

Second chance 581

Chapter 581:

The scream started in her stomach. Rose through her chest, her throat, her mouth. It was not human. It was the sound of an animal caught in a trap, of something being torn apart from the inside. Cailin grabbed the glass perfume bottle from the counter — heavy, crystal, a gift from a life that had never existed — raised it above her head and brought it down against the mirror.

The crash was enormous. Glass exploded outward, shards flying, catching the light like diamonds. Cailin did not flinch. She hit it again. The mirror shattered, fragments falling into the sink, onto the floor, around her feet. One piece caught her wrist as she swung, slicing through skin and drawing blood that streaked across the white tile.

She kept hitting the empty frame, the wall behind, anything that would break, anything that would make the image go away.

Outside, in the hallway, having trailed her taxi all the way from Manhattan, Hilliard Holloway froze.

He had been there for twenty minutes. Had followed her from the street, had watched her enter, had been trying to find the courage to knock, to speak, to beg for something he knew she would not give. Gavin was downstairs, waiting in the SUV, following the order to stay back, to give him space, to let him fail alone.

The crash was not a normal sound. It was the sound of destruction, of violence, of something ending.

“Cailin!” He was at the door, hands pounding the steel, the reinforced frame that had been installed to keep people like him out. “Cailin, open the door!”

Silence. Then another crash — smaller, something falling, something breaking.

Hilliard’s mind went to the medical file he had read, to the words burned into his retinas. High risk of self-harm. Multiple incidents of dissociative episodes resulting in unintentional self-injury.

“Gavin!” He was screaming into his phone. “Get up here! Now! Bypass the lock! I don’t care how — just get this door down in thirty seconds!”

Gavin moved. The tools were in the SUV, standard equipment for a man who protected billionaires from threats they could not imagine. He took the stairs three at a time, reached the door, and assessed the lock in one glance. Electronic. Reinforced. Designed to withstand forced entry.

He did not hesitate. A sleek, black device was in his hands. He pressed it against the electronic lock, a low hum filled the air, and a progress bar appeared on its small screen. There was a sharp click, and the heavy steel door swung inward.

Hilliard was already moving. He pushed past Gavin, into the darkness, into the smell of blood and broken glass and the heavy silence of a room where something terrible had happened.

“Cailin!”

He found her in the bathroom. She was sitting against the tub, surrounded by fragments of mirror that caught the light like a galaxy of broken stars. Her left wrist was bleeding, a steady flow that pooled on the tile and ran toward the drain. Her eyes were open, fixed on nothing, seeing something that was not there.

“Oh God. Oh no. Oh please —”

Hilliard fell to his knees. The glass cut through his trousers, into his skin, and he did not feel it. He was tearing off his jacket, pressing it against her wrist, trying to stop the flow that seemed to have no end.

Chapter 582:

“Don’t touch me.” Cailin’s voice was barely audible. She tried to pull away, but her strength was gone, drained out with her blood, with her hope, with everything that had kept her moving.

“I’m taking you to the hospital. Please. Don’t close your eyes. Look at me. Cailin, look at me —”

She did not look. She stared through him, through the wall, through everything. Her lips moved, shaping words that had no sound.

Hilliard lifted her. She weighed nothing, was nothing, was the ghost he had been chasing for five years made flesh in his arms. He carried her through the apartment, through the door, down the stairs. Gavin was already at the SUV, back doors open, emergency medical kit ready.

“Manhattan Presbyterian. Private wing. Call ahead.” Hilliard’s voice broke as he climbed in, arranging her across his lap, pressing his hand harder against the wound that was soaking through his jacket. “Tell them it’s Cailin Morton. Tell them she’s bleeding. Tell them to have everything ready.”

The car accelerated. Hilliard held her against his chest, feeling the shallow rise and fall of her breathing, the flutter of her pulse against his palm. He was crying. He could feel the tears on his face, hot and shameful and completely beyond his control.

“I’m sorry. I’m so sorry. This is my fault. All of it.” He pressed his face to her hair, inhaling the scent of her shampoo that had not changed, that was the same as it had been when she loved him, when she was whole, when he had not destroyed everything. “Please stay. Please. I’ll do anything. I’ll be anything. Just don’t leave me like this.”

Cailin did not respond. She lay in his arms, cold and getting colder, her eyes fixed on the roof of the car as if she could see through it, as if she could see the stars, as if she could see her daughter waiting somewhere in the dark.

The hospital lights were blinding. The medical team was waiting, gurney ready, faces professional and concerned in ways that suggested they had been warned, had been prepared, had been paid enough to ask no questions. Hilliard carried her out of the car, refused to let them take her, refused to release her until they were inside, until the doors were closing, until she was being wheeled away into the fluorescent brightness of a future he could not control.

He stood in the hallway. His hands were covered in her blood. His jacket was ruined. His heart was beating so hard he could feel it in his throat, his temples, his fingertips.

“Sir.” A nurse approached, gentle, careful. “You need to let them work. You need to —”

“Save her.” Hilliard’s voice was barely human. “Whatever it takes. Whatever it costs. Save her.”

He did not sit. He stood against the wall, sliding down until he was on the floor, knees drawn up, hands still red, still sticky, still holding the warmth of her body against his skin. He would wait. He would always wait. He had learned that much, if nothing else.

Chapter 583:

The morning light came through the blinds in stripes, prison bars made of sunshine.

Cailin opened her eyes. The ceiling was white, institutional, the same as every hospital she had ever been in, every facility that had tried to fix what was not broken, what was only damaged beyond repair. Her wrist was bandaged in thick white gauze that itched where the adhesive touched her skin. Her knees had been cleaned, the scrapes covered in antibiotic ointment and smaller bandages. She was wearing a hospital gown, thin cotton that gaped at the back.

She did not feel weak. She felt clear. The kind of clarity that came after the storm, when everything had been destroyed and there was nothing left to lose.

The chair beside her bed was occupied. Hilliard sat with his elbows on his knees, his head in his hands. He was still wearing the shirt from last night — white cotton stained brown with her blood, dried now, stiff. Gavin had brought a change of clothes hours ago, but Hilliard had refused. “No,” he’d rasped, his voice raw. “I want her to see it. I want her to see what I did.” His face was unshaven, hollowed by sleeplessness, by grief, by the exhaustion of a man who had been watching someone he loved almost die.

“Cailin.” He looked up when she moved. His eyes were red, shot through with broken blood vessels.
“You’re awake. Thank God. The head of psychiatry is outside. We need to start treatment immediately, we need to —”

“Get out.”

The words were quiet. Flat. The tone of someone discussing weather, traffic, the price of commodities that did not concern her.

Hilliard flinched. “Cailin, I know you’re angry. I know you don’t want me here. But you need help. What happened last night, the mirror, your wrist —”

Cailin reached for the IV in her right hand. Found the connection, the plastic tube, the needle buried in her vein. She pulled. The tape resisted, then gave, and the needle came free with a small spurt of blood that she ignored.

“What are you doing?” Hilliard was on his feet, reaching for her, stopping himself when she looked at him. That look. The one that had made him step over her on the street, that had made him understand what he had become in her eyes. “You’re bleeding. You need —”

“I need you to leave.” Cailin swung her legs over the side of the bed. The room spun, once, twice, then steadied. She was wearing hospital socks, thin cotton with rubber grips on the bottom. She stood, holding the bed rail, waiting for her body to remember how to be vertical. “I am going to work. I have a job. I have responsibilities that do not include being your psychiatric project.”

Chapter 584:

Work was order. Logic. It was the only cage strong enough to hold the screaming ghosts in her mind. Today, a specific artifact was being finalized for transport — a piece Kegan needed for his next move. The intricate details of the logistics were a firewall against the chaos of her own thoughts. She had to go, not for Kegan, but for herself.

Five minutes later, Joanne stood beside the car. Her heels clicked on the concrete, echoing in the empty space. She had tried to compose herself, to prepare for whatever this was, but the reality of being summoned, of standing before this man in this place, had stripped away her pretenses. She was afraid. She was also excited. The combination made her reckless.

“I need you to remember that you have no right to tell me what I need.” Cailin pushed past him, or tried to. Her shoulder brushed his chest and she recoiled, a physical spasm of revulsion that she did not try to hide. “You are not my husband. You are not my doctor. You are nothing to me. Less than nothing. You are the air I breathe when I want to suffocate.”

She reached the closet where they had hung her clothes. The trench coat was there, still damp, still smelling of rain and blood and the street. She pulled it on over the hospital gown and belted it tight.

“Move.”

“Cailin, please.” Hilliard’s voice cracked. He did not move from the door. “I can’t let you hurt yourself. I can’t watch you —”

“Then don’t watch.” She was close enough now to smell him — the cologne and antiseptic and the sourness of a man who had not slept, had not eaten, had not done anything except wait for her to wake up and hate him. “Call security. Have me arrested. Or step aside and accept that I would rather die in the street than spend one more minute in your presence.”

They stood there. The silence was absolute, a weight that pressed against the windows, the walls, the space between them that had once been filled with everything and was now filled with nothing.

Hilliard stepped aside.

“Let me drive you.” The words were barely audible. “Please. I won’t speak. I won’t touch you. I just need to know you’re safe. I need —”

“Fine.” Cailin walked past him, through the door, into the hallway where nurses stared and doctors pretended not to see. “But if you say one word, if you look at me, if you breathe in a way I don’t like, I will open this door and throw myself into traffic. Do you believe me?”

Hilliard believed her.

The Vault occupied the basement of a building in Tribeca that had once been a bank vault, then a nightclub, then a series of failed restaurants. Now it was the most exclusive underground auction house in Manhattan, accessible only to those whose wealth had transcended mere millions, whose taste ran to the illegal, the impossible, the irreplaceable.

Cailin walked through the metal detector, past the security guards who knew her face, who had been instructed never to ask questions. She did not look back to see if Hilliard was following. She knew he was. She could feel him, a presence at her back like a shadow she could not shake.

Chapter 585:

Her office was small, functional, designed for someone who spent more time with objects than with people. She sat behind her desk, opened her laptop, and began scrolling through the inventory for the week's auction. European logistics. Shipping manifests. The mathematics of moving priceless things across borders that did not want them moved.

The door opened. Hilliard entered with a paper bag in one hand and a prescription bottle in the other. He set them on the corner of her desk, careful not to touch her papers, her space, her.

"Oatmeal," he said. "And the medications they prescribed. The psychiatrist said —"

"Throw them away."

"I'll leave them here." He stepped back, hands raised in surrender. "In case you change your mind."

"I won't."

Hilliard looked at her. Really looked. At the hollows beneath her eyes, the way her hands trembled slightly as she typed, the absolute refusal to acknowledge his existence in any meaningful way.

He wanted to fall to his knees. Wanted to beg. Wanted to do something, anything, that might bridge the chasm he had created.

Instead, he turned and left.

Joanne was watching from the hallway. She had been at The Vault for three years, had worked her way up from intern to junior appraiser, had learned to recognize the signs of power, of wealth, of the dynamics that governed the world she had chosen to inhabit. She knew who Cailin was. The mysterious Cali, the woman who had appeared from nowhere and taken over the European division in six months. The woman who never spoke of her past, who wore vintage couture like armor, who had the kind of cold beauty that made people nervous.

She did not know who the man was. Not at first. He was tall, broad-shouldered, dressed in clothes that had cost more than her annual salary before they had been ruined by blood and sleeplessness. He moved like someone who owned spaces, who expected doors to open and people to step aside.

Then he turned, just for a moment, and the light caught his face.

Joanne's breath stopped. She had seen that face in magazines, on television, in the financial news that her parents watched with the anxiety of people who would never be rich. Hilliard Holloway. The Holloway. The man who had built an empire before he was thirty, who had been engaged to Charla English until he had not been, until something had happened that the tabloids could not explain.

And he had been following Cailin like a dog. Had been carrying her oatmeal. Had been looking at her with an expression that Joanne had never seen on that face, on any face that belonged to a man like that. Vulnerability. Desperation. Love, or something so close to it that the difference did not matter.

Joanne's mind began to work. The possibilities unfolded like a fan, each one more glittering than the last. If she could get close to Cailin, if she could learn what had happened between them, if she could find a way to make herself useful to either of them or both —

Chapter 586:

She did not see Hilliard pause at the end of the hallway. Did not see him turn, did not see his eyes find hers with the coldness of a predator who has sensed movement in the grass. She was already planning, already scheming, already making the mistakes that would define her future.

Hilliard walked out into the November morning. The cold was bracing, clearing his head, reminding him that he was still alive, still breathing, still capable of action even when action seemed pointless.

“Boss.” Gavin was at the curb, holding the door of the SUV. “Where to?”

“The office.” Hilliard climbed in, arranged himself in the seat, tried to find a position that did not remind him of how she had felt in his arms, how close he had come to losing her forever. “And Gavin. The woman who was watching. In the hallway. Find out everything about her.”

The garage beneath The Vault was designed for discretion. No cameras. No attendants. Just concrete and shadow and the vacant silence of spaces that had been built to hide things.

Hilliard’s Maybach sat in the corner, black and bulletproof and indistinguishable from the other luxury vehicles except for the configuration of antennae that suggested diplomatic plates, and window tint that suggested privacy beyond the legal limit. He sat in the back seat, the window down three inches, a cigar unlit in his fingers.

Gavin stood outside, tablet in hand, speaking in the low tones of a man who had learned to deliver bad news without inflection.

“Joanne Castellano. Junior appraiser. Three years with the firm. No criminal record. Student loans, eighty thousand dollars. Lives in Astoria. Single. Parents in Florida, retired, middle income.”

“Bring her.”

Gavin moved. The request was not unusual. Hilliard had built his empire on information, on the unique currency of knowing things that others did not know. The methods were sometimes gray, sometimes black, always effective.

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“Mr. Holloway.” She tried for professional, for calm. “I don’t know what you think you saw, but I was just —”

Hilliard held up a hand. The gesture stopped her words more effectively than any threat could have. He reached into his jacket, withdrew a checkbook — the kind that was handmade in Switzerland, that cost more than most people made in a month — and uncapped a pen. The scratch of ink on paper was loud in the silence.

He tore off the check. Held it between two fingers and extended it through the window.

Joanne looked. Looked again. The number had seven figures. Enough to not just erase her past, but to buy an entirely new one.

"I don't understand." The words were automatic, the protest of someone who had been taught that money came with strings, that nothing was free, that everything was a trap.

Chapter 587:

"I'm buying your eyes and your mouth." Hilliard's voice was flat, conversational, the tone of a man discussing the weather or the stock market. "From this moment, you work for me. You tell me everything she does. When she arrives. When she leaves. What she eats, if she eats. Whether she takes her medication. Who she speaks to, who she ignores, who she looks at when she thinks no one is watching."

Joanne's hand moved toward the check. Stopped. "She'll fire me. If she finds out, I'll never work in this industry again."

"Then don't let her find out." Hilliard's eyes found hers. They were amber, she noticed, the color of whiskey or old gold. They were also empty, stripped of anything that might have been human, might have been merciful. "This is a down payment. Ten thousand now. Ten thousand every week that you provide useful intelligence. If she has a bad day, a difficult moment, anything that suggests she might harm herself —" He paused. Leaned forward, close enough that she could smell his cologne, the cedar and something darker underneath. "You call me immediately. Day or night. I don't care what I'm doing. I don't care who I'm with. You call."

"And if I don't?"

Hilliard smiled. It was not a pleasant expression. "Then you will discover that the money I give, I can also take away. That the life I build, I can also destroy. You will find yourself unemployable, unbankable, invisible to every system that makes modern life possible." He sat back, the threat delivered with the same casualness as the offer. "Do we understand each other?"

Joanne understood. She took the check. Folded it, put it in her pocket, felt the weight of it against her hip like a gun.

“There’s a phone in the bag.” Gavin appeared at her elbow, holding a small black case. “Encrypted. Satellite connection. Untraceable. Use it only for this purpose. Destroy it if you believe you’ve been compromised.”

“Thank you, Mr. Holloway.” The words were automatic, the gratitude of someone who had just sold something they had not known they owned. “I won’t let you down.”

“Don’t.” Hilliard raised the window. The glass rose between them, smooth and silent, leaving Joanne alone in the garage with her money and her new master and the cold knowledge that she had just stepped into a world where the rules she had learned no longer applied.

Inside the car, Gavin spoke. “She’s unreliable. Greedy. She’ll make mistakes.”

“I know.” Hilliard lit the cigar at last, inhaled, watched the smoke curl toward the ceiling. “She’s a consumable. When she’s used up, we’ll find another. For now —” He stopped. The words would not come. The need was too large, too desperate, too impossible to name. “For now, she’s all we have. She’s the only way to reach her. To know that she’s breathing. That she’s —”

He stopped again. Gavin waited, professional, giving him the distance of his grief.

Chapter 588:

“Sinclair.” Hilliard’s voice changed, became something harder, something that belonged to the man who had built an empire, who had destroyed competitors, who had learned to want something so badly that he would burn the world to have it. “The girl. The one they call Elia. I want to know everything. Who she is. Where she came from. Why she looks like —” He stopped. The hope was too dangerous, too fragile, too likely to be destroyed by truth. “Just find out. Everything.”

Three days. Seventy-two hours of silence, of waiting, of watching the reports from Joanne that told him nothing he wanted to know. Cailin arrived at nine. Cailin left at seven. Cailin ate a salad, or did not eat. Cailin spoke to no one, or spoke to the intern about a shipping manifest. The minutiae of a life that continued without him, that would continue without him, that had never needed him in any meaningful way.

Hilliard sat in his office at Holloway Tower, surrounded by glass and steel and the intimidating silence of spaces designed to intimidate. The Sinclair file was open on his desk. Pages of intelligence, of speculation, of the gaps that told him more than any report could. The girl’s background was encrypted, military-grade, accessible only to those with the resources of a nation-state or the ruthlessness to acquire them by other means.

He had not slept. Had not eaten, except for the mechanical consumption of protein bars and coffee that his assistant provided. He was running on adrenaline and obsession and the sharp clarity that came from wanting something so badly that the body forgot its needs.

The phone rang. Joanne’s voice, breathless, excited. “She’s looking at the European shipping data. The numbers are bad. Holloway Group subsidiaries have been redirecting cargo, delaying deliveries. She’s losing money. A lot of money.”

Hilliard smiled. It was not a pleasant expression. “Tell her I want to see her. Now.”

“I don’t think she’ll —”

“Tell her.”

He was waiting when she arrived. Standing at the window, watching the city that had been his kingdom, that he had built and ruled and would burn if necessary. He heard the door open, did not turn.

“You have something to say to me.” Cailin’s voice was flat, exhausted. She had not slept either, he could see. The hollows beneath her eyes were darker, the tremor in her hands more pronounced. She was running on fumes, on willpower, on the stubbornness that had always been her defining characteristic.

“I have an invitation.” He turned. Held out his hand, a card between his fingers — heavy stock embossed with the Sinclair crest. “Sebastian Sinclair is introducing his new daughter to society. Tonight. The Hamptons.”

Cailin did not take the card. “I don’t care about your social obligations, Hilliard. I don’t care about —”

“You should care.” He dropped the card on his desk, stepped closer, close enough to smell her shampoo, the herbal scent that had not changed. “Because if you don’t attend, if you don’t walk in there on my arm and smile for the cameras, I will instruct all Holloway Group insurance subsidiaries to cease coverage for any artifact handled by The Vault. I’ll have my media outlets raise questions about your security protocols. Without insurance, your clients won’t risk moving a paperclip, let alone a masterpiece. Your revenue will be zero within a week.”

Chapter 589:

Cailin's face did not change. But something in her eyes shifted — a calculation, a reassessment of the man standing before her. "You wouldn't. The fallout, the lawsuits, the —"

"I would." Hilliard reached out, touched her cheek before she could pull away. His fingers were cold, or she was cold, or the space between them had become something that consumed heat. "I will burn my own empire to the ground if it means keeping you alive. If it means forcing you to eat, to sleep, to exist in a way that doesn't end with you bleeding on a bathroom floor."

"Don't touch me." The words were automatic, but weaker than before. She was tired. He could see it, could use it, hated himself for using it.

"Get dressed." He stepped back, gestured toward the door where his assistant waited with a garment bag. "The car leaves in an hour. And Cailin —" He waited until she looked at him, really looked, with something that might have been hatred or might have been fear or the exhaustion of two people who had destroyed each other and could not stop. "You will look beautiful. You always do."

The dress was vintage Valentino, black velvet with a neckline that suggested rather than revealed, a skirt that moved like water. Cailin wore it like armor, like a uniform, like the costume of a person she had once been and could not remember how to be.

The car was warm. The partition was up, giving them the illusion of privacy, the reality of proximity. Cailin sat as far from him as the seat allowed, her face turned to the window, watching the city give way to highways and the stark desolation of Long Island in November.

Gavin's voice came through the intercom, professional. "Sir. The Sinclair briefing. The girl's name is Elia Sinclair. Adopted three weeks ago. Background sealed. Sebastian Sinclair has been seen with her twice, both times displaying what witnesses describe as unusual emotional attachment."

Cailin's body went rigid. Hilliard saw it — the way her hand found the door handle, white-knuckled, ready to pull. The way her breathing changed, shallow and fast, the unmistakable physiology of panic.

"Elia." The name emerged as whisper, as prayer, as the sound of a woman who had learned not to hope confronting the impossible.

"It's a common name." Hilliard's voice was gentle, careful, the tone of a man speaking to someone fragile. "There are thousands of —"

"Drive faster." Cailin turned to the driver, her voice sharp, commanding, the voice of the woman she had been before him, before everything. "I want to be there when the doors open. I want to —"

She stopped. The words would not come. The need was too large, too desperate, too likely to be destroyed by truth.

Hilliard watched her. Watched the way she leaned forward in her seat, the way her eyes fixed on the road ahead as if she could see through the darkness, through the distance, through everything that separated her from what she wanted.

Chapter 590:

He did not speak. He was afraid, he realized. Afraid of what they would find, afraid of what it would mean, afraid of the hope that was burning in his chest like a coal that would destroy him if it turned out to be false.

The Hamptons rose against the night, the glitter of old money, of wealth that did not need to impress because it had never been questioned. The Sinclair estate was at the end of a long drive, gates open, welcoming the cars that lined up like supplicants before a throne.

Cailin was out of the car before it stopped moving. Hilliard followed, catching her arm, feeling her pull away, holding on anyway.

“Not yet.” His voice was low, urgent. “We walk in together. We smile. We play the game. And then —”

“Then what?” She turned to him, and he saw something in her eyes that he had not seen since the beginning, since the time before the betrayal, before the loss, before everything. Hope. Terrible, fragile, unmistakable. “Then we find out if my daughter is alive? If you didn’t kill her after all?”

Hilliard had no answer. He took her hand, felt her fingers stiffen then relax — the surrender of someone who needed him for something, who would use him and discard him when he was no longer useful.

They walked toward the doors together. Toward the light, the music, the crowd that waited inside. Toward whatever truth was waiting to destroy them or save them or simply continue the hell they had built for themselves.

The Hamptons air tasted of salt and old money, a combination that suggested generations of privilege, of summers that had never ended, of lives lived in the spaces between obligations.

Cailin walked through the entrance on Hilliard's arm, her hand resting on his forearm with the lightness of a bird that might take flight at any moment. The dress moved around her like water, black velvet catching the light in ways that suggested depth, mystery, the allure of things that could not be possessed. Heads turned. Whispers started. She ignored them, as she had always ignored them, as she had learned to do in the years when she had been someone else's wife, someone else's possession, someone else's shame.

Hilliard was stopped almost immediately. A senator, two hedge fund managers, a woman from the State Department who wanted to discuss the strategic implications of Holloway Group's latest acquisition. He tried to extricate himself, to follow Cailin as she moved away, but the hands were too many, the needs too urgent, the obligations of power that could not be refused.

Cailin did not look back. She walked toward the champagne tower, a structure of crystal and gold that rose six feet into the air, each glass filled with liquid that cost more than most people's hourly wage. She needed a drink. Needed something to steady her hands, to clear her head, to prepare her for whatever was coming.

"Well, well. The murderer returns."