

## Second chance 641

### Chapter 641:

Behind her, Ashely inhaled a lungful of the yellow smoke. She immediately doubled over, coughing so hard her ribs cracked. She tried to stand, but her legs turned to jelly. She collapsed onto the Persian rug, gasping for oxygen that was no longer there.

Suddenly, the solid oak double doors of the apartment violently combusted from the outside.

A massive tongue of orange fire blew the door inward off its hinges. The heat hit Cailin like a physical blow, singeing her eyelashes. Someone had doused the hallway carpet in chemical accelerant.

Cailin ignored the searing pain in her bandaged hands. She threw her elbow backward, shattering the glass of the emergency fire extinguisher cabinet built into the wall. She ripped the red cylinder out and squeezed the handle.

Nothing happened. She looked down. The pressure gauge read absolute zero. The pin had been removed, the tank emptied.

The fire roared, feeding on the oxygen in the room, racing across the rug toward them.

“Move!” Cailin grabbed Ashely by the collar of her ruined blouse, dragging her backward away from the inferno, retreating into the only space left—the master bedroom at the far end of the hall.

Cailin kicked the bedroom door shut, but she knew it wouldn't hold for more than a few minutes. She dragged Ashely into the corner, grabbed a towel from the en-suite bathroom, soaked it in the sink, and pressed it hard over Ashely's nose and mouth.

The toxic smoke was already filling the bedroom. Cailin's eyes streamed with involuntary, physiological tears. Her lungs burned as if she were inhaling crushed glass.

The reinforced bulletproof windows, designed to keep assassins out, now acted as a perfect oven. The extreme heat caused the thick glass to emit a high-pitched, agonizing cracking sound.

The escape route was completely sealed.

Ashely's eyes rolled back. Her body went completely limp, her dead weight sliding heavily against Cailin's shoulder.

Down on the street, a black SUV jumped the curb at seventy miles per hour.

The heavy vehicle smashed through the police barricades, tires screaming against the pavement. Hilliard Holloway kicked his door open before the SUV had even fully stopped.

He let out a low grunt of agony. His sternum, fractured during the fall at the mansion, ground together with a sickening friction. He ignored the blinding pain. His amber eyes locked onto the fourteenth floor of the building, where thick black smoke was violently vomiting out of the ventilation grates.

Two NYPD firefighters rushed forward to intercept him. “Sir, you can’t go in there! The structure is—”

Hilliard didn’t speak. He grabbed the first firefighter by the harness, using his momentum to hurl the man aside, and shoved the second one to the ground with brutal, unstoppable force.

Chapter 642:

He sprinted into the lobby and hit the emergency stairwell. Every single step sent a jagged, blinding spike of agony through his fractured sternum. The pain was so intense it threatened to black out his vision, but pure, unadulterated adrenaline and a desperate terror kept his legs moving. He gripped the iron handrail, using his arms to haul his body upward, trying to take the weight off his shattered chest. His boots felt like lead weights. The leather of his expensive dress shoes began to emit a foul, burning smell as he hit the higher floors.

He ripped off his silk tie and wrapped it tightly around his nose and mouth. He hit the fourteenth-floor landing. The heavy fire door was already warping from the heat. He couldn’t use his chest, so he spun around and drove a brutal, desperate back-kick into the push bar, forcing the warped metal open.

A shower of sparks rained down, instantly igniting the fabric of his suit jacket. Hilliard didn’t stop to put it out. The corridor was a black, zero-visibility nightmare. The temperature was easily pushing four hundred degrees. He navigated purely by memory, counting the doors.

He heard a faint, desperate thudding sound coming from the end of the hall.

Hilliard stepped over a burning section of the ceiling that had collapsed, his boots crushing the embers. He reached the master bedroom. The armored door was completely jammed, the metal frame warped and fused by the extreme heat.

Hilliard took two steps back. He closed his eyes for a microsecond, bracing his fractured chest.

He couldn't use his upper body without risking a punctured lung. He shifted his stance, channeling all his remaining strength into his legs, and drove his combat boot into the doorframe right next to the lock. Once. Twice. Three times. The jarring impact sent shockwaves of agony up his spine, but he gritted his teeth, tasting his own blood.

On the fourth strike, the locking mechanism violently shattered.

Hilliard stumbled into the smoke-filled bedroom. His eyes immediately locked onto the corner.

Cailin was slumped against the wall, barely conscious, her bandaged hands still weakly trying to hold the wet towel over Ashely's face.

Hilliard dropped to his knees. He ripped off his burning suit jacket and wrapped it tightly around Cailin, pulling her small, trembling body flush against his chest.

Cailin's eyes fluttered open. Through the haze of smoke, she saw his face. Her fingers weakly grabbed his ruined shirt. She didn't ask him to save her. She pointed a trembling, bandaged finger at the floor.

"Ashely," Cailin rasped, her vocal cords bleeding.

Hilliard didn't hesitate. He spun around. A burning section of the heavy wooden wardrobe had collapsed onto Ashely's legs. Hilliard kicked the burning wood away with a vicious strike. He grabbed Ashely by the back of her collar with his left hand, hoisting her dead weight off the floor.

With Cailin tucked securely under his right arm and Ashely dragging behind his left, Hilliard turned and charged back out into the roaring inferno of the hallway.

Chapter 643:

Hilliard drove his shoulder into the half-collapsed fire door, the heated metal searing through his thin dress shirt. He dragged Cailin and the unconscious Ashely out of the burning corridor and into the slightly wider, less congested elevator lobby.

The sudden rush of cooler, oxygen-rich air from the stairwell hit Cailin's lungs. She convulsed, coughing violently, hacking up dark, soot-stained phlegm.

As her brain received oxygen, her dilated pupils suddenly snapped into sharp focus. A jolt of pure, electric panic shot through her nervous system. A fragmented memory flashed behind her eyes: her mother, weak in a hospital bed, pressing the small wooden box into her hands. "Promise me," her mother had whispered. "Promise you'll protect this. It's everything."

"The box," Cailin choked out, her voice a shredded whisper.

She grabbed the charred collar of Hilliard's shirt. Her grip was weak, but her amber eyes were wide with a sudden, absolute madness. "My mother's box. It's still in the bedroom. Next to the safe."

Hilliard's jaw locked. The muscles in his neck stood out like thick cables. He looked back at the hallway. The fire had already breached the ceiling, and the structural beams were groaning under the intense thermal stress.

"No," Hilliard commanded, his voice a harsh, uncompromising bark. "The floor is collapsing. Going back in there is suicide."

"Let me go!" Cailin screamed.

She shoved her hands against his shattered sternum, pushing him away with a sudden burst of hysterical adrenaline. She spun around, her boots slipping on the soot-covered tiles, and lunged back toward the wall of fire.

Hilliard reacted with predatory speed. He lunged forward, wrapping his thick arm around her waist from behind, lifting her feet off the ground, and hauling her backward.

Cailin went feral. The trauma of losing her mother, the years of hiding, the absolute necessity of that wooden box — it all boiled over into a violent, uncontrollable physical response. She thrashed in his grip like a trapped wolf.

She swung her elbows backward, striking his ribs. She ignored the excruciating, tearing pain radiating from her own severely lacerated, bandaged hands. Every time her elbows and forearms connected with his chest, fresh blood seeped through her white gauze, a searing agony shooting up her arms, but her fury acted as a white-hot anesthetic.

Hilliard let out a sharp, breathless grunt. The fractured bone in his chest shifted. A hot, metallic taste flooded his mouth, and a thin line of dark blood trickled from the corner of his lips. He didn't loosen his grip a single millimeter.

Suddenly, a deafening crack echoed above them. The massive crystal chandelier in the hallway, its metal supports melted by the heat, detached from the ceiling. It crashed down exactly where Cailin had been trying to run seconds ago, exploding into thousands of lethal, razor-sharp shards.

Chapter 644:

Even witnessing the near-death impact didn't stop her. Cailin twisted her neck, her teeth bared, and sank her jaw directly into the meat of Hilliard's forearm. She bit down hard enough to draw blood, tasting the salt and ash on his skin.

Hilliard looked down at her. He saw the absolute, unhinged desperation in her eyes. She was willing to burn alive for whatever was in that box.

A profound, agonizing sorrow flashed through Hilliard's amber eyes. He knew words couldn't reach her.

"Forgive me," he whispered.

He shifted his grip, sliding his hand up to the back of her head. With surgical, cold precision, he drove the edge of his hand hard into the side of her neck, striking the carotid sinus.

Cailin's body instantly went rigid. The frantic light in her eyes short-circuited. She collapsed backward, her weight completely dead, folding into Hilliard's chest like a broken marionette.

Hilliard caught her gently. He lowered her to the floor in the corner of the stairwell landing, far from the heat. He stripped off his heavy Kevlar vest — the one he had put back on after the Long Island explosion — and draped it over her unconscious body to shield her from any falling debris.

Heavy, synchronized footsteps thundered up the concrete stairs.

Kegan Aguirre burst through the stairwell door, flanked by four heavily armed operatives in black tactical gear. They wore fire-retardant gear over their suits, their faces grim. “We came through the sub-level service tunnels,” Kegan barked, explaining their bypass of the NYPD perimeter. “The building’s schematics are a mess, but we found a route.”

Kegan’s eyes instantly locked onto Cailin’s unconscious body on the floor, then shifted to Hilliard. A murderous, icy rage contorted Kegan’s handsome face. He drew his Glock 19 in a blur of motion, leveling the black muzzle directly at the center of Hilliard’s face.

“What did you do to her?” Kegan hissed, his finger tightening on the trigger.

Hilliard didn’t even blink at the gun. He wiped the blood from his mouth with the back of his hand. His amber eyes were dead and focused.

“Get them out of here,” Hilliard ordered, his voice echoing with the absolute authority of a king, completely ignoring the weapon. “Take them down to your armored transport. Now.”

Kegan let out a dark, mocking laugh. “You can’t even protect your own woman, Holloway. You’re pathetic.” He holstered his weapon and snapped his fingers. His men immediately moved in, hoisting Cailin and Ashely onto their shoulders.

As Kegan turned to follow his men down the stairs, Hilliard turned his back to them. He faced the roaring inferno of the hallway.

Kegan stopped. He looked back, his brow furrowing in genuine confusion. “Are you insane? The ambient temperature in there will melt your skin off.”

Hilliard didn’t look back. He stared into the flames, his broad shoulders rising and falling with ragged breaths.

“She’ll hate me for the rest of her life if I don’t,” Hilliard said quietly.

Without another word, Hilliard sprinted straight back into the wall of fire.

The flames swallowed his tall silhouette instantly. Kegan’s jaw tightened. He cursed under his breath and ordered his men to move faster, disappearing down the stairwell.

Chapter 645:

Inside the apartment, the heat was a physical, crushing weight. Hilliard squeezed his eyes shut, navigating blindly through the smoke. His lungs felt like they were expanding with boiling water. The skin on his face and arms began to blister and crack.

He kicked his way through the debris of the master bedroom. He dropped to his knees, his hands blindly sweeping the scorching floorboards until his fingers brushed the warped metal of the floor safe.

The metal was superheated. The moment his bare hands touched it, the smell of searing flesh filled his own nose. Hilliard bit completely through his lower lip to stop himself from screaming.

He jammed his bleeding, burned fingers into the melted gap of the hidden compartment next to the safe. He pulled with every ounce of strength left in his shattered body. The compartment gave way.

His hands closed around the smooth, antique walnut wood of the box.

He pulled it out, instantly tucking it against his stomach, curling his body forward to use his own flesh as a thermal shield for the wood.

Above him, the main load-bearing beam of the ceiling let out a catastrophic groan.

Hilliard threw himself sideways, rolling across the burning carpet. The massive, flaming beam crashed down, missing his head by inches, but the jagged, burning edge caught his left shoulder.

The impact tore through his shirt, slicing deep into the muscle. Blood sprayed, instantly vaporizing in the extreme heat.

Hilliard scrambled forward, clutching the box to his chest. His vision was completely gone, replaced by a dark, swimming red haze. He couldn't find the door. The smoke was too thick. He collapsed against the far wall, his strength finally gone, the box held tight against his chest. The last thing he heard before the darkness took him was the splintering of wood and Kegan's voice roaring his name as his team smashed through the bedroom's outer wall from the adjacent apartment.

The sharp, sterile stench of medical alcohol and bleach violently dragged Cailin back to consciousness.

She gasped, her eyes snapping open. The sudden intake of air triggered a coughing fit, and the heart monitor beside her bed began to shriek, its green lines spiking in a frantic rhythm.

Cailin's hand shot up instinctively, her fingers brushing the back of her neck. A dull, throbbing ache pulsed right over her carotid artery. The physical sensation instantly unlocked the memory: the fire, the struggle, Hilliard's cold, precise strike.

"No!" Cailin gasped. She ripped the IV needle out of the back of her hand. A few drops of dark crimson blood splattered across the pristine white hospital sheets. She threw her legs over the side of the bed.

The heavy oak door of the VIP suite burst open.

Five-year-old Elia ran into the room, her small face pale and her eyes red and swollen from crying. She threw herself at Cailin, burying her face into Cailin's stomach, her tiny arms locking around her mother's waist with desperate strength.

"Mommy!" Elia sobbed, her whole body trembling.

Cailin wrapped her arms around her daughter, burying her face in Elia's soft hair. She looked up, her amber eyes scanning the room.

Chapter 646:

Kegan stood in the doorway. He was wearing a dark bespoke suit, but his tie was missing, and his expression was a mask of cold, hard granite.

"Where is it?" Cailin demanded, her voice a raw, gravelly rasp. She didn't ask how she got here. She didn't ask about Ashely. "Where is the box, Kegan? And where is Hilliard?"

Kegan didn't say a word. He slowly stepped aside.

Behind him, resting on a sterile stainless-steel medical cart, was the antique walnut box. The edges were heavily charred, the wood blackened and smelling of ash, but it was intact.

Cailin let out a choked sob. She gently pushed Elia back, stumbled across the room, and grabbed the box, pressing it hard against her chest as if trying to absorb it into her own body.

She turned back to Kegan. The relief of seeing the box was instantly swallowed by a cold, creeping dread.

"Where is he?" Cailin repeated, her knuckles turning white.

Kegan's jaw tightened. "He didn't fall," he said, his voice devoid of any sympathy. "My team pulled him from the wreckage just before the floor gave way. He's in the burn unit down the hall. Thirty percent of his body is covered in second- and third-degree burns. His shoulder is torn to shreds."

Cailin's breath hitched. The room seemed to tilt violently. She grabbed the edge of the medical cart to steady herself. Her face drained of all color, leaving her looking like a ghost. He went back in. He actually went back in for her.

Elia, standing near the bed, felt the sudden, terrifying shift in her mother's emotions. The little girl's hands balled into tight fists. She looked at the door, her eyes burning with a sudden, fierce hatred that was far too old for her face.

"He's a monster," Elia said, her high-pitched voice slicing through the silence like a razor blade. "That bad man hit you, Mommy. I saw the bruise on your neck. I hate him."

Cailin's heart twisted. She dropped to her knees, reaching out to grab Elia's shoulders. "Elia, listen to me. He didn't mean to hurt me. He did it to stop me from going into the fire. He saved—"

The sound of heavy, squeaking wheels interrupted her.

The suite door was pushed open wider by two massive bodyguards in black suits. A medical wheelchair was rolled into the room.

Hilliard sat in the chair.

He was a ruin of a man. His broad chest and left shoulder were heavily wrapped in thick, white sterile bandages. His right arm was encased in a rigid plaster cast. The right side of his face bore the angry, red marks of fresh burns, the skin raw and blistered.

Despite the catastrophic physical damage, his amber eyes were entirely focused. He stared across the room, locking onto Cailin.

When he saw that she was awake, standing, and holding the box, the rigid, agonizing tension in his jaw finally relaxed. A faint, exhausted shadow of a smile touched his cracked lips.

He opened his mouth to speak, his vocal cords dry. "Cailin—"

Before the word fully left his mouth, Elia exploded.

Chapter 647:

The five-year-old girl charged across the room, throwing her arms out wide, placing her small body directly between Hilliard's wheelchair and Cailin.

"Get out!" Elia screamed. Her voice echoed off the sterile walls, shrill and filled with absolute venom. "Get away from my mommy! You hurt her! You're a bad man!"

The faint smile on Hilliard's face vanished instantly. The light in his amber eyes died, replaced by a sudden, hollow devastation. He slowly raised his uninjured left hand, reaching out toward the little girl.

"Elia," Hilliard rasped, the sound breaking in his throat. "Please. I didn't—"

Elia slapped his hand away. The physical rejection hit Hilliard harder than the concrete pavement ever had.

Elia turned her back on him. She ran straight to Kegan, throwing her arms around his leg. She looked up at the mercenary, her small body trembling violently. She wasn't calculating; she was a terrified child desperately seeking the only shelter she recognized in a world that had suddenly caught fire. She buried her tear-streaked face into his suit jacket. "Kegan, make him go away!" Elia sobbed loudly, her voice breaking with genuine, raw fear. "I don't want the bad man here! Protect Mommy!"

The word Daddy never left her lips, but the implication struck Hilliard's chest with the kinetic force of a hollow-point bullet.

His lungs seized. The heart monitor attached to his wheelchair shrieked, the jagged green lines spiking erratically as his heart rate skyrocketed in pure panic. His left hand gripped the armrest of the wheelchair so hard the plastic cracked. The veins in his neck bulged against the white bandages.

Kegan froze for a fraction of a second. Then a slow, cruel smirk spread across his face. He reached down and scooped Elia up into his arms, holding her securely against his chest.

"Of course, sweetheart," Kegan purred, his eyes locked on Hilliard, radiating pure, triumphant malice. "I'll take you and Mommy far away from this dangerous bastard."

Hilliard's breathing turned into shallow, ragged gasps. The physical pain of his burns was nothing compared to the absolute, soul-crushing agony of watching his own flesh and blood choose another man's protection over his.

"Elia, stop it right now!" Cailin snapped, stepping forward, her voice sharp with shock. "You do not speak like that!"

Elia buried her face into Kegan's neck, refusing to look at Cailin, refusing to look at Hilliard. She used her silence as a weapon, punishing Hilliard in the most brutal way a child could.

Hilliard stared at the three of them. Kegan holding his daughter. Cailin standing beside them. They looked like a family — a family that had completely, utterly excised him from their existence.

A thick, metallic taste of blood filled Hilliard's mouth. He slowly lowered his head, staring at the linoleum floor. The fight completely drained out of his massive frame.

"Take me back to my room," Hilliard whispered to his bodyguards, his voice completely dead.

Chapter 648:

The bodyguards turned the wheelchair around. The squeak of the rubber wheels on the floor sounded like a death knell as Hilliard Holloway was rolled out of the room, leaving his heart bleeding on the floor behind him.

Two floors down, in the hospital's high-end VIP lounge, the atmosphere was entirely different.

Ashely stood by the floor-to-ceiling window, staring out at the relentless New York rain. She was wearing a standard-issue hospital gown, a thick wool blanket draped over her trembling shoulders. She held a styrofoam cup of hot coffee in both hands, letting the heat seep into her freezing palms. The right side of her face was heavily bruised from Kane's kick, and her throat still burned from the toxic smoke.

The heavy frosted glass door of the lounge was suddenly shoved open. The metal handle slammed against the wall with a violent crash.

Ashely flinched. Her hands jerked, and the styrofoam cup slipped from her grasp. It hit the tiled floor, bursting open. Hot, brown liquid splashed across her bare ankles and soaked into her hospital slippers.

A man strode into the room. He wore a flawless, charcoal-grey Savile Row bespoke suit. His blonde hair was slicked back with meticulous, arrogant precision. His expensive Italian leather shoes crunched over the spilled coffee, his steps echoing with aggressive entitlement.

It was Wyatt Sterling. Her former fiancé.

Ashely's breath caught in her throat. Her heart began to hammer a frantic, terrified rhythm against her ribs. She instinctively took a step backward, her spine hitting the cold glass of the window.

Wyatt didn't look at her bruised face. He didn't ask if she was hurt. His pale blue eyes swept over her hospital gown with a look of profound, absolute disgust.

“What the hell are you doing back in New York, Ashely?” Wyatt demanded. His voice was smooth, cultured, and dripping with condescension. “I gave you permission to take a sabbatical in Europe to clear your head. I did not give you permission to return and get yourself involved in whatever low-class gang war this is.”

Ashely’s hands began to shake. The familiar, suffocating weight of his control crashed down on her. “I... I don’t need your permission, Wyatt,” she stammered, hating how weak her voice sounded. “We broke off the engagement. I don’t work for you.”

Wyatt stared at her, realizing with absolute certainty that she wasn’t bluffing. He looked at Ashely, his eyes filled with venomous hatred, then looked back at Cailin.

“You’ll regret this, Ashely,” Wyatt spat, his voice trembling with suppressed rage. “You’ll come crawling back.”

He turned on his heel and practically ran out of the lounge, the heavy glass door swinging shut behind him.

As soon as he was gone, the adrenaline left Ashely’s body. Her knees buckled. She slid down the glass window, collapsing onto the floor, burying her face in her hands and sobbing uncontrollably.

Cailin dropped the ashtray. She knelt on the floor, wrapping her arms tightly around Ashely, letting her friend cry out years of suppressed trauma.

Chapter 649:

Outside in the hallway, peeking around the corner, five-year-old Aron pushed his blue-light-blocking glasses up his nose. Beside him, Davy crossed his arms, his eyes narrowed into dangerous slits as they watched Wyatt Sterling hurry toward the elevators.

“Did you get his license plate from the security feed?” Davy whispered.

“Got it,” Aron replied, tapping his smartwatch. “Let’s see how much money this guy actually has.”

Cailin sat on the floor of the hospital lounge, her bandaged hands gently stroking Ashely’s tangled blonde hair.

Ashely’s sobs slowly subsided into ragged, exhausted hiccups. She kept her face buried in her knees, her shoulders shaking.

“He’s right,” Ashely whispered, her voice thick with self-loathing. “I’m nothing. I let him treat me like a dog for three years. I let him take credit for my work. I’m a coward, Cailin.”

Cailin gently grabbed Ashely’s shoulders, pulling her up until they were eye to eye.

“Look at me,” Cailin commanded, her voice firm but warm. “Wyatt Sterling is a parasite. Gaslighting is what parasites do to keep their hosts weak. He didn’t break you because you’re weak. He broke you because you have a light he could never possess, and he needed to steal it.”

Ashely sniffled, looking away. "The Paris Fashion Week award... he told everyone he bought the judges. He told me my sketches were derivative trash."

"And yet he used those exact sketches to secure a fifty-million-dollar investment from LVMH," Cailin stated flatly. "He lied to you, Ash. He isolated you so you wouldn't realize your own worth. But you are free now. As long as I am breathing, that man will never touch you again."

Ashely looked into Cailin's amber eyes. The absolute, unwavering certainty in Cailin's gaze acted like an anchor. Ashely took a deep, shuddering breath. She reached up and wiped the tears from her bruised cheeks.

"Okay," Ashely whispered, nodding slowly. "Okay."

Two floors down, in the intensive burn unit, the silence was suffocating. Hilliard sat rigidly on the edge of his sterile hospital bed, refusing to lie back. His private physician, Dr. Aris, stood nearby holding a syringe of heavy painkillers, looking helpless. Hilliard hadn't spoken a single word since he was wheeled out of Cailin's room. He just stared blankly at the rain lashing against the windowpane. The physical agony of his second- and third-degree burns was excruciating, but it didn't even register. His amber eyes were entirely hollow, stripped of all their usual commanding fire. The echo of Elia's voice choosing another man's protection played on a relentless, torturous loop in his mind, systematically dismantling whatever was left of his soul. He waved the doctor away with a weak, trembling motion of his uninjured hand, choosing to drown in the pain rather than numb it.

A soft, polite knock on the open glass door interrupted them.

Cailin turned her head. Standing in the doorway was an elderly man dressed in an immaculate, traditional black tailcoat. His silver hair was perfectly combed, his posture rigidly straight.

It was Charles, the head butler of the Holloway family estate.

Charles bowed slightly from the waist. His eyes bypassed Ashely entirely, locking onto Cailin with cool, professional detachment.

Chapter 650:

"Ms. Morton," Charles said, his British accent clipped and precise.

Cailin stood up, her body instantly tensing. The warmth in her eyes vanished, replaced by the cold, calculating stare of "Cali." She knew Charles didn't run errands unless they came directly from the absolute top of the Holloway food chain.

Charles stepped forward and extended a gloved hand. Between his fingers was a thick, black envelope sealed with the gold wax crest of the Holloway family.

"Mr. Amerigo Holloway requests your presence in the penthouse VIP suite," Charles announced. "Immediately."

Cailin didn't take the envelope. She stared at the gold wax. "Amerigo is dead," she stated, her voice flat. "I have nothing to say to a ghost."

Charles kept his hand extended. "The reports of his demise were a strategic misdirection to protect him during the final stages of his illness. He is, however, dying. The patriarch understands your reluctance. But he instructed me to inform you that this meeting concerns the immediate future of the Holloway Group, and, more importantly, the legal status of your three children."

The mention of the triplets hit Cailin like a physical blow. Her stomach dropped. Amerigo knew. The old monster knew about Aron and Davy.

Cailin turned to Ashely. Ashely had stopped crying completely. She nodded at Cailin, her expression hardening. "Go. I'm fine. Deal with the devil."

Cailin took a deep breath. She snatched the black envelope from Charles's hand. She didn't open it. She just crushed it in her fist.

"Lead the way," Cailin said.

She walked out of the lounge. Down the hall, sitting on a row of plastic waiting chairs, were Aron, Davy, and Elia.

Cailin walked over and crouched down in front of them. She looked at her three beautiful, brilliant children.

"We have to go see someone," Cailin said softly. "An old man who thinks he owns the world. He's not a nice person."

Davy scoffed. He reached into the pocket of his hoodie, his fingers brushing against a micro-EMP jammer he had assembled from hospital equipment. "We're not scared of old people."

Aron adjusted his glasses, his eyes gleaming with cold intelligence. "If he threatens us, I can crash his pacemaker's Bluetooth monitoring system in four seconds."

Cailin managed a tight, proud smile. "No crashing pacemakers today. Just stay close to me."

She stood up, taking Elia's hand in her left, while Aron and Davy flanked her right side. Together, they followed Charles to the private, keycard-access elevator at the end of the hall.

The elevator doors slid shut. The digital display blinked as they ascended to the top floor. The silence in the small metal box was heavy, suffocating. Cailin stared at the changing numbers, her heart pounding a slow, steady rhythm. She was walking into the lion's den, and the stakes had never been higher.

The heavy oak double doors of the penthouse suite swung open silently.