

Second chance 661

Chapter 661:

The massive man did not even blink. He looked at Davy as if the boy were a minor insect.

Aron immediately grabbed the back of Davy's collar and yanked him backward. Aron pushed his blue-light-blocking glasses up his nose. His eyes scanned the contractor's weight distribution, the placement of their hands, calculating the absolute zero percent chance of a physical breakthrough.

Cailin felt a cold sweat break out across the back of her neck. Preston was playing a brutal game of semantics. He couldn't take the kids legally, so he was initiating a physical siege. He was going to starve them out, cut off their outside contact, and wait for Cailin's injured body to simply collapse from exhaustion.

Ashely stood a few feet away, her bruised face pale. She looked at the armed men blocking the exits. She looked at Cailin's heavily bandaged hands, knowing the deep lacerations beneath the gauze would tear open if Cailin tried to fight.

Ashely took a slow step backward. She kept her head down, sliding silently toward the heavy wooden door of the corridor's private restroom.

She slipped inside and locked the door. Her hands were shaking so violently she dropped her phone twice before she could unlock the screen. She bypassed her contacts and manually typed in the encrypted twelve-digit number she had found buried in Cailin's emergency medical file just days prior. She had sworn never to use it, but this was a nightmare she couldn't fight alone.

Miles away, in the master bedroom suite of the Holloway penthouse on the Upper East Side, the atmosphere was suffocating in a different way.

Hilliard Holloway was not supposed to be out of bed.

He sat at the edge of the hospital-grade mattress his medical team had installed three days prior, bare-chested beneath an open button-down shirt that his attending nurse had left deliberately unfastened — the fabric could not be draped normally over the compression bandaging that encased the left side of his torso and shoulder. The rigid plaster cast encasing his right arm rested against his knee like a dead limb. He hadn't slept. The burns across his back and left flank made it impossible to lie flat for more than forty minutes at a stretch before the pressure became unbearable. His attending physician had made it explicitly clear: no travel, no exertion, no significant movement for a minimum of three weeks.

Hilliard had listened to all of it in silence. He had nodded once. Then he had instructed Gavin to keep the cars available at all times.

He was reviewing reports on a tablet propped against his plastered forearm — the only reading posture he had found that didn't pull at the torn shoulder beneath its bandaging — when the private cell phone resting on the bedside table vibrated.

The screen lit up. The caller ID displayed Ashely Trevino's name.

Chapter 662:

Hilliard's hand stopped moving. The tablet tilted against his cast. Seeing the name of Cailin's fiercely protective best friend — a woman who despised him — flashing on his private line sent an immediate, icy spike of alarm straight through his chest. He knew Ashely would rather die than call him unless Cailin was in catastrophic danger.

He picked up the phone with his left hand and pressed it to his ear.

“Speak,” Hilliard commanded.

“Hilliard, it’s Preston,” Ashely’s voice came through the speaker, breathless and laced with raw panic. “He locked down the VIP floor at Mount Sinai. He has eight private military guys blocking the elevators. Cailin can’t fight them. Her hands are ruined. They are trapping the kids.”

A lethal, absolute silence descended over Hilliard.

The violent surge of adrenaline hit his bloodstream so hard his vision briefly tinted red. The muscles in his jaw locked with a sickening pop.

He stood up.

It was not a controlled motion. The sudden shift in posture dragged the torn tissue of his left shoulder against the compression bandaging with a white-hot, nauseating wrench of pain. He felt the wet warmth of fresh bleeding begin immediately beneath the gauze. He registered it. He filed it somewhere beneath conscious concern and reached for his shirt.

“Get the cars,” he said into the phone, not to Ashely. Gavin, who had been stationed outside the bedroom door, had the door open before the sentence was finished. “Mount Sinai. Now.”

“Sir.” Gavin’s voice was flat and immediate. “Your physician specifically—”

“I heard what he said.” Hilliard was already moving toward the door, his right arm locked against his side by the weight of the cast, his left hand gripping the door frame as he passed through it. “Call the Shadow Squad. I want six of them in the cars.”

Gavin said nothing further. He made the calls.

Hilliard did not take the elevator. The building’s private garage was two floors down by stairwell, and the effort of descending those stairs — each step a negotiation between his fractured sternum, his screaming shoulder, and his own absolute refusal to slow down — was something he allowed himself to feel only in the rigid clench of his jaw. By the time he reached the car, the back of his shirt was visibly darkened at the shoulder. He got in without comment. Gavin shut the door behind him and did not mention it.

Back in the hospital corridor, the standoff was reaching its breaking point.

The contractor’s earpiece buzzed. He listened for a second, then nodded. He looked at Cailin.

“Mr. Preston Holloway has authorized a medical transfer,” the contractor said coldly. “You are being relocated to the medical wing at the Holloway Estate. Do not resist.”

All four men at the elevator bank stepped forward simultaneously.

Cailin shoved her children behind her. She reached out with her bandaged hands and grabbed the heavy, metal defibrillator unit resting on the nearby nurse's station cart. The pain in her palms was blinding, but she lifted the machine, ready to smash it into the first skull that came within range.

Before the contractor could take another step, a deafening, metallic screech echoed through the hallway.

Chapter 663:

The doors of the private VIP elevator emitted a sharp, high-pitched electronic squeal. A red override light flashed as Gavin Thorne's handheld decryption device bypassed the security lock from the inside, forcing the heavy metal panels to slide open.

Hilliard Holloway stepped out of the elevator car.

He didn't look like a CEO. He looked like something that should not have been ambulatory at all, and had decided that was irrelevant. The open shirt hung from his frame, the left side entirely consumed by the white compression bandaging that wrapped his torso and shoulder — a landscape of medical gauze already stained rust-brown at the shoulder seam where the drive over had finished what getting out of bed had started. The plaster cast on his right arm was a grotesque white anchor, dead at his side, entirely useless. He moved with the deliberate, locked-jaw economy of a man operating somewhere past the boundary of what the human body was designed to endure. Behind him, six members of the Shadow Squad poured out, pulling tactical batons from their belts.

Hilliard's eyes locked onto Cailin. He saw her backed against the wall, holding the heavy medical equipment with bleeding hands.

Something in his expression went very still.

He didn't charge. He couldn't — not without his sternum grinding in ways that would put him on the floor before he reached her. What he did was walk, with a speed and directness that was somehow more frightening than running, straight toward the nearest contractor, and drive his left elbow in a short, brutal upward arc into the man's jaw.

The motion required almost no extension of his chest. It required almost no involvement of his right side. It was the kind of strike that came not from athletic training but from something colder — the precise, rage-distilled knowledge of exactly how much force a human joint could absorb before it stopped functioning.

The sickening crunch of the man's mandible shattering echoed off the walls. The contractor's eyes rolled back in his head, and he was lifted off his feet, crashing heavily into the drywall.

The hallway erupted into absolute violence.

The Shadow Squad engaged Preston's men in brutal, close-quarters combat. The sound of batons striking flesh and bone filled the air.

Hilliard stepped directly in front of Cailin. He did not turn back to the fight. He had done the one thing he was physically capable of doing, and now he stood with his broad back to the chaos, his useless right arm and his ruined left shoulder presented to whatever came, using his mass alone as the barrier between Cailin and Preston's men.

A contractor tried to flank Hilliard, aiming a punch at his blind spot. Hilliard shifted his weight and took the blow partially on his left shoulder rather than let it reach Cailin. The impact on the torn tissue was catastrophic. He didn't make a sound. He turned his head toward the man with an expression of such absolute, focused hatred that the contractor actually hesitated — and that half-second was all the Shadow Squad needed to drag him off his feet.

Chapter 664:

The fight was over in less than thirty seconds. Preston's men were entirely outmatched by the sheer, unadulterated brutality of the Shadow Squad. They lay groaning on the floor.

Hilliard turned around to face Cailin.

He was no longer moving with any particular economy. His chest rose and fell in ragged increments, each inhale a visible effort against the fractured sternum. The compression bandaging at his left shoulder had soaked through entirely, a broad, dark stain spreading through the white gauze and into the fabric of his shirt. The cast on his right arm hung at his side. His face had the color of old ash. He had burned through every reserve he had possessed simply getting here, and what was left was standing in front of her on the force of something that had nothing to do with the body.

But his amber eyes were entirely focused on her. They burned with a frantic, desperate need to ensure she was whole.

He slowly raised his left hand. His fingers trembled badly. He reached out, wanting to touch her cheek, wanting to feel the warmth of her skin to prove she was alive.

His hand stopped an inch from her face. He froze, terrified that she would flinch, terrified that she would look at him with the same absolute disgust she had shown him for weeks.

Cailin looked at his hand. She looked at the fresh blood soaking through the compression bandaging, spreading dark and relentless into the white fabric. She looked at the cracked plaster cage around his right arm — the arm he had never once mentioned, never once used as an excuse, never once protected when it counted less than she did. She looked at the color of his face, and understood with quiet, terrible clarity exactly how far past his body's limit he had come. Her amber eyes flickered with a complex, painful emotion.

She didn't pull away.

The silence between them was heavy, loaded with a thousand unspoken words.

Before Hilliard could close the final inch, the heavy metal door of the emergency stairwell at the far end of the corridor was pushed open.

Two figures stepped out into the hallway, their presence instantly commanding the chaotic space.

Sebastian Sinclair stepped into the ruined hospital corridor.

He wore an iron-grey bespoke suit that draped perfectly over his tall frame. His silver hair was immaculate. He walked with a slow, deliberate cadence, his weight supported by a magnificent black ebony cane topped with a solid silver wolf's head.

Beside him walked Catherine Sinclair. She exuded the quiet, lethal elegance of old money. Her sharp eyes immediately swept over the groaning bodies of Preston's contractors scattered across the linoleum, before locking onto the group huddled near the elevator.

Sebastian's gaze bypassed the carnage entirely. His eyes fixed directly on Cailin.

It was a heavy, suffocating stare. It carried the weight of a man accustomed to dissecting people with a single glance.

Hilliard reacted instantly.

Chapter 665:

He stepped sideways, his broad shoulders completely eclipsing Sebastian's line of sight. Hilliard squared his stance, his muscles coiling under his ruined suit. He let out a low, vibrating growl that sounded entirely feral.

"Mr. Sinclair," Hilliard said. His voice was a flat, dangerous blade. "This floor is currently closed for Holloway family business. I suggest you find another place to take your evening stroll."

Sebastian stopped ten feet away. He rested both hands on the silver wolf's head of his cane. He did not look intimidated by the blood soaking through Hilliard's jacket or the armed Shadow Squad operatives standing at attention.

“You seem to be confused about your territory, Mr. Holloway,” Sebastian replied. His voice was calm, but it carried an undeniable, crushing authority. “The Sinclair Consortium holds the majority stake in this medical facility. I do not require permission to walk the halls of my own property.”

Hilliard’s jaw clenched. The muscles in his neck stood out like thick cords. He knew the financial reality. The Sinclair family possessed a terrifying amount of liquid capital. The Holloway Group, currently fractured by internal war, could not survive a two-front battle against a predator like Sebastian.

While the two men engaged in a silent, high-stakes standoff, Elia shifted uncomfortably.

The smell of copper blood and sweat in the hallway frightened her. She buried her face into Cailin’s stomach, twisting her small body to hide.

Elia was wearing a loose, oversized knit sweater. The sudden, twisting motion caused the wide neckline to slip down, exposing her left shoulder.

Catherine Sinclair’s eyes casually drifted toward the movement.

Time seemed to stop. The chaotic sounds of the hallway — the groans of the injured men, the hum of the hospital lights — faded into a distant, muffled roar in Catherine’s ears. There, resting perfectly on the pale skin just above Elia’s shoulder blade, was a small, delicate birthmark the color of faded rose. It was shaped exactly like a crescent moon, clean and precise, as though drawn by a careful hand.

The sight hit Catherine like a wall of ice water.

A memory, buried under twenty years of grief and silence, violently detonated in her brain. It wasn't a thought; it was a full sensory hallucination. She was suddenly standing in the sun-drenched rose garden of their summer estate. She could smell the blooming hydrangeas. She could hear the buzzing of bees. And she could see Seraphina — her beautiful, lost younger sister-in-law — laughing as she spun in a white sundress, the exact same pale pink crescent moon stark against her sun-kissed shoulder.

Catherine's breath stopped.

Her hands, which had been resting calmly on her expensive leather handbag, went rigid. She did not move. She did not gasp. Twenty years of aristocratic discipline snapped into place like a steel trap closing over a wound.

She looked away.

It was a single, deliberate motion — smooth, unhurried, entirely controlled. To any observer, it would have appeared as nothing more than a wealthy woman losing interest in a frightened child. But beneath the immaculate surface, Catherine's pulse was hammering so violently she could feel it in her teeth.

Chapter 666:

She could not afford to react. Not here. Not in front of Sebastian.

Not until she understood what she was truly looking at.

Cailin felt the sudden shift in Catherine's attention. It was brief — almost imperceptible — but Cailin had spent enough years reading dangerous rooms to catch it. A fierce, maternal panic spiked in her chest.

She immediately reached down and yanked Elia's sweater back up, completely covering the birthmark. She pulled the little girl tight against her legs and fixed Catherine with a single, hard look.

Catherine met her gaze with perfect, glacial composure. There was nothing readable in her expression. Nothing at all.

That blankness frightened Cailin more than open hostility would have.

Hilliard, who had been locked in his staring contest with Sebastian, did not catch the exchange. He grabbed Cailin's elbow, his grip firm but careful of her bandaged hands, and shoved her and the children backward into the open elevator car.

"We are leaving," Hilliard stated coldly.

Sebastian did not move to stop them. His attention remained fixed on Hilliard with the cold, calculating patience of a man who had never needed to chase anything in his life.

"This conversation is not finished, Mr. Holloway," Sebastian said quietly. It was not a threat. It was simply a fact.

Hilliard stepped backward into the elevator, placing himself firmly in front of Cailin. He glared at Sebastian as the metal doors began to slide shut.

“Stay away from my family, Sinclair,” Hilliard warned, his voice a low, lethal promise.

The elevator doors clicked shut, sealing them inside.

The hallway fell into a dead, heavy silence. The only sound was the faint groaning of the unconscious contractors on the floor.

Sebastian exhaled slowly through his nose. He surveyed the corridor with the expression of a man mentally filing away every detail for later use.

“Inefficient evening,” he remarked, his voice already returning to its dry, boardroom register. “Have the administrative office pull the security footage for this floor. I want to know who authorized the Holloway Group’s access to my building.”

He turned and began to walk back the way he had come, the measured tap of his cane steady against the linoleum.

Catherine followed.

She walked at his left shoulder, her heels precise and even, her handbag resting in the crook of her elbow. Her face was a perfect portrait of composed disinterest.

Inside, she was shaking.

She kept her eyes forward and her breathing controlled, and she thought of nothing except the pale pink crescent moon on a little girl's shoulder, and the twenty years she had spent believing there was no one left in the world who could carry it.

She needed to be certain before she said a single word to anyone. Especially Sebastian.

Catherine Sinclair had not survived forty years inside one of the most powerful and ruthless families on the continent by making assumptions.

She would find out who that child was.

Quietly. Carefully. Alone.

The elevator descended in suffocating silence.

Chapter 667:

Cailin kept her children pressed into the back corner of the metal box. She stared at the digital floor indicator, her chest rising and falling with rapid, shallow breaths. Hilliard stood near the doors, his broad back to them, his posture rigid with adrenaline and pain.

The elevator chimed. The metal doors slid open to the underground parking garage.

The moment Hilliard stepped out, a wall of blinding, high-beam headlights hit them.

Three massive, black Holloway Group armored SUVs were parked in a tight V-formation, completely blocking the exit path from the elevator bank. The engines idled with a deep, menacing rumble.

Preston Holloway stood in the center of the headlights. His tailored suit was immaculate. He held a sleek tablet in his hand, and a cruel, victorious smile stretched across his face.

“You can break a few jaws, Hilliard,” Preston called out, his voice echoing in the concrete cavern. “But you can’t punch your way out of the system. You are outmatched.”

Preston tapped the screen of his tablet and held it up.

Even from twenty feet away, Cailin could see the glowing logo of the New York Child Protective Services. A red emergency dispatch icon was flashing aggressively on the screen.

"I just submitted a priority one endangerment report to CPS," Preston announced, his tone dripping with fake concern. "I provided them with the fire marshal's report from your burned-down apartment, Cailin. I also provided them with photographic evidence of your ongoing association with Kegan Aguirre, a known international arms dealer."

Cailin's stomach plummeted. The blood turned to ice in her veins.

"The CPS extraction team is three minutes away," Preston continued ruthlessly. "They have a mandate to remove all three minors from your custody immediately. They will be placed into the state foster system pending a six-month investigation. You know how the system works, Cailin. You'll be lucky if you ever see them again."

Cailin's breathing turned into ragged gasps. The American foster system was a bureaucratic nightmare. Once the state took physical custody, Preston's lawyers would bury her in endless litigation. She would lose them.

Hilliard let out a low, vibrating snarl.

He reached his right hand inside his ruined suit jacket. His fingers wrapped around the textured grip of the Glock 19 holstered under his arm. He was prepared to shoot Preston in the face and drag Cailin and the kids out through the blood.

Before Hilliard could pull the weapon, a small hand clamped down hard on his wrist.

Hilliard looked down.

Aron stood beside him. The five-year-old boy's grip was surprisingly strong. Aron looked up at the man he despised, his eyes completely devoid of panic. They were cold, calculating, and terrifyingly rational.

"That's a tactically unsound decision," Aron whispered, his voice so low only Hilliard could hear. "Your weapon discharge will be recorded by garage security. Mommy becomes an accessory to felony assault. We are still taken by the state. You lose."

Chapter 668:

Hilliard froze. He stared at the boy, recognizing the exact same ruthless, pragmatic calculation he used in boardrooms staring back at him from a five-year-old's face. The rage in his chest warred with the cold, undeniable logic. For the first time in his life, he was completely outmaneuvered, and his opponent was a child. His child. Hilliard slowly released the grip on his weapon.

Aron let go of Hilliard's wrist. He turned and grabbed Davy's hand.

Without looking back at his mother, Aron walked directly toward the blinding headlights. He stopped ten feet in front of Preston, his small spine perfectly straight.

"Cancel the CPS dispatch," Aron stated. His voice did not tremble. It carried the chilling authority of a seasoned negotiator.

Preston raised an eyebrow, looking down at the boy in amusement. "Excuse me?"

“You don’t want the girl,” Aron said flatly, pointing a thumb back at Elia. “She’s a liability. You want heirs. You want leverage over the board. Davy and I will voluntarily enter your vehicle. We will accept your ‘protection.’”

The entire parking garage went dead silent.

Preston’s amusement vanished. He stared at the boy, his eyes narrowing as a greedy, predatory hunger washed over his face. Two male heirs. It was the ultimate prize.

Cailin’s heart tore in half.

“No!” Cailin screamed. She lunged forward, ignoring the agonizing pain in her bandaged hands, desperate to grab her sons. “Aron, get back here! I will not let him take you!”

Davy turned his head.

He looked directly at Cailin. He flashed her a bright, almost feral smile. He didn’t make a sound, but he exaggerated the movement of his lips so she could read them perfectly in the harsh light.

Trojan. Horse. Mommy.

Cailin’s boots skidded to a halt on the concrete.

Her breath caught in her throat. The realization hit her like a lightning bolt. They weren't surrendering. They were infiltrating. They were willingly walking into the heart of the Holloway security apparatus to tear it down from the inside.

Her logical brain understood the tactical brilliance of the move. But her maternal instincts screamed in pure, agonizing torment. Her eyes filled with hot tears. Her fingernails dug so deeply into her bandaged palms that fresh blood began to seep through the white gauze.

Preston looked at the boys, then at Cailin's devastated face. He calculated the odds.

"Deal," Preston said quickly. He snapped his fingers at his assistant. "Cancel the CPS dispatch. Tell them it was a false alarm."

Aron and Davy walked back to Cailin.

Aron wrapped his arms around her waist, hugging her tight. He pressed his face against her stomach. "Wait for our signal," he whispered into her sweater.

Davy hugged her next, kissing her cheek. "Don't worry, Mommy. We're going to break all his toys."

Hilliard stood paralyzed. His fists were clenched so tight his knuckles were white. He watched his two sons, boys he barely knew, sacrifice themselves to the enemy to save their mother. The rational part of

his brain knew it was the only play that kept them out of state custody. The father in him wanted to burn the world down.

Preston opened the heavy armored door of the center SUV.

Chapter 669:

Aron and Davy climbed into the back seat. They sat side by side, looking out the tinted window with cold, unblinking eyes. The heavy door slammed shut with a final, metallic thud.

The SUVs reversed in unison. The tires screeched against the concrete as they accelerated up the ramp, disappearing into the New York night.

The moment the taillights vanished, the adrenaline holding Cailin upright evaporated.

Her knees buckled. She collapsed toward the hard concrete.

Hilliard was there instantly. He caught her from behind, wrapping his uninjured arm tightly around her waist, pulling her back against his chest.

Cailin didn't fight him. She leaned her weight against him, her body shaking with silent, violent sobs. The pain of watching her sons drive away with a monster was unbearable.

A low, smooth hum of a massive engine broke the silence.

A sleek, midnight-black Rolls-Royce Phantom glided silently into the parking garage. It pulled up smoothly, stopping just a few feet away from where Hilliard held Cailin.

The rear window hummed downward.

Sebastian Sinclair sat in the luxurious leather interior. His face was partially shadowed, but his eyes were fixed intently on Cailin.

The rear door swung open. A massive bodyguard stepped out and immediately opened a large black umbrella, though they were underground.

Sebastian leaned forward, resting his hands on his silver-headed cane. He extended a pristine, white linen handkerchief toward Cailin.

"Ms. Morton," Sebastian said, his voice a smooth, deep baritone that offered no room for refusal. "Please. Get in. We have much to discuss."

Cailin stared at the white linen handkerchief extended from the dark interior of the Rolls-Royce.

She took a deep, jagged breath. The scent of exhaust fumes and damp concrete filled her lungs. She forced the terrifying image of her sons driving away with Preston into a locked box in the back of her mind. She could not afford to be a grieving mother right now. She needed to be Cali.

She pushed herself out of Hilliard's supportive grip. She ignored the handkerchief.

Hilliard immediately stepped between Cailin and the open car door. He glared down at Sebastian, his amber eyes burning with territorial rage.

"She isn't going anywhere with you, Sinclair," Hilliard growled, his voice a low, dangerous rumble. "Do not try to exploit her trauma."

Sebastian did not even glance at Hilliard. He kept his eyes locked entirely on Cailin.

"I have resources that extend far beyond the reach of the Holloway Group," Sebastian said calmly, his voice echoing slightly in the cavernous garage. "Get in the car, Ms. Morton. I might be able to help you extract those two boys from Preston's estate."

The words struck Cailin with the precision of a sniper's bullet.

Her sons. She knew it was a hook, a lure from a predator sensing weakness. But it was the only hook in the water. Her own resources were cut off, Hilliard was a broken warrior, and her boys were in the enemy's den. This was not about trust; it was about leveraging a new player on the board.

She reached out and placed her bandaged hand flat against Hilliard's chest, right over his uninjured pectoral muscle. She shoved him aside.

Chapter 670:

Hilliard stumbled back half a step, a flash of wounded shock crossing his face. It wasn't the push that hurt; it was the realization that in this moment, his protection was worthless to her. He reached for her arm, but two massive Sinclair bodyguards instantly stepped forward, their hands resting casually on the bulges beneath their suit jackets. They formed a physical barricade between Hilliard and the vehicle.

Cailin grabbed Elia's hand and slid into the cavernous, leather-scented back seat of the Phantom.

The heavy door chunked shut.

The ambient noise of the parking garage vanished instantly, replaced by absolute, pressurized silence. The air inside the car smelled faintly of cedarwood and expensive cologne.

Sebastian pressed a silver button on the armrest. A thick, soundproof glass partition glided up smoothly, completely sealing the rear cabin off from the driver.

He didn't waste time with pleasantries.

Sebastian reached into the inner pocket of his suit jacket. He pulled out a beautifully engraved, antique silver cigarette case. His thumb pressed the latch. It clicked open.

He didn't pull out a cigarette. Instead, he carefully extracted a faded, yellowing Polaroid photograph.

He held the photograph out to Cailin. His hand was trembling so violently the silver case rattled.

Cailin took the photo.

It was a picture of a young woman, perhaps in her early twenties, standing in a sunlit garden. She was wearing a vintage, off-the-shoulder dress. She was laughing, her head thrown back.

And there, resting perfectly on the pale skin of her exposed left shoulder, was a dark red birthmark shaped exactly like a waning crescent moon.

Cailin's pupils contracted to pinpricks.

Her heart slammed against her ribs with the force of a sledgehammer. The woman in the photo had the exact same jawline, the exact same arch of the eyebrows as Cailin. It was like looking into a distorted, faded mirror.

Sebastian leaned closer. The smell of cedarwood grew stronger. He stared at Cailin's face, tracking every micro-expression, every twitch of her facial muscles.

“Do you know the woman in this photograph?” Sebastian asked. His voice cracked. It was the sound of a man begging for his life.

Cailin’s mind raced at a thousand miles an hour.

The physical evidence was undeniable. The birthmark on Elia. The face in the photo. The sudden, desperate interest of a Wall Street titan. But Cailin had survived the underground auction world by never showing her cards. In the brutal ecosystem of billionaires, revealing a vulnerability before understanding the game was a death sentence.

She forced her facial muscles to relax. She let her eyes go flat and dead.

Cailin handed the Polaroid back to Sebastian.

“No,” Cailin said. Her voice was a block of solid ice. “I have never seen this woman in my life.”

Sebastian’s breath hitched. He stared at her, his eyes wide with disbelief. He pointed a shaking finger at Elia, who was sitting quietly beside Cailin.

“The mark on your daughter’s shoulder,” Sebastian insisted, his voice rising in panic. “That is the Sinclair genetic signature! It has appeared in our bloodline for four generations! It is impossible for her to have it unless—”

He grabbed Cailin's wrist. His grip was surprisingly strong for an old man.

"Tell me your mother's name," Sebastian pleaded, tears welling in his sharp eyes. "Was her name Seraphina? Seraphina Sinclair?"