

Second chance 651

Chapter 651:

The smell hit Cailin first. It wasn't just the sharp, chemical tang of medical antiseptics; it was the distinct, sour odor of decaying flesh and impending death.

The suite was massive, larger than most Manhattan apartments, but it felt claustrophobic. In the center of the room, elevated on a mechanized hospital bed, lay Amerigo Holloway.

The ruthless patriarch of the Holloway empire looked like a mummified corpse. His skin was translucent, stretched tight over his skull. Tubes ran into his nose and arms, connecting him to a bank of softly beeping life-support machines. But his eyes — pale, watery, and sharp as broken glass — were entirely alive.

Amerigo raised a trembling, skeletal hand. He weakly waved his fingers toward the door.

"Out," Amerigo wheezed, his voice muffled by the plastic oxygen mask over his mouth.

Charles bowed and immediately ushered the two private nurses out of the room. The heavy doors clicked shut, locking from the outside.

The room fell into a dead silence, broken only by the rhythmic hiss-click of the ventilator.

Amerigo's watery eyes shifted from Cailin to the three children standing behind her. His gaze lingered on Aron and Davy. A sudden, greedy hunger flashed in the old man's eyes — the look of a dragon counting its gold.

Davy didn't flinch. He shoved his hands into his pockets and glared back at the dying billionaire with open hostility.

Cailin stepped sideways, physically blocking Amerigo's view of her sons.

"You have five minutes, Amerigo," Cailin said, her voice dropping to a flat, icy register. "State your business."

Amerigo let out a dry, rattling chuckle that quickly devolved into a wet cough. He reached under his pillow with a shaking hand and pulled out a thick, black velvet folder. He tossed it weakly toward the foot of the bed. It landed with a heavy thud.

"Open it," Amerigo commanded.

Cailin approached the bed cautiously. She picked up the folder and flipped it open.

Inside was a stack of legal documents printed on heavy-stock paper. The first page bore the embossed seal of the New York State Supreme Court. The title read: Irrevocable Trust Transfer Agreement.

Cailin's eyes scanned the dense legal jargon. When she reached the second page, her breath hitched. Her pupils dilated: transfer of 15% of the total voting shares of the Holloway Group...

Fifteen percent. In current market valuation, that was roughly forty billion dollars. It was enough voting power to completely control the board of directors. It was absolute, world-bending power.

Amerigo watched her face. He reached up and pulled his oxygen mask down around his neck.

"It's already notarized," Amerigo rasped, his voice dripping with arrogant certainty. "My signature is on the last page. All it needs is yours. You sign that paper, Cailin, and you become the most powerful woman on Wall Street. You can crush Preston. You can crush Charla. You can buy a small country."

Cailin's hands gripped the edges of the folder. The paper felt heavy, radioactive. She knew the Holloway family. They never gave away a single cent without extracting a pound of flesh in return.

Chapter 652:

She looked up, her amber eyes locking onto Amerigo's pale gaze.

"What's the price?" Cailin asked coldly.

Amerigo smiled. It was a ghastly, terrifying expression on his skeletal face.

“You’re smarter than you look,” Amerigo wheezed. He raised a trembling finger and pointed directly at Aron, Davy, and Elia. “I want them. All three of them. Full, uncontested, legal custody transferred to the Holloway Family Trust. You sign the shares, you walk away, and you never see them again.”

Cailin felt as if a physical blow had struck her in the stomach. All the blood drained from her face. The folder slipped from her bandaged hands, hitting the floor with a loud slap.

Outside the room, in the quiet hallway, a nurse wearing a surgical mask and pushing a cart of fresh linens stopped right outside the heavy oak doors. It was Charla. She hadn’t just put on a uniform and hoped for the best; she had utilized a meticulously cultivated inside contact. For months, she had been quietly blackmailing one of the hospital’s senior shift supervisors with evidence of gambling debts. That leverage had finally paid off. The supervisor had provided her with a valid keycard, a perfectly tailored uniform, and had deliberately looped the security camera feeds for this specific corridor for exactly ten minutes. She pressed her ear against the crack in the door, desperate to find a way back into the family’s good graces.

She heard Amerigo’s raspy voice clearly: “...15% of the total voting shares of the Holloway Group... you sign that paper, Cailin, and you become the most powerful woman...”

Charla didn’t hear the condition. She only heard the offer.

Her eyes widened in pure, psychotic horror. Her fingernails dug so hard into her own palms that they broke the skin, drawing blood. Forty billion dollars. He’s giving her the empire.

Inside the room, Amerigo continued to press his attack. “Don’t be a fool, Cailin. That money can buy you ten lifetimes of happiness. You can have more children. But you will never, ever see an offer like this again.”

Aron saw the color drain from his mother's face. He stepped forward, grabbing Cailin's cold, bandaged hand. Davy and Elia immediately moved in, wrapping their arms tightly around Cailin's legs.

The physical touch of her children acted like a defibrillator to Cailin's heart. The momentary shock of the forty-billion-dollar number vanished, instantly incinerated by a roaring, maternal fury.

Cailin slowly bent down. She picked up the black folder from the floor. She looked at Amerigo, her eyes burning with a lethal, absolute hatred.

Cailin held the thick stack of legal documents up in the air.

Amerigo leaned back against his pillows, a smug, victorious sneer playing on his dying lips. He expected her to ask for a pen. He expected the greed that ruled his world to rule hers.

Cailin's bandaged hands tightened around the top of the pages.

With a sudden, violent jerk of her wrists, Cailin ripped the forty-billion-dollar irrevocable trust agreement cleanly in half.

Chapter 653:

The sound of the heavy-stock paper tearing was shockingly loud in the quiet room.

Amerigo's pale eyes bulged out of their sockets. The heart monitor beside his bed instantly spiked, the machine letting out a frantic, high-pitched warning beep as his heart rate skyrocketed in pure shock.

Cailin didn't stop. She put the two halves together and ripped them again, destroying the notarized seals, shredding the signatures. She threw the confetti of torn paper directly into Amerigo's face. The pieces fluttered down, landing on his chest and the sterile white sheets.

"My children are not for sale," Cailin said. Her voice was a low, terrifying hiss. "Not for forty billion. Not for the whole damn world."

Amerigo began to tremble violently. His skeletal hands clawed at the bedsheets. "You stupid, arrogant bitch!" he gasped, his lungs struggling for air. "You think you can walk away? I will unleash an army of lawyers! I will bury you in litigation! I will have you declared an unfit mother and take them anyway!"

Cailin leaned over the bed. She placed her hands flat on the mattress, bringing her face inches from Amerigo's. The aura of the frightened mother vanished completely, replaced by the absolute, predatory dominance of the underground auctioneer.

"Listen to me very carefully, old man," Cailin whispered, her amber eyes locking onto his. "I am not just Cailin Morton. I am Cali. I control the European underground art market. I have billions in untraceable offshore liquidity. If you send one lawyer after my kids, I will use every cent I have to aggressively short-sell Holloway Group stock. I will leak your internal financial rot to the SEC. I will burn your legacy to the ground before I let you touch a single hair on their heads."

Amerigo stared at her. He knew the name "Cali." He knew the power she wielded in the shadows. The realization that he had completely misjudged his opponent hit him like a physical heart attack.

His chest heaved. A terrible, wet rattling sound came from his throat. He began to gasp frantically for air, his hand weakly slapping the emergency call button pinned to his pillow.

Outside the door, Charla heard the frantic buzzing of the call alarm.

Panic seized her. She shoved the linen cart away and sprinted down the hall, ducking into a small, foul-smelling utility closet just as the elevator doors pinged open.

Charles the butler and a team of doctors rushed down the hall, bursting into the penthouse suite.

“Code Blue! Get the crash cart!” a doctor yelled.

Cailin stepped back, her face an emotionless mask as the medical team swarmed the dying billionaire. She didn’t look back. She grabbed her children’s hands and walked out of the room, leaving Amerigo to choke on his own failed ambition.

In the dark utility closet, Charla pressed her back against the cold tile wall. She was hyperventilating.

Chapter 654:

She ripped it up, Charla thought frantically, her mind twisting the reality. She's playing hard to get. She wants more. She wants the whole company. As long as those three little bastards are alive, Amerigo will give her everything.

Charla reached into the pocket of her scrubs. She pulled out a cheap, untraceable burner phone. Her hands were shaking so badly she almost dropped it. She punched in a long string of encrypted numbers she had bought off the dark web months ago.

The line clicked. A synthesized, robotic voice answered. "Target parameters."

"Three children," Charla whispered, her voice trembling with psychotic desperation. "Ages five. Currently at Mount Sinai Hospital. I want it to look like a medical accident. Lethal injection. Do it today."

"Contract accepted." The line went dead.

Cailin stepped off the elevator on the fourth floor, her adrenaline slowly crashing. Aron looked up at her, noticing the slight tremor in her bandaged hands.

"You were really cool in there, Mommy," Aron said quietly. "But your heart rate is elevated. You're scared."

Cailin managed a weak smile, squeezing his hand. "Fighting monsters is scary, baby. But I'll never let them take you."

As they turned the corner into the main waiting area, Cailin stopped dead in her tracks.

Standing by the vending machines was Ashely. But Ashely wasn't alone. Wyatt Sterling had returned. He hadn't come back to find Ashely; he had realized, halfway to his waiting car, that in his blind panic he had left his custom leather briefcase — containing highly sensitive, unencrypted Sterling Holdings financial documents — in the lounge. He had marched back up to retrieve it, only to run squarely into Ashely. And clinging to his arm, wearing a pristine white Chanel tweed suit and a smug, victorious smile, was Serena — the woman Wyatt had cheated on Ashely with, the woman who had stolen Ashely's life.

Cailin's eyes narrowed. The fire in her blood, which had just begun to cool, instantly reignited into a blazing inferno.

Wyatt Sterling stood tall, his injured hand tucked carefully into his suit pocket. He looked down at Ashely with an expression of profound, aristocratic pity.

Serena leaned her head against Wyatt's shoulder. She looked Ashely up and down, her eyes lingering on the oversized, stained hospital gown and the ugly purple bruise on Ashely's cheek.

"Oh my god, Ashely," Serena gasped, pressing a manicured hand to her chest in mock horror. Her voice was a high, breathy whine designed to carry across the waiting room. "Look at you. You look like a homeless person. Did you get into a bar fight? Wyatt, darling, we really shouldn't be associating with people like this."

Ashely's hands balled into fists. The humiliation burned in her throat, but the anger finally overrode her fear.

“This hospital gown is cleaner than that Chanel suit you bought with my stolen design money, Serena,” Ashely fired back, her voice shaking but loud.

Serena’s fake smile vanished. Her eyes flashed with genuine malice. She immediately turned to Wyatt, her lower lip trembling perfectly. “Wyatt! Did you hear what she said to me? She’s so jealous and unhinged!”

Chapter 655:

Wyatt’s face darkened. He stepped forward, towering over Ashely. “Watch your mouth, Ashely. You have no class. You never did. That’s why you failed in London, and that’s why you’re standing here looking like trash.”

“I failed because you stole my portfolio!” Ashely screamed, the years of suppressed rage finally exploding. Heads turned in the waiting area. Nurses paused at their stations. “You took my sketches, you put your name on them, and you gave the lead designer position to the woman you were sleeping with behind my back!”

Wyatt’s eyes widened in panic as people began to stare. His carefully constructed public image was being shredded. In a blind flash of narcissistic rage, he pulled his uninjured left hand from his pocket and swung it in a vicious arc.

Smack.

The sound of flesh hitting flesh echoed loudly in the corridor. Wyatt’s palm struck Ashely’s bruised cheek with brutal force.

Ashely's head snapped to the side. She stumbled backward, crashing into the vending machine. A fresh trickle of blood leaked from the corner of her mouth. The room went dead silent.

Serena gasped, but a cruel, satisfied smirk played on her lips.

Cailin saw the slap.

A cold, metallic ringing filled Cailin's ears. The blood drained from her extremities, pooling hot and violent in her core. She didn't think. She didn't hesitate.

Cailin crossed the twenty feet of linoleum floor in three seconds. Her tactical boots made no sound.

Before Wyatt could even lower his hand, Cailin grabbed him by the lapels of his bespoke suit. She didn't use her hands to strike. She planted her feet, twisted her hips, and drove her knee upward in a brutal, precise strike directly into his thigh, hitting the femoral nerve. The impact sent a paralyzing jolt through his leg, causing it to buckle instantly.

Wyatt's gold-rimmed glasses flew off his face, shattering against the wall. He was thrown completely off balance, staggering backward and crashing hard onto the floor, his nose instantly gushing blood from the jarring fall.

"Ah!" Serena shrieked, dropping to her knees beside him. "Security! Somebody call security! This crazy bitch just attacked my fiancé!"

Cailin stood over Wyatt, shaking out her leg. Her amber eyes were flat, dead, and utterly terrifying.

"If you ever raise a hand to her again," Cailin said, her voice a low, vibrating growl, "I will break every bone in your body."

Wyatt scrambled backward like a crab, clutching his bleeding nose. His face was purple with rage and humiliation. "You're dead!" he screamed, spitting blood onto the floor. "Both of you!"

He frantically unzipped his leather briefcase with his trembling good hand. He pulled out a thick stack of legal documents and threw them at Ashely. The papers scattered across the floor.

"You just violated your Non-Disclosure Agreement in a public setting!" Wyatt roared, pointing a bloody finger at Ashely. "You accused me of corporate theft in front of witnesses! Read the contract, Ashely! You owe Sterling Holdings fifty million dollars in breach of contract penalties! I'm going to bankrupt you! You'll spend the rest of your life in a debtor's prison!"

Chapter 656:

Ashely looked down at the papers. The words "Fifty Million Dollars" seemed to jump off the page. The blood drained completely from her face. Her legs gave out, and she slumped against the vending machine, her eyes wide with absolute, paralyzing despair. She didn't have fifty thousand dollars, let alone fifty million.

Serena stood up, brushing off her skirt, laughing cruelly. "Have fun in bankruptcy court, Ashely."

Cailin didn't look at the papers. She didn't look at Ashely. She kept her eyes locked on Wyatt.

Slowly, Cailin reached into her pocket and pulled out her smartphone. She unlocked it and dialed a twelve-digit international number. She pressed the speakerphone button and held the phone up.

The line rang twice. A crisp, professional voice answered in fluent French. “Banque Privée Suisse, gestion de fortune exclusive. Comment puis-je vous aider?”

Cailin spoke in flawless, unaccented English. “This is Cali. Voice authorization code: Echo-Seven-Tango-Niner. I need an immediate liquidation from my offshore C-account in Zurich.”

There was a brief pause, the sound of rapid typing. “Authorization confirmed, Madame Cali. What is the amount?”

“Fifty million US dollars,” Cailin said, her eyes boring into Wyatt’s terrified face. “Prepare it for immediate wire transfer. I’m buying a friend’s freedom.”

The voice on the speakerphone didn’t hesitate. “Understood, Madame Cali. Fifty million US dollars will be liquidated and ready for wire transfer within ten minutes. Will there be anything else?”

“No. Keep the line open for the routing numbers,” Cailin said, and tapped the mute button.

The silence in the hospital corridor was absolute.

Wyatt Sterling sat on the floor, his bloody hand frozen halfway to his face. His pale blue eyes were wide, staring at Cailin as if she had just grown a second head. The arrogant, aristocratic sneer had been completely wiped from his features, replaced by a profound, existential terror.

Serena's mouth hung open. She looked from the phone to Cailin, her Chanel-clad body trembling. "You... you're bluffing," she stammered, her voice lacking any conviction. "Nobody has fifty million dollars in liquid cash just sitting around."

Cailin slowly lowered the phone. She took a step toward Wyatt, her tactical boots loud on the linoleum.

"My lawyers will wire the fifty million to your corporate account by 9:00 AM tomorrow," Cailin said, her voice as cold and hard as a diamond. "That buys Ashely out of her NDA. It buys her freedom. And it buys your absolute silence."

Cailin leaned down, bringing her face inches from Wyatt's bleeding nose.

"If you ever contact her again," Cailin whispered, "if you ever speak her name, if you even look in her direction... I will use the rest of that offshore account to buy your primary competitors. I will short your stock into the ground. I will dismantle Sterling Holdings piece by piece until you are begging for change on the streets of London. Do you understand me?"

Wyatt swallowed hard. His Adam's apple bobbed. As a predator in the financial world, he recognized a bigger apex predator when he saw one. The aura radiating from Cailin wasn't a bluff. It was the terrifying, quiet confidence of unlimited capital.

Chapter 657:

Wyatt nodded quickly, scrambling to his feet. He didn't say a word. He grabbed Serena by the arm, his grip bruising her, and practically dragged her toward the elevators, leaving his shattered glasses and his dignity on the floor.

As the elevator doors closed behind them, Ashely let out a choked, disbelieving sob.

She threw her arms around Cailin's neck, burying her face in Cailin's shoulder. "Cailin... fifty million... you can't. That's insane. I can't let you do that."

Cailin hugged her back, ignoring the pain in her bandaged hands. She smiled, a genuine, warm smile. "To Cali, fifty million is just the price of a mid-tier Picasso. Your freedom is worth ten times that. You're going to start your own label, Ash. And you're going to crush him."

Ashely pulled back, wiping her eyes. A new, fierce light burned in her gaze. The victim was gone. The genius designer was back. "I'll pay you back. Every single cent. Even if it takes me the rest of my life."

Before Cailin could reply, her cell phone vibrated violently in her pocket. The screen lit up with an urgent text from Kegan: PRESTON EN ROUTE TO YOU. BOUGHT A JUDGE. EMERGENCY CUSTODY ORDER. STALL HIM.

The blood froze in Cailin's veins. The warmth of the moment with Ashely vanished, instantly replaced by a primal, maternal panic.

She didn't have time to explain. "Ashely, get the kids. Now," she barked, her voice dropping to a deadly serious tone. She was already sprinting down the corridor, her heart hammering against her ribs like a trapped bird. Ashely, sensing the disaster, ran right behind her.

Cailin rounded the corner to the VIP ward entrance.

The area was in total chaos. Her private security guards were locked in a physical standoff with a dozen men wearing identical black suits and earpieces — Holloway family fixers.

Standing behind the wall of muscle were Preston Holloway and Jeraldine Holloway.

Jeraldine was reaching out, her manicured hands grasping at Elia's arm. Elia was screaming, kicking wildly, trying to pull away. Aron and Davy stood in front of their sister, their small fists raised, fiercely kicking at the shins of the massive men trying to grab them.

"Mommy!" Elia shrieked, her voice tearing through the corridor.

A sound erupted from Cailin's throat — a raw, guttural roar of absolute fury.

She launched herself directly into the wall of Holloway operatives, knowing her hands were practically useless. The first man turned, reaching out to grab her. Cailin ducked under his massive arm, pivoting on her heel, and drove her elbow upward with brutal force, smashing directly into his throat. The man gagged, collapsing to his knees. The second operative lunged. Cailin didn't try to grab him with her lacerated fingers. Instead, she stepped inside his guard, slamming her shoulder into his chest, and delivered a devastating knee strike to his groin, sending him crashing face-first into the wall. Every

sudden movement sent ripples of blinding pain through her bandaged hands, but she gritted her teeth, locking the agony away.

She broke through the line. She shoved Jeraldine violently backward. The older woman shrieked, stumbling and falling hard onto her designer handbag.

Chapter 658:

Cailin spun around, sweeping all three of her children behind her back, turning her body into a human shield. She glared at Preston, her chest heaving, her amber eyes burning with a murderous, unholy fire.

“Touch them again,” Cailin hissed, her voice dripping with venom, “and I will kill you right here in this hallway.”

Preston Holloway adjusted his silk tie, completely unfazed by her violence. He stepped aside, allowing a man in a sharp legal suit to step forward.

“Violence won’t help you, Cailin,” Preston said smoothly, a cruel smile playing on his lips. “We aren’t kidnapping them. We’re rescuing them. Legally.”

The lawyer standing beside Preston pushed his gold-rimmed glasses up his nose. He held a thick stack of documents, the top page bearing the unmistakable red seal of a New York family court judge.

“Ms. Morton,” the lawyer began, his voice a droning, mechanical monotone designed to project absolute legal authority. “I am holding an Emergency Custody Order, signed twenty minutes ago by Judge Aris. Due to your recent involvement in a catastrophic fire, your documented history of severe

mental instability, and your current lack of a secure residence, the court has deemed you an immediate danger to these minors.”

He thrust the papers toward her. “Temporary physical and legal custody of all three children has been transferred to their grandmother, Jeraldine Holloway, effective immediately.”

Cailin didn’t even look at the papers. She raised her bandaged hand and slapped the documents away with a vicious backhand. The papers exploded into the air, scattering across the hospital floor.

“That order is garbage,” Cailin spat, her chest heaving. “You bought a corrupt judge. You think a piece of paper is going to stop me from walking out of here with my kids?”

Jeraldine, having been helped up by a guard, pointed a shaking, manicured finger at Cailin. “You are insane! You dragged Holloway blood into a warzone! Grab the children!” she shrieked at the operatives. “Take them now!”

Preston nodded. Four of the massive Holloway fixers stepped forward simultaneously, forming a tight half-circle, moving in to physically overwhelm Cailin.

Cailin dropped her stance, her muscles coiling like a spring. She pushed the children further back toward Ashely.

The first operative lunged, aiming to pin Cailin’s arms. Cailin slipped to the side, driving a brutal palm strike into his floating ribs. But as she struck, the second operative tackled her from the blind side.

Cailin hit the wall hard, the breath knocked out of her. The operative pinned her shoulders against the drywall. The third man reached past her, his massive hands grabbing for Davy.

“Don’t touch me!” Davy roared.

Aron stepped forward. The five-year-old’s face was completely devoid of panic. He reached into a hidden pocket Kegan had sewn into the lining of his jacket, his fingers closing around a small, black rectangular device. It was a military-grade micro-taser Kegan had given him, explicitly calling it a “last resort” for emergencies exactly like this. Aron jammed the device directly into the operative’s thigh and pressed the trigger.

Chapter 659:

A loud crack of electricity echoed in the hallway. The operative let out a strangled yell, his leg muscles violently seizing. He collapsed onto the floor, twitching uncontrollably.

Preston’s eyes widened in shock. “Restrain that little psycho!” he yelled.

The operative holding Cailin turned his head, distracted by the taser. It was the only opening Cailin needed. She slammed her forehead backward into the man’s nose, feeling the cartilage crunch. He dropped her, howling in pain.

Before Preston could order the rest of his men to attack, the ping of the main elevators echoed through the corridor.

The doors slid open, and a tactical squad of NYPD ESU (Emergency Service Unit) officers poured out, clad in heavy body armor and carrying assault rifles at the low ready.

“NYPD! Stand down! Everyone freeze!” the lead sergeant bellowed, his voice amplified by the enclosed space.

The Holloway operatives immediately froze, raising their hands. You don’t fight SWAT.

Preston’s lawyer quickly stepped forward, holding his hands up placatingly. “Officer, we have a court-ordered Emergency Custody mandate. We are here legally to take possession of the children. This woman is resisting a lawful order.”

The sergeant frowned, stepping forward to examine the scattered papers on the floor.

Cailin straightened her clothes, her breathing ragged but her mind razor-sharp. She knew local police would enforce a judge’s order, no matter how corrupt. She needed a bigger gun.

She pulled her phone from her pocket. She dialed a number she kept on speed dial for absolute emergencies. “Callum,” Cailin said the moment the line connected, putting it on speakerphone. “Preston Holloway just ambushed me at Mount Sinai with a bogus local emergency custody order. I need a nuclear option. Now.”

The voice of Callum Vance, Manhattan’s most ruthless, high-priced defense attorney, crackled through the speaker. “A local order? Cute. Give me sixty seconds.”

The sound of furious typing echoed over the line. Preston sneered, crossing his arms. "A phone call won't save you, Cailin. The law is the law."

"Done," Callum's voice announced. "I just filed an emergency ex parte motion with the Federal District Court. I cited the ongoing federal investigation into the Holloway Group's interstate kidnapping attempt from last month. Judge Kaplan just signed a Federal Restraining Order against Preston and Jeraldine Holloway."

The NYPD sergeant's radio suddenly squawked. He pulled it to his ear, listening intently. His eyes widened. He looked at Preston, then at Cailin.

"Federal order supersedes local," Callum's voice echoed smugly from the phone. "Tell Preston if he doesn't back off my client by the time I hang up, I'll have the FBI arrest him for violating a federal mandate."

The sergeant unclipped his radio. He pointed a stern finger at Preston. "Sir. Dispatch just confirmed a federal injunction. You and your men need to vacate this floor immediately, or I will arrest you all."

Preston's face turned an ugly, mottled purple. The veins in his forehead throbbed. He glared at Cailin, realizing he had been completely outmaneuvered by her endless resources.

"This is just a delay, Cailin," Preston hissed, stepping backward toward the elevators. "You can't hide them forever. I'll see you in court."

Chapter 660:

“Bring a body bag,” Cailin replied coldly.

As the Holloway forces retreated into the elevators, Cailin finally let out a long, shaky breath. She dropped to her knees, pulling Aron, Davy, and Elia into a desperate, crushing hug. She buried her face in their small shoulders, her bandaged hands trembling against their backs.

She had won the battle.

The NYPD sergeant gave a final, stern look at the retreating Holloway group, ensuring Preston and his immediate entourage entered the elevator. As the metallic doors slid shut, the officers began to disperse, their mission of enforcing the federal injunction complete. For a few fleeting seconds, the hallway returned to a heavy, ringing silence.

Cailin stayed on her knees, the warmth of her children’s bodies the only thing keeping her grounded. She closed her eyes, allowing herself a single, trembling breath of relief. She thought the nightmare had paused.

But the silence was too sudden. Too curated.

As Cailin looked up, she realized the police hadn’t cleared the floor — they had only cleared the center. From the recessed alcoves and the shadows of the emergency exits, eight men in identical black suits stepped forward in perfect synchronization. They didn’t make a sound; they simply drifted into position, their expressions as vacant as stone, effectively sealing both ends of the corridor.

The relief in Cailin's chest turned into a cold, hard knot of dread. Preston hadn't left. He had simply traded a legal battle for a physical siege.

Cailin knelt on the cold linoleum floor of the hospital corridor. Her bandaged hands were wrapped so tightly around Aron, Davy, and Elia that her knuckles throbbed with a dull, sickening ache. She watched Preston Holloway's lawyer disappear around the corner, taking the useless local custody order with him. The immediate threat of the paperwork was gone, but the physical reality of their nightmare remained.

At both ends of the long, sterile hallway, eight men in identical black suits stood like concrete pillars. They were Preston's private security contractors. Their hands were clasped in front of them, their faces devoid of any human emotion.

Cailin slowly stood up. She kept her children pushed behind her legs. She took a step toward the VIP elevator bank.

Two of the massive contractors immediately stepped forward. They crossed their thick arms, forming an impenetrable wall of muscle and tailored fabric right in front of the elevator doors.

"Move," Cailin commanded. Her voice was a low, vibrating rasp that tore at her smoke-damaged throat.

The contractor on the left looked down at her. "Mr. Preston Holloway's orders are absolute, Ms. Morton. Until the legal custody transfer is complete, no one is permitted to leave this floor. We aren't here to debate the law; we are here to execute his commands."

Davy stepped out from behind Cailin's leg. His five-year-old face was twisted in pure, unfiltered rage. He swung his small leg and kicked the contractor directly in the shin with his hard leather shoe.

