” Vance snapped.

“My latest blood work,” Cailin said. The corners of her mouth curved into a cold, mocking smile. “I just returned from the underground black markets in the Democratic Republic of Congo two weeks ago.”

Vance’s eyes swept the bold red text on the screen.

Pathogen Identified: Marburg Virus Variant. Status: High-Risk Incubation Period. Transmission: Bodily Fluids. Mortality Rate: 90%.

The color drained from his face in a fraction of a second. He looked as though he had been electrocuted. He violently shoved the tablet back at Cailin and stumbled away, his expensive leather shoes slipping on the marble floor.

“You... you have hemorrhagic fever?!” Vance shrieked, his voice cracking.

As an aging billionaire who spent millions annually on longevity treatments, Vance was a severe germaphobe. The mere thought of a highly contagious, flesh-destroying virus was his ultimate nightmare.

"It gets better," Cailin said.

She took a step forward, forcing him to retreat another step. She swiped the screen, bringing up the second page of the forged document.

It was a clear early-pregnancy ultrasound.

"I am also pregnant," Cailin stated, her eyes locked onto his terrified face.

"The father of this child," she continued, dropping her voice to a lethal register, "is Kegan Aguirre. The largest underground arms dealer in Europe."

Vance stopped breathing. His chest heaved as panic seized him.

"If you touch me tonight," Cailin promised, stepping close enough that he could see the blood on her teeth, "I guarantee two things. First, your blood will pour from every pore in your body within forty-eight hours. Second, Kegan's mercenaries will turn your entire Wall Street empire into a crater of ash."

Vance stared at the woman before him. The drug in the air was supposed to dissolve her willpower, but she looked like a demon clawing its way out of hell. He understood with absolute, crushing certainty that he had just locked himself in a room with a walking biological and military time bomb.

“You crazy bitch!” Vance screamed, completely losing his composure. He backed away until his spine hit the heavy oak desk. “Eleanor, that stupid woman! She set me up!”

“Give me the digital cipher,” Cailin demanded.