

Second chance 611

Chapter 611:

“What did you say to her?” Hilliard’s voice came out as a low, deadly growl. He began walking toward Charla, each step slow and deliberate — the measured tread of a predator.

“No! It wasn’t me! Hilliard, listen to me, she’s lying!” Charla shrieked, reading the look of pure murder on his face. She was utterly terrified.

She began to crawl toward him, her hands grasping for the leg of his trousers — a desperate, pathetic attempt to find sanctuary with the very man she had just tried to destroy.

“Get away from me,” Hilliard snarled. He kicked out — not a vicious blow, but a powerful, contemptuous shove with the sole of his shoe that sent her sprawling backward across the floor.

At that moment, Sebastian Sinclair finally emerged from the shadows.

His face was a mask of thunderous rage. As the host of the evening, this — an assault on an honored guest, a child, committed within the walls of his own home — was the ultimate insult to his authority.

“Mr. Aguirre,” Sebastian said, giving Kegan a slight, almost imperceptible nod of approval. “Thank you for returning our... guest.”

Then he turned his razor-sharp gaze on Charla.

“Miss English,” he said, his voice quiet but weighted with the gravity of absolute power. “It seems you have some explaining to do. About what, precisely, you did to my little princess.”

The title — my little princess — hung in the air like a declaration of ownership and a promise of retribution. The temperature in the room seemed to drop ten degrees.

Old Joe, the Sinclair family’s head of security, stepped forward with a team of black-suited guards. They formed a silent, impassable circle around Charla, cutting off any hope of escape.

Charla looked at the cold, unforgiving faces surrounding her on all sides. A wave of absolute, final despair washed over her.

She was finished.

Charla lay on the floor — a broken thing surrounded by predators. Sebastian Sinclair’s cold judgment, the hundreds of contemptuous eyes, the closing circle of security: it was too much. Her mind snapped.

She abandoned any hope of appealing to Sebastian. She knew it was useless. Her last, desperate gamble was Hilliard.

“Hilliard! Hilliard, save me!” She sobbed, crawling toward him again — a pathetic, glittering slug on the marble floor. “All our years together... our history... you can’t just let them do this to me! You can’t let them destroy me!”

She was trying to ignite a spark of pity, of shared memory, of the bond she had always believed was unbreakable.

Hilliard looked down at her. His amber eyes were no longer filled with pain or rage. They were empty — a terrifying, bottomless void, the look a man gives to an inanimate object just before he destroys it.

“History?” He repeated the word, his voice dripping with a contempt so pure it was almost a physical substance. A cruel, chilling smile touched his lips. “The moment you spoke those lies to my daughter, our history was erased. All that exists between us now is a debt. And I am here to collect.”

Chapter 612:

He lifted his foot, shod in a five-thousand-dollar handmade leather shoe. He didn’t kick her this time. He simply used the tip of his shoe to push her grasping, desperate hand away from his trouser leg. It was a small, precise, utterly dismissive gesture — and it was more degrading than any blow could have been.

He turned his back on her and addressed Sebastian Sinclair directly.

“Mr. Sinclair,” he said, his voice low but clear. “I have brought this filth into your home. I now place her at your disposal. Whatever your family decides, the Holloway Group will offer no objection.”

He had just publicly sacrificed her — handed her to his enemy as a peace offering.

Charla let out a sound that was not entirely human: a raw, animalistic wail of utter despair.

Sebastian nodded, a flicker of grim satisfaction crossing his eyes. He glanced at his son, Silas.

Silas stepped forward, his voice carrying the crisp, dispassionate tone of a Wall Street executioner.

“Effective immediately,” he announced to the silent room, “the Sinclair Conglomerate is permanently terminating all contracts, partnerships, and financial dealings with the English Group and all its subsidiaries.”

He paused, letting the weight of the declaration sink in.

“Furthermore, the Sinclair family will be leveraging its full influence on Wall Street to have the English Group placed on the highest-risk investment blacklist. We strongly advise all partners present tonight to liquidate any and all assets connected to the English family, to avoid unnecessary collateral damage.”

It was a nuclear bomb detonated at the heart of the financial world.

Around the room, faces went pale. The sharks of finance, smelling blood in the water, immediately reached for their phones. Thumbs flew across screens. Urgent, whispered sell orders were placed with brokers and trading desks across the globe.

The English family's commercial empire began to crumble in real time.

Hilliard listened, his face impassive. Then he added his own sentence, quiet but perfectly audible across the room. "The Holloway Group will be doing the same."

A joint execution by the two most powerful families in New York. It was unprecedented.

Charla watched with eyes wide with horror, and she understood. She hadn't merely destroyed herself. She had annihilated her entire family.

The last thread of her sanity snapped.

"It was you!" she shrieked, her hatred now concentrating itself on the one person she could still blame. "You, Cailin! You ruined everything!"

A flicker of ice appeared in Hilliard's eyes. He had heard enough of her voice. He keyed his earpiece, his command a low murmur. "Gavin. Cut her off. From everything. Her family included. And prepare the press outside. It's time."

A moment later, Charla's phone — still inside her ruined evening bag on the floor — began to vibrate frantically as her panicked family tried to reach her. Before she could even react, Kegan strode forward and brought his heel down on the device.

The screen shattered with a sickening crunch.

The connection was severed. Physically. Socially. Financially.

Charla English's social execution was complete.

Cailin watched it all, her expression unreadable, her heart a cold and still stone. This wasn't justice. It was simply interest, long overdue.

In her arms, Elia didn't understand the words, the finance, or the ruin unfolding around her. But she understood one thing clearly.

Chapter 613:

The bad woman was being punished.

The ballroom was a tomb. Charla sat on the floor like a soulless puppet whose strings had been cut, her eyes vacant as the full, instantaneous ruin of her world settled over her.

Hilliard looked at her one last time, his face a mask of cold indifference. Then he turned to Old Joe, the Sinclair security chief.

“Get her out of here,” he commanded.

Old Joe’s face remained impassive. “Mr. Holloway. Where to? The service exit? Or shall we deliver her to the police?”

“Neither,” Hilliard said, a sliver of pure, refined cruelty curving his lips. “The front door.”

He let the order hang in the air for a moment. “There are quite a few reporters outside, aren’t there? Let them get a good look.”

A flicker of understanding crossed Old Joe’s eyes. He knew exactly what this was — the most humiliating ritual in the American theater of justice and shame. A perp walk.

“As you wish.” Old Joe gestured, and two massive bodyguards moved in, grabbing Charla under the arms and hauling her to her feet as though she were a sack of laundry.

“No! Don’t! You can’t do this to me!” The reality of what was about to happen finally penetrated her shock. She began to struggle and scream, her voice a raw shriek of terror. “Hilliard! You’re a monster! You’ll burn in hell for this!”

Hilliard didn’t flinch. He simply turned and gently covered Elia’s ears with his hands, shielding her from the noise.

The guards dragged Charla through the silent, watching crowd toward the massive, ornate doors that symbolized the very pinnacle of New York society. The guests parted like the Red Sea, phones held high, recording every second of her degradation.

The great doors swung open.

Outside, a feeding frenzy erupted. Hundreds of reporters who had been waiting for hours surged forward like sharks scenting blood. A blinding storm of camera flashes exploded, bleaching Charla's tear-streaked, cake-smeared face a ghastly white.

"Miss English! Is it true you're being arrested for attempted murder?"

"Has Mr. Holloway broken the engagement?"

"Is the English Group bankrupt?"

The questions came like knives, stabbing at her from every direction.

Hilliard's assistant, Gavin Thorne, was already waiting outside. He stepped in front of the cameras and spoke with measured calm. "The Holloway Group will be holding an emergency press conference to release evidence pertaining to Miss English's involvement in multiple criminal conspiracies."

Simultaneously, on Gavin's instruction, several major news outlets controlled by the Holloway Group began a live stream of the entire event.

Within minutes, the hashtag CharlaEnglishPerpWalk was trending number one worldwide on X.

The whole world watched as the once-untouchable New York socialite was dragged across the long, elegant driveway — her screams and curses broadcast into every home, every office, every corner of the globe. They watched as she was shoved, unceremoniously, into an unmarked black van.

It was a fate worse than death.

Back in the ballroom, the oppressive atmosphere finally began to lift.

Chapter 614:

Sebastian Sinclair approached Cailin, a faint, almost gentle smile on his face. "Miss Morton," he said. "I believe you and I have some things to discuss. Would you and your daughter care to join me in my study?"

Cailin looked at Elia, still trembling in her arms. Then she looked at Hilliard, standing alone, his eyes as dead as the ashes of his rage. She nodded.

She already knew: Charla's drama was over. But the battle for her and Elia's future — now a pawn between two warring dynasties — was only just beginning.

Hilliard watched her go, watched her follow Sebastian up the grand staircase without a backward glance. He made no move to stop her. He knew he had no right. After what he had done — what he had allowed to happen — he had forfeited any claim.

He simply turned to Julian, his voice dropping to a low, desperate command.

“Watch her. Don’t let her leave this estate.”

Julian nodded, his own face grim, and followed them up the stairs.

A secret negotiation for the future and custody of Elia was about to begin, deep within the heart of the Sinclair fortress.

The study in the Sinclair estate was a sanctuary of old power, smelling of leather, aged paper, and cigar smoke. Elia lay asleep on a deep velvet couch, a cashmere blanket tucked around her small frame, watched over by a discreet nanny stationed in the corner.

Sebastian Sinclair sat behind a desk the size of a small boat, his sharp eyes not on Cailin, but on the man he had just summoned. Hilliard stood in the doorway, his face pale, his shoulders carrying the weight of a man who had been brought to his knees.

“Holloway. Get in here,” Sebastian commanded, his voice devoid of any warmth.

Hilliard drew a slow breath and walked into the room, stopping a good fifteen feet from Cailin. He said nothing.

“Because of your negligence and your monumental stupidity,” Sebastian began, each word landing like a hammer blow, “my granddaughter was abducted and mentally tortured inside my home.”

He let the accusation hang in the air. “This is a grave insult to the Sinclair name. By all rights, I should have you carried out of here in a box.”

Hilliard stood in silence, accepting the judgment without argument. He knew he deserved every word of it.

“However,” Sebastian’s tone shifted. He glanced at Cailin, then at the sleeping Elia. “It seems my little princess still has some use for her so-called father.”

Cailin’s brow furrowed. She couldn’t yet see the shape of his game.

“So I am offering you a chance to atone,” Sebastian said, leaning forward, a cruel, predatory amusement glinting in his eyes.

Hilliard looked up, a flicker of desperate hope crossing his face. “I’ll accept any condition.”

“Excellent.” Sebastian rose and walked to the massive floor-to-ceiling window, gesturing outside. “Starting now, you, Hilliard Holloway, will stand alone outside the main gates of my estate.”

Chapter 615:

He paused, his voice dropping to a flat, chilling monotone. “The forecast calls for a storm. Three days of heavy rain. You will stand in that rain for seventy-two hours. No food. No water. No sleep. A public vigil.”

He turned back to face Hilliard. “This is your penance for your failure. It is the pilgrimage you must make to beg for my granddaughter’s forgiveness.”

The room was utterly silent. Julian, who had followed Hilliard in, stared at Sebastian in disbelief. No one spoke to a Holloway like this. No one.

Cailin was stunned. It was a medieval punishment — a trial by ordeal. Not merely physical torture, but a public demolition of pride, an unbearable humiliation for the entire Holloway dynasty.

Hilliard didn’t hesitate. There was no flash of anger, no flicker of wounded vanity.

He simply bowed his head in a gesture of profound, formal respect. “I accept.”

His voice was quiet, but steady. “If it means they can stay here, under your protection... if it means I can earn the right to even look at them from a distance... I would stand for seven hundred and twenty hours.”

He risked a glance at Cailin and Elia — a look so full of broken, pleading devotion that Cailin involuntarily turned away, shaken by what she saw in it.

Without another word, Hilliard turned and walked out of the study.

Sebastian watched him go, a cold smile settling on his lips. He turned to his butler. “Charles, prepare the finest guest suite for Miss Morton and her daughter.”

Cailin and Elia were now officially under the protection — and control — of the Sinclair family.

Julian caught up with Hilliard in the hallway, grabbing his arm. “Brother, are you insane? You can’t do this. You’ll be the laughingstock of Wall Street!”

“I lost the right to dignity the moment I pushed my own daughter into hell,” Hilliard said, his voice hollow and flat.

He pulled his arm free and walked on — alone, toward the storm that was already gathering outside, waiting for him. His penance was about to begin.

Night fell, and with it, the rain. It started as a cold drizzle, then thickened into a relentless, driving downpour.

Hilliard stood outside the massive wrought-iron gates of the Sinclair estate. He wore no coat. The expensive white dress shirt he had worn all day was soaked through, clinging to his skin like a second, colder one. The rain plastered his hair to his skull and ran in rivulets down his face.

He stood perfectly still, his back straight — a silent, unmoving statue. His eyes were fixed on a single lighted window in the distant main house. He knew that was their room.

Gavin Thorne stood a few yards away, holding a large black umbrella, his own trousers soaked through. “Boss, please. At least take the umbrella.”

“Go.” Hilliard’s voice was a low growl, nearly swallowed by the roar of the rain, but its finality was absolute.

Chapter 616:

Gavin retreated, his heart heavy as he watched the king of Wall Street — his boss, his friend — willingly accept this profound, public humiliation. In the distance, a handful of media vans remained, their cameras flashing in the stormy darkness like ghost lights, documenting the unprecedented penance for the world to see.

Inside the warm, dry study, a servant had brought Cailin a glass of hot milk and a soft wool blanket. Elia was sleeping soundly on the couch, her breathing deep and even.

Cailin stood at the floor-to-ceiling window, a silent silhouette against the storm, watching the figure of Hilliard slowly blur into a dark shape in the deluge.

“How long do you think he’ll last?”

Sebastian Sinclair’s voice came from behind her. He held out a glass of amber liquid — brandy.

“I don’t care,” Cailin said, her voice as cold as the rain outside. She didn’t take the glass.

Sebastian didn’t press. He took a small sip himself and returned to his desk. His gaze grew distant, filled with a deep, ancient sadness.

“You know,” he said softly, “you remind me of my sister. Seraphina.”

Cailin turned from the window, surprised.

“She was stubborn, like you. Proud. Refused to bend for anyone.” Sebastian’s eyes misted over, and for the first time, the iron-willed patriarch looked fragile. “Years ago, she ran away. She refused a marriage the family had arranged for her. We searched — used every resource we had — but she vanished.”

His voice tightened. “We found out, years later, that she had died. In some small, forgotten town. Alone. From complications during childbirth.”

The words hung in the air, heavy with unspoken grief.

"I never even knew the man's name," Sebastian whispered, his voice breaking. "I never knew if my niece or nephew lived or died."

Cailin's heart clenched.

Complications during childbirth. Alone.

The words were needles, piercing the scar tissue around her own memories. She was instantly transported back to a small, sterile clinic in Europe — to the terror and the pain of giving birth to the triplets by herself, to the feeling of being utterly alone, convinced she was about to die on that operating table.

She understood his pain. It was a mirror of her own.

The ice around her heart, the cold fortress she had built over five long years, melted just a little.

She walked to his desk, picked up a tissue from the box, and gently offered it to him.

"I'm sorry," she said, her voice soft and sincere.

Sebastian took the tissue and dabbed at the corner of his eye. He gave her a grateful, heartbroken smile.

In that moment, they were not a tycoon and a pawn. They were two souls adrift in the same ocean of grief, connected by a shared and unspeakable loss.

A profound, unexpected bond formed between them in the quiet of the study.

The relentless storm continued to batter Hilliard, the freezing rain now striking his forehead like bullets of ice.

He didn't flinch. He stood outside the towering wrought-iron gates of the Sinclair estate, his soaked white dress shirt clinging to his skin like a second layer of ice. His amber eyes were locked onto a single illuminated window on the second floor of the guest wing.

Chapter 617:

The torrential downpour showed no signs of letting up. If anything, it was growing fiercer. The freezing water battered his exposed chest through the thin, ruined fabric, tracing the outline of muscles locked tight against the biting cold. The temperature continued to drop, but his feet remained planted in the mud.

Headlights swept across the driveway. The last of the departing guests from the ruined party rolled past in their luxury sedans.

Inside the warm cars, Wall Street executives and socialites pressed their faces against the glass. Their jaws dropped. They scrambled for their phones, snapping photos of the Emperor of the Holloway Group standing in the mud like a stray dog.

In the bushes lining the estate, the paparazzi were already swarming. A makeshift camp of news vans and pop-up tents had formed across the street, a testament to the media's relentless appetite. Camera flashes erupted in rapid succession, strobing like blue-white lightning, broadcasting his public crucifixion to the entire world.

Inside the grand foyer of the estate, Butler Charles stood with his hands clasped behind his back, speaking into a discreet earpiece as he reported directly to Sebastian Sinclair.

"Mr. Holloway has been standing for over an hour, sir. His core body temperature is dropping rapidly. He continues to refuse the umbrella."

Upstairs, in the ultra-luxury suite prepared for her, Cailin stood before the massive floor-to-ceiling window. After Sebastian had graciously allowed her and Elia to retire from the study, she now held a crystal glass of Bordeaux, her face a mask of smooth, impenetrable ice. She stared down through the rain-streaked glass at the blurry, rigid silhouette standing in the storm below.

A violent gust of wind struck him. Hilliard's broad shoulders shuddered uncontrollably. His body jerked, but he forced his knees to lock and stood up straighter. He looked like a statue being slowly weathered away by a hurricane.

Cailin swirled the wine in her glass. The dark red liquid coated the crystal in a slow, lazy wave. She caught her own reflection in the glass and let out a cold, hollow laugh.

What a perfect performance, she thought, her stomach twisting with bitter, acidic cynicism. She clung to the thought, desperately trying to drown out the tremor of empathy that Sebastian's grief had stirred in

her just an hour before. Every shiver timed perfectly. Just enough to give the media the most sympathetic shot. She was afraid — not of his performance, but of the terrifying possibility that it wasn't one.

To her, this wasn't penance. It was a PR strategy. A billionaire's calculated investment, trading physical discomfort for public sympathy and her own weakness.

She lifted the glass and drained the wine in one long swallow. The alcohol burned down her throat, a welcome distraction from the strange, tight feeling spreading through her chest.

She set the glass down with a sharp clink, then grabbed the edges of the heavy velvet curtains and yanked them shut. The room plunged into darkness, cutting off the sight of the man in the rain entirely.

She crossed to the massive king-sized bed. Elia was fast asleep, having been gently carried up from the couch earlier, her small chest rising and falling evenly beneath the thick duvet.

Chapter 618:

Cailin sat on the edge of the mattress. She reached out, her fingers trembling slightly, and gently stroked her daughter's soft hair.

Her jaw tightened until her teeth ached. Her eyes hardened into dark, unyielding stones.

"I won't let you get hurt again," Cailin whispered to the sleeping child. "Never again."

Morning broke, but the sky remained a bruised, violent gray. The rain hadn't stopped. It hammered against the glass with relentless fury.

Elia stirred. She rubbed her eyes and slipped out from under the warm covers, her bare feet padding softly across the thick carpet. She went straight to the window and pulled the edge of the heavy velvet curtain back just an inch.

She peered out.

Her small breath hitched. Down below, standing in the exact same spot as the night before, was the man. He looked like a broken scarecrow — his clothes plastered to his skin, his head bowed against the driving rain.

Elia's lower lip trembled. Her large eyes filled with sudden, overwhelming distress.

She ran back to the bed and grabbed Cailin's hand.

"Mommy," Elia whispered, her voice tight with panic. "Daddy is going to get sick. Can we let him come inside?"

Cailin's heart seized. A sharp, physical pain pierced her chest, like a needle sliding between her ribs. She looked at her daughter's pleading eyes, then forced her own expression to freeze.

“No, Elia,” Cailin said, her voice flat and cold. “He did bad things. This is the price he has to pay.”

Elia’s eyes instantly welled with tears. She was five. She didn’t understand the complex, ugly arithmetic of adult grievances. She only saw a man she was supposed to fear, suffering alone in the freezing rain.

The suite door clicked open. Silas Sinclair walked in carrying a silver tray with breakfast. He stopped, taking in the tense scene before him.

He set the tray down on the table, glanced at the crack in the curtains, then looked at Cailin.

“It might not just be about the price he has to pay, Cailin,” Silas said. His voice was low, stripped of its usual casual charm. “I pulled Elia’s complete medical file from the hospital last night.”

Cailin turned her head, her spine stiffening.

“The neurologist’s notes were specific,” Silas continued, his eyes locking onto hers. “When Elia was at her worst — right after the trauma — they used subconscious image stimulation to test her brain activity. The very first name she reacted to, the first person she reached for in her subconscious...”

He paused. “It was Hilliard.”

Cailin's pupils contracted. The air rushed out of her lungs.

Her mind fired rapidly, connecting the timeline. Elia's subconscious had been reaching for Hilliard. And then, at the party, Charla had taken Elia away.

Bile rose in Cailin's throat. She understood exactly what had happened. Charla hadn't simply frightened Elia. She had found the one thing Elia was beginning to trust, and she had twisted it into a weapon of pure terror.

Chapter 619:

Cailin dropped to her knees in front of her daughter. She took Elia's small shoulders in her hands, trying to keep her voice steady.

"Baby," Cailin said, her voice barely holding. "When that bad lady put you in the dark room... what exactly did she say to you?"

The words dark room struck Elia like a physical blow.

The little girl's entire body went rigid. Her eyes widened in absolute, blind terror. She tore herself from Cailin's grip and scrambled backward until her back hit the corner of the bed frame.

She clapped both hands over her ears and screamed.

“He doesn’t want me!” Elia shrieked, her body convulsing with violent sobs. “He told her to throw me in the sea! Don’t let him throw me in the sea!”

Cailin stared at her daughter, paralyzed.

The sound of Elia’s broken screams tore through her soul like a blade. The hatred she felt for Charla — and the misplaced anger she had directed at Hilliard — boiled over all at once, turning her blood to liquid fire.

A convoy of black, armored SUVs sliced through the driving rain.

They rolled up to the Sinclair estate and stopped exactly fifty yards from the wrought-iron gates. The heavy doors swung open. A dozen security guards in black suits poured out, instantly deploying massive black umbrellas. They formed a solid wall of nylon and muscle, completely blocking the paparazzi’s lenses.

Preston Holloway stepped out of the lead vehicle. His face was a mask of apoplectic rage, the veins in his neck bulging against his stiff white collar.

He marched straight up to Hilliard.

“Do you have any idea what you’re doing?!” Preston roared, his voice barely cutting through the sound of the storm. “The entire financial district is laughing at you! Holloway stock opened down three percent this morning because of this pathetic romantic stunt!”

Hilliard didn't blink. He didn't turn his head. His dead amber eyes remained fixed on the second-floor window, as if Preston didn't exist.

Preston's face turned a dangerous shade of purple.

"I am ordering you," Preston spat, stepping closer. "Stop this humiliating circus right now. Get in the car. Remember your goddamn last name!"

Inside the SUV, behind the bulletproof glass, Jeraldine Holloway sat with her hands pressed against the window. Her eyes were red and swollen. She stared at her son, her face twisted in furious disbelief. This fool was jeopardizing the empire her grandsons were destined to inherit.

Hilliard finally moved.

He turned his head with agonizing slowness. His face was deathly pale, his lips tinted blue from the cold. He looked at his cousin with eyes that were completely hollow — a dark, bottomless abyss devoid of ambition, pride, or fear.

"My last name," Hilliard rasped. His throat was raw, his voice sounding like two stones grinding together. "My empire. My stock prices. All of it."

He drew a shallow, rattling breath.

“In front of them, it is worth absolutely nothing.”

Preston froze.

Chapter 620:

“If my dignity can buy back one single smile from my daughter,” Hilliard said, his voice dropping to a dead, terrifying calm, “I will gladly grind it into the mud. I will let it be crushed.”

Preston stared at his cousin. He opened his mouth, but no words came out. He was looking at a man who had completely severed himself from the Holloway bloodline — a man who had nothing left to lose.

A violent shudder of pure disgust and fury ripped through him.

Preston spun around, kicking a puddle of muddy water. He yanked the car door open. “Drive!” he roared at the chauffeur, slamming his fist against the partition.

The doors slammed shut. The convoy accelerated instantly, the heavy tires kicking up a massive spray of dirty water that splashed directly across Hilliard’s legs.

They drove away without a second glance.

Hilliard slowly turned his head back to the window. He locked his knees, ignored the freezing mud dripping from his trousers, and resumed his silent watch.

It was the middle of the second night.

Hilliard had been standing in the freezing downpour for over twenty-four hours.

His body was failing. A fever burned him alive from the inside while the icy rain froze his skin from without. His legs shook violently, entirely beyond his control. He was swaying, held upright by nothing but a terrifying, iron-willed refusal to fall.

Upstairs, Elia was finally asleep.

Cailin was wide awake. Her chest felt tight, her lungs burning with every breath. She moved like a ghost toward the balcony doors and pushed them open just enough to slip outside, pressing herself into the shadows behind a thick stone pillar.

The dim yellow security lights by the front gates cast a sickly glow on Hilliard's silhouette. Even from this distance, she could see the unnatural stillness of his form — the way his head was bowed, like a man already dead whose body hadn't yet received the news.

Then a violent gust of wind howled across the lawn.

Hilliard's body gave out. He pitched forward, his knees buckling beneath him. He fell hard, his hands splashing into the freezing mud to stop his face from hitting the ground.

Cailin's heart violently contracted. A sharp gasp tore from her lips. She lunged forward, her hand gripping the cold stone railing. His name sat right there on the tip of her tongue, ready to be screamed into the night.

But down below, Hilliard didn't stay down.

His arms shook violently. His knuckles turned white against the mud. With agonizing, excruciating slowness, he pushed himself up. He dragged his feet beneath him and forced his knees to lock.

He stood back up. A dying tree refusing to fall.

Cailin stared at him. The massive, heavy anchor of hatred she had dragged through her chest for five long years suddenly caught on something — the chain pulling violently taut.

Her stomach dropped. Panic flooded her veins.

Is it acting? she thought frantically. Or is this a man betting his actual life just to beg?

The uncertainty terrified her. She was terrified of softening. She was terrified of trusting him and being destroyed all over again.

She raised her right hand and dug her fingernails brutally into her own palm, pressing until the skin broke and a sharp, stinging pain shot up her arm. She used it to anchor herself, forcing the coldness back into her chest, back behind her eyes.

She spun around and practically ran back inside, grabbing the heavy curtains and yanking them shut, sealing the balcony from view.

She crossed to the small table where Elia had left a half-finished puzzle of a castle. Cailin sat down heavily in the chair and drew a slow, deliberate breath, forcing her expression into a mask of calm.

She picked up a cardboard puzzle piece and tried to fit it into the edge of the castle wall.

But her fingers were trembling so violently she couldn't make the pieces connect.