

Second chance 701

Chapter 701:

“Mommy, why is he here?” Davy demanded, his voice thick with betrayal. “He’s the enemy.”

Cailin knelt on the concrete. She smoothed Davy’s hair. She looked over the boy’s shoulder, meeting Hilliard’s tense gaze.

“He did bad things,” Cailin said softly, her voice steady. “But right now, there are worse monsters out there trying to hurt us. He is helping me build a wall to keep them out.”

She looked directly at Aron. “Do you understand? It is a tactical necessity.”

Aron processed the information. His genius-level intellect instantly grasped the concept of a temporary alliance. He gave a single, sharp nod. He reached out and took Elia’s hand, leading his siblings toward the open door of the SUV.

Cailin stood up. She walked past Hilliard without touching him and climbed into the passenger seat.

Hilliard got behind the wheel. The cabin was silent, thick with unresolved tension.

He reached into his leather briefcase on the center console. He pulled out a thick stack of legal documents and placed them on Cailin's lap.

"The fifteen percent voting shares from Amerigo's trust," Hilliard said, putting the car in gear. "I forced the board to expedite the transfer. The ink is dry. You are now the second-largest shareholder in the Holloway Group."

Cailin stared at the documents. The sheer weight of the power resting on her thighs was staggering. This wasn't just money; it was a loaded gun pointed directly at the heart of the empire.

She did not say thank you. She slid the papers into her bag, her expression unreadable.

Later that night, the Tribeca penthouse was quiet. The children were asleep in the guest wing.

Cailin sat alone on the white sofa in the living room. She held a steaming mug of chamomile tea in her bandaged hands. Ashely sat across from her, scrolling idly through her phone, having stayed over to offer silent, unwavering support. The glow of Cailin's laptop illuminated her tired face. She was reviewing the guest list for tomorrow's engagement gala, memorizing the names of the board members she intended to destroy.

Ashely's phone suddenly emitted a sharp, intrusive notification chime. She glanced down, her brow furrowing in confusion at the unfamiliar sender on a social media app. "Weird," she muttered, tapping the screen.

Her face went from casual curiosity to stark, bone-white horror in less than a second. Her breath hitched in a choked gasp. Her hand flew to her mouth, and the phone clattered from her numb fingers onto the glass coffee table.

“Ash? What is it?” Cailin asked, her head snapping up.

Ashely couldn’t speak. She just pointed a trembling finger at her phone screen. Cailin picked it up. A video file was open.

It was grainy, shot in the stark black-and-white contrast of an infrared camera. The room was dark, but Cailin instantly recognized the ornate, custom-built headboard and the crystal chandelier. It was the master bedroom of the Oceancliff villa.

Chapter 702:

A woman in a sheer nightgown was pinned to the mattress. The camera angle obscured her face, but the crimson silk was identical to a piece Cailin had seen Charla purchase months ago.

Then the audio kicked in.

It was a wet, sickening sound of flesh slapping against flesh, accompanied by the woman’s high-pitched, desperate moans.

A massive male figure was positioned over her, his broad back to the camera. The man moved with brutal, rhythmic aggression.

Cailin's breathing stopped.

She stared at the screen. The width of the man's shoulders. The exact taper of his waist. The aggressive, dominant way he held the woman's wrists above her head. It was a physical signature she knew intimately. Her immediate, tactical instinct screamed that this was a trap. A deepfake. A body double engineered by Charla to break her. But as the man on the screen shifted his weight — a hyper-specific, controlling posture that mirrored the darkest nights of her own past — the logic in her brain was entirely swallowed by a tsunami of trauma. Her rational mind demanded she analyze the pixels, but her body betrayed her. The phantom sensation of being pinned down choked the air from her seizing lungs.

The video cut to black. The final second of audio played clearly.

"Hilliard," Charla's voice moaned, thick with pleasure. "Give me a child..."

Cailin's hand jerked violently.

The mug of scalding tea slipped from her fingers. It shattered against the glass coffee table, sending boiling liquid splashing across her bare ankles and feet.

She didn't feel the burn. She didn't feel anything except a sudden, catastrophic implosion in the center of her chest.

Her stomach violently convulsed. She clamped a hand over her mouth, dropping the phone, and sprinted for the guest bathroom.

She collapsed over the porcelain sink, her body wracked with violent, agonizing dry heaves. Acid burned her throat. Tears of pure, unadulterated revulsion streamed down her face.

He had touched her.

After everything Charla had done — after she had murdered his grandfather, after she had framed Cailin, after she had tried to kill Elia — Hilliard had gone to her bed. He had promised Cailin a “guillotine,” and then he had driven to Long Island and buried himself in the enemy.

Cailin gripped the edges of the sink. Her knuckles turned bone-white. She stared at her pale, trembling reflection in the mirror.

The pain vanished, instantly flash-frozen into absolute, terrifying ice.

He had played her. He was securing his alliance with the English family with his own body, keeping Cailin around as a backup plan.

Cailin turned on the cold water. She splashed it onto her face, washing away the tears.

She looked at her reflection again. The mother was gone. The victim was gone. Only Cali remained.

“You want to play games, Hilliard?” Cailin whispered to the empty room, her voice a dead, metallic scrape. “Fine. Tomorrow night, I will burn your entire world to ashes.”

The midday sun reflected blindingly off the polished glass storefronts of Fifth Avenue.

Chapter 703:

Inside the VIP suite of the Harry Winston boutique, the air was heavily perfumed and temperature-controlled. Cailin sat on a plush velvet sofa. She wore a sharp, tailored ivory suit and oversized black sunglasses that completely hid her red, swollen eyes.

Ashely sat beside her, sipping sparkling water.

The boutique manager, a woman in a severe black dress, approached with reverent steps. She carried a black velvet tray. Resting in the center was a masterpiece: a bracelet composed of thirty flawless, emerald-cut pink diamonds. It caught the light and threw fractured rainbows across the walls.

“The ‘Pink Tear,’ Ms. Morton,” the manager whispered. “It is a one-of-a-kind piece from our vault.”

Ashely let out a low whistle. “Cailin, that is stunning. It’s perfect for tonight.”

Cailin slowly reached out, her bandaged fingers hovering over the diamonds.

Before she could touch the platinum clasp, the frosted glass doors of the VIP suite were shoved open with aggressive force.

Charla English strutted into the room. She was flanked by her sycophantic friend, Blair. Charla wore a plunging, emerald-green silk blouse.

Cailin's stomach executed a violent, sickening flip. The bile rose in her throat, identical to the nausea she had felt over the bathroom sink. The visual confirmation of the video was a physical knife twisting in her gut.

She forced her jaw to lock. She did not move a single muscle.

Charla saw Cailin. A vicious, triumphant smirk spread across her face. She marched directly to the coffee table and snatched the velvet tray right out from under Cailin's hand.

Charla held the pink diamond bracelet up to the light.

"Oh, this is gorgeous," Charla cooed, her voice dripping with fake sweetness.

Blair giggled loudly. "Mr. Holloway is so generous to his real fiancée. Not like the charity cases he has to drag around for PR."

Ashely slammed her water glass down on the table. She opened her mouth to scream, but Cailin's hand shot out, gripping Ashely's wrist with bruising force.

Cailin slowly leaned back against the velvet sofa. She reached up and pulled off her sunglasses.

Her amber eyes were completely dead. They were twin pools of absolute, freezing void. She looked at Charla not with anger, but with the clinical detachment of a scientist observing an insect.

"It is a beautiful piece," Cailin said, her voice smooth and devoid of any inflection. "But if you need to buy shiny rocks to prove to yourself that a man hasn't thrown you away, Charla, then by all means. Take it."

Charla's smirk vanished. The insult was a precision strike against her deepest insecurity — her desperate need to be validated as old money.

Charla's face flushed an ugly, mottled red. She slammed the tray back onto the table.

"I don't need to prove anything to a murder suspect!" Charla shrieked. She turned to the manager. "Wrap this bracelet up. I'm taking it."

The manager swallowed hard, her eyes darting nervously between the two women.

“Ms. English,” the manager said carefully. “The ‘Pink Tear’ is our centerpiece. The retail price is eight million, five hundred thousand dollars. Will you be requiring financing?”

Chapter 704:

Blair gasped. Charla’s eyes widened for a fraction of a second. Eight and a half million. Her personal black card had a limit, and her father had been screaming about liquidity all week.

Cailin saw the microscopic hesitation. She struck.

Cailin picked up her teacup, taking a slow, elegant sip. “Manager,” Cailin said casually, her voice a blade of ice, “if the English family can’t cover it, put it on my trust.”

The words “my trust” acted like a lit match dropped into a barrel of gasoline.

Charla’s vanity exploded. She could not let Cailin humiliate her in front of Blair. She could not let Cailin act like the true Holloway matriarch.

Charla ripped a sleek, black titanium credit card from her designer bag and slammed it onto the glass table.

“Who said I can’t afford it?!” Charla screamed, her voice echoing shrilly in the quiet boutique. She pointed a shaking finger at the massive glass display case lining the wall. “Wrap the bracelet! And wrap that entire spring collection in the case! I want all of it! I’ll show you who the real Holloway is!”

The manager stared at Charla in absolute horror. The spring collection case contained over twenty-five million dollars' worth of inventory.

"Ma'am, that is..."

"Do it!" Charla roared.

With trembling hands, the manager picked up the black card. She walked over to the sleek POS terminal on the desk. She swiped the card and punched in the staggering total.

The machine hummed for three agonizing seconds.

Then it emitted a sharp, loud, electronic beep.

A red light flashed on the terminal. The screen displayed the words in bold, unforgiving text:
TRANSACTION DECLINED — INSUFFICIENT FUNDS.

The silence in the VIP suite was absolute. It was the deafening silence of total social annihilation.

Blair took a slow, embarrassed step away from Charla.

Charla stared at the red light. Her mouth opened and closed like a dying fish. The blood drained completely from her face.

Cailin let out a low, soft chuckle. The sound was a razor blade slicing through the quiet room.

Charla snatched the card from the manager. Her hands shook so violently she dropped it twice before dialing her father's number on her cell phone.

"Dad!" Charla screamed into the phone, tears of pure humiliation streaming down her face. "Wire twenty million to my black card right now! I need it now!"

Cailin stood up. She smoothed the front of her ivory suit and slid her sunglasses back onto her face.

She walked past the hysterical, sobbing Charla. She paused for a single second.

"I hope those rocks look good on you tonight, Charla," Cailin whispered, her voice a lethal chill. "Because the guillotine is waiting."

Cailin walked out of the boutique, leaving Charla screaming into her phone.

The sun set over Manhattan, casting a bloody, orange glow against the glass skyscrapers.

Outside The Plaza Hotel, the security perimeter was impenetrable. Black SUVs lined the block. The flashing lights of police cruisers reflected off the wet pavement. Inside the Grand Ballroom, tens of thousands of white roses hung from the ceiling, their heavy, sweet scent masking the scent of the impending slaughter.

Chapter 705:

In the opulent bridal suite on the top floor, Charla English stood in front of a full-length mirror.

She wore a custom, mermaid-style gown covered in thousands of hand-stitched pearls. Around her neck rested a heavy diamond choker — a piece she had forced her father to acquire on credit after the disaster at Harry Winston.

The door to the suite slammed open.

Richard English stormed in. His face was a terrifying shade of purple. He held a crumpled bank statement in his fist.

“Are you insane?!” Richard bellowed, spit flying from his lips. He marched up to Charla and shoved the paper in her face. “You tried to authorize a twenty-five million dollar charge today? The bank flagged it! They froze our bridge loan! Two of our primary suppliers just filed breach of contract lawsuits against us an hour ago!”

Patricia rushed into the room, grabbing Richard’s arm. “Richard, stop! You’ll ruin her makeup!”

“She ruined the company!” Richard roared. “We are completely out of liquid cash!”

Charla turned away from the mirror. She did not look panicked. She looked utterly, delusionally triumphant. She placed a hand flat against her stomach.

“Stop yelling, Dad,” Charla said, her voice dripping with smug superiority. “The money doesn’t matter anymore. I slept with Hilliard last night. We didn’t use anything. I’ve been secretly taking fertility injections, and my ovulation timing was flawless. I am going to have a Holloway baby.”

Richard froze. The anger instantly evaporated from his face, replaced by a look of sheer, predatory greed.

“But what if you aren’t pregnant?” Richard breathed.

“I have the entire encounter on video,” Charla smirked. “If he even thinks about backing out, the scandal will tank Holloway stock overnight. He’s trapped. By tomorrow, we will own the ports. We will own everything.”

A sharp knock on the door interrupted them. A hotel concierge stepped in, bowing slightly. “Ms. English. Mr. Holloway is waiting. It is time.”

Charla pulled on a pair of white lace gloves. She lifted her chin, looking every inch the conquering queen, and walked out of the suite.

Down in the Grand Ballroom, the noise was deafening. Wall Street titans, politicians, and media moguls clinked champagne glasses.

Hilliard stood in the dead center of the elevated main stage. He wore a pristine white tuxedo jacket. However, the right sleeve was custom-slit and draped loosely over a heavy, grotesque plaster cast that bound his completely useless right arm to his chest. Beneath the pristine fabric, his shattered sternum and severe burns screamed in agony with every breath, leaving a faint sheen of cold sweat on his pale forehead. His amber eyes swept over the crowd, cold and entirely devoid of life. He looked like a statue carved from ice.

The string quartet shifted seamlessly into a slow, sweeping waltz.

The heavy brass doors at the back of the ballroom opened.

Charla walked in, her hand resting on Richard's arm. The crowd parted. Camera flashes erupted like a strobe light. Charla soaked in the adoration, her smile wide and victorious. She walked up the steps to the stage.

Chapter 706:

Richard placed Charla's hand into Hilliard's.

Hilliard looked down at her. His lips curved into a flawless, terrifyingly empty smile. Using his uninjured left hand, his fingers closed over hers. His grip trembled slightly from the immense physical effort of suppressing his injuries, yet it was tight enough to cause a brief flash of pain.

Charla leaned in, pressing her chest against his arm. “Last night was amazing,” she whispered, her voice carrying a sickeningly sweet purr. “I’m still sore.”

Hilliard’s stomach churned with absolute revulsion, but his expression did not change. “Tonight,” he whispered back, “will be unforgettable.”

The master of ceremonies stepped up to the microphone. He delivered a sickeningly sweet speech about the union of two great dynasties. He gestured to a woman holding a velvet pillow.

Resting on the pillow was a massive, ten-carat, emerald-cut pink diamond ring.

Charla’s eyes filled with tears of pure greed. She extended her left hand, her fingers trembling in anticipation.

Hilliard picked up the ring. Because his right arm was a grotesque, useless weight, he awkwardly but deliberately used his left hand to pinch the diamond between his thumb and forefinger. He moved it slowly toward Charla’s outstretched hand.

The ring was exactly one millimeter away from sliding over her knuckle.

Boom.

The sound of the heavy brass doors at the back of the ballroom being violently kicked open echoed like a bomb blast.

The string quartet screeched to a halt. Five hundred heads snapped toward the entrance.

Cailin Morton stood in the doorway.

She wore a blood-red, floor-length gown that clung to her body like a second skin. She wore no jewelry. Her hair was pulled back severely. Her right hand was wrapped in thick, tightly bound bandages, a stark reminder of the deep glass laceration she had suffered days ago. She looked like a blade forged in hellfire.

Flanking her were four men in dark suits. They wore tactical earpieces. Gold badges hung from chains around their necks. Federal Bureau of Investigation.

The ballroom descended into absolute, paralyzed silence.

Charla's face turned the color of chalk. She pointed a shaking finger at Cailin. "Security! Get that murderer out of here! Shoot her!"

Dozens of Holloway security guards reached into their jackets.

On the stage, Hilliard made a single, microscopic movement with his left hand.

Every single guard in the room froze. They dropped their hands and stepped back against the walls, turning into statues.

Cailin walked down the center aisle. Her black stilettos clicked rhythmically against the marble floor. She did not look at the crowd. She kept her eyes locked on the stage. She walked up the steps and stopped five feet away from Charla.

Chapter 707:

Cailin reached into her small clutch. She instinctively tried to use her right hand, but a sharp jolt of pain shot through her bandaged thumb. Gritting her teeth, she awkwardly switched to her left hand and pulled out a thick document stamped with the FBI seal. She threw it. The heavy paper slapped against Charla's chest and fell to the floor.

Cailin looked directly at Hilliard. Her eyes were filled with a mixture of absolute hatred and shattering heartbreak.

"You thought you could betray me and build your empire on my corpse, Hilliard," Cailin said, her voice dripping with venom. "I promised I would burn your entire world to ashes. I'm starting by destroying this pathetic alliance and publicly humiliating your chosen bride."

Then she turned her gaze to Charla.

"Did you really think dissolving the digital storage drives made you untouchable?" Cailin sneered. "You forgot about the analog offshore bank ledgers your accountant kept in a physical safety deposit box. And that '100% DNA match' at the crime scene? The FBI just confirmed the blood was planted — stolen

directly from the clinic where my hand was stitched up two days ago. The lab technician you bribed has already flipped for immunity.”

“The engagement is canceled,” Cailin announced, her voice ringing clear and cold through the silent ballroom. “Charla English, you are under arrest.”

The lead FBI agent stepped past Cailin. He grabbed Charla’s wrist, twisting her arm roughly behind her back.

The sharp, metallic click of handcuffs echoed through the silent ballroom.

Charla let out a piercing, hysterical shriek. She thrashed wildly against the agent’s grip, the pearls on her gown tearing loose and scattering across the stage.

“Get your hands off me!” Charla screamed, her eyes wide and manic. “I am the Holloway matriarch! She is the murderer! Arrest her!”

Richard English lunged forward to grab his daughter. A second FBI agent drove a hard knee into Richard’s thigh, dropping the older man to the floor. “Interfere with a federal arrest, sir, and you will join her,” the agent barked.

Cailin bent down. She picked up the document from the floor. She stepped directly in front of Charla, holding the paper inches from her face.

“This is a wire transfer log,” Cailin said, her voice amplified by the dead silence of the room. “Five million dollars, routed through a dark web cryptocurrency tumbler, paid to a European wet-work syndicate. You hired the cleaner who melted the hospital servers.”

Charla’s breathing turned into rapid, shallow gasps. “You’re lying! Aron said the servers are gone! The physical drives were dissolved! You have no proof!”

Cailin’s lips curled into a terrifying, predatory smile.

“You’re absolutely right. The hospital drives were completely destroyed, and data recovery was impossible,” Cailin announced to the room, her voice dripping with mockery. “But you forgot one crucial thing about dark web mercenaries, Charla. They have no loyalty. The syndicate kept a copy of the security feed before the acid hit — insurance, to blackmail you later. Aron didn’t need to recover the dead hospital servers. He simply hacked the syndicate’s private stash.”

Cailin raised her hand.

The massive, floor-to-ceiling LED screen behind the stage flickered and went black. A second later, a high-definition video feed filled the screen.

A collective gasp of horror ripped through the crowd of five hundred guests.

Chapter 708:

The video showed the hospital roof garden. It showed Amerigo Holloway sitting in his wheelchair. And it showed Charla English, wearing blue scrubs, raising a massive river rock above her head and bringing it down with sickening force onto the old man's skull.

Charla's knees buckled. The FBI agent had to hold her up by her handcuffed arms. She stared at the screen, watching herself commit murder in a continuous loop. Her perfect, airtight reality shattered into a million pieces.

"Charla English," the FBI agent recited loudly, "you are under arrest for First-Degree Murder, Conspiracy to Commit Murder, and Federal Wire Fraud."

Charla's head snapped up. Her eyes were completely unhinged. The sheer terror morphed into the rabid desperation of a cornered animal.

She glared at Cailin, spitting venom:

"You think you won?" Charla shrieked, her voice cracking. She jerked her head toward the side of the stage. "Look at your precious ally! He hates you! He came to my bed last night! He begged me for a child! I have the video!"

The ballroom erupted into chaotic murmurs.

Cailin's body went rigid. The physical memory of the nausea she felt watching that infrared video hit her again. Her lungs burned. She looked over at Hilliard.

He was not standing. He sat rigidly in a motorized medical wheelchair, a custom tuxedo jacket draped loosely over his heavily bandaged left chest and shattered shoulder. His right arm was entirely immobilized in a thick plaster cast, and the right side of his face was raw, swollen red, and dotted with burn blisters.

Despite his horrific physical state, Hilliard's amber eyes radiated absolute, freezing disgust. He did not flinch under Cailin's gaze.

Because of his shattered left shoulder and casted right arm, he couldn't move his hands. He gave a slight, stiff nod to his trusted assistant standing beside his wheelchair.

The assistant pulled out a small, black remote control and pressed a button.

The murder footage on the massive screen vanished. It was replaced by the infrared video Cailin had seen. The dark room. The crimson nightgown. The heavy, rhythmic movements of the man on top of Charla.

Charla let out a triumphant, manic laugh. "See?! That's him!"

The assistant pressed a second button.

The video did not stop, but the visual filter changed. The grainy, black-and-white infrared overlay was stripped away by a military-grade AI enhancement program. The shadows were illuminated. The pixels sharpened into crystal-clear, high-definition color.

The man on top of Charla lifted his head.

The face on the massive screen was not Hilliard Holloway.

It was a rugged, heavily tattooed European male model with dirty blonde hair.

The silence in the ballroom was so profound you could hear a pin drop.

Charla's manic laughter died in her throat. Her eyes bulged out of her skull. She stared at the blonde man on the screen, her brain completely failing to process the visual data.

"No," Charla whispered, her voice trembling. "No, that's a fake. That was you. You smelled like cedarwood..."

Hilliard looked down at her from his wheelchair. His breathing was shallow due to the bandages wrapping his chest, but his voice, though raspy from the pain medication, echoed mercilessly through the microphone his assistant held for him.

Chapter 709:

"Did you honestly believe I would drag my broken body out of a hospital bed to touch the garbage that murdered my grandfather?" Hilliard asked. "I hired that man from an underground club in Berlin for a thousand dollars. I gave him a bottle of my cologne. I hired him with only one specific instruction: to

make sure you remember that he is merely a hired hand servicing the Holloway family. Every drop of sweat on your skin was nothing but my absolute disdain for you. The power and status you so desperately crave, Charla, is something I can purchase for a thousand dollars in a dirty nightclub.”

The words hit Charla like a physical wrecking ball.

She looked at the screen. She looked at the burned, incapacitated man in the wheelchair. The realization of what had actually happened to her body, the absolute, degrading violation of her vanity and her flesh, broke her mind completely.

Charla let out a sound that was not human. It was a guttural, tearing shriek of pure, psychotic agony. She collapsed onto the stage, writhing and screaming, tearing at her own hair with her handcuffed hands.

Cailin stood frozen.

Her heart hammered violently against her ribs. The ice in her veins melted in a rush of blinding heat. He hadn't touched her. He had never betrayed the alliance. He had built the guillotine exactly as he promised, even from a hospital bed.

The FBI agents dragged the screaming, thrashing Charla off the stage, hauling her down the aisle toward the exit.

Hilliard signaled his assistant to wheel him forward.

The motorized chair hummed quietly as it approached Cailin, stopping two feet away. He looked up into her eyes, stripping away the cold, calculating mask of the CEO, revealing the desperate, bleeding man underneath.

He could not sink to one knee. His body was a broken monument to the war they had just won.

With agonizing slowness, his trembling fingers on his uncasted hand reached down to a small velvet box resting on his lap. Fighting through the visible pain of his shattered shoulder blade, he managed to flip the lid open, revealing a massive pink diamond ring.

“The garbage is cleared,” Hilliard said softly, his raspy voice thick with emotion, meant only for her despite the silent, watching crowd. “Cailin Morton. Will you let me spend the rest of my life proving that you are the only thing in this world that matters to me?”

The Grand Ballroom of The Plaza Hotel held its collective breath.

Five hundred pairs of eyes, and dozens of camera lenses, were locked onto the stage. Hilliard Holloway, the ruthless tyrant of Wall Street, was kneeling on the red carpet, offering a flawless pink diamond to the woman he had once destroyed.

Cailin looked down at him.

She saw the raw, unshielded hope in his amber eyes. She felt the heavy, rhythmic thud of her own heart hammering against her sternum. The urge to collapse into his arms, to let him carry the weight of the war they had just fought, was a physical ache in her muscles.

But the phantom scars on her wrists throbbed. The memory of Elia screaming in terror in the hospital room burned in her mind.

Cailin slowly reached out her right hand. Her bandaged fingers brushed against the velvet box.

Hilliard's breath hitched. A desperate, fragile smile touched the corners of his mouth.

Cailin did not take the ring.

She placed her index finger on the lid of the box and pushed it downward.

Snap.

The sharp, crisp sound of the velvet box closing echoed through the microphone.

Chapter 710:

Hilliard's smile vanished. His body went rigid. The hope in his eyes shattered like dropped glass.

Cailin looked down at him, her expression a mask of absolute, impenetrable calm.

"I told you in the car, Hilliard," Cailin said, her voice steady and devoid of malice. "This was a guillotine. The executioner's job is done. I do not require a reward."

She stepped back, creating a physical distance between them. She turned to face the sea of shocked reporters and flashing cameras.

"I am officially resigning from all executive and board positions within the Holloway Group, effective immediately," Cailin announced, her voice ringing clear. "As for the fifteen percent voting shares, they are my children's birthright. I will act as their sole guardian, and I will wield the full power of those shares to ensure no one in your boardrooms ever threatens my family again. I want no part of your empire, but I will be its eternal overseer."

The crowd erupted into chaos. Shouted questions bounced off the crystal chandeliers.

Cailin did not answer them. She picked up the skirt of her blood-red gown. She turned and walked down the steps of the stage, her head held high, moving with the absolute grace of a woman who had finally won her freedom.

Hilliard remained kneeling on the stage. He watched her walk away. He did not chase her. He closed his hand around the velvet box, the sharp edges digging into his palm. He knew that five years of trauma could not be erased by a single act of vengeance.

Three days later.

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The air inside the maximum-security visiting room of the Manhattan Detention Complex was stale and heavily filtered.

Cailin sat in a metal chair. She wore a sharp, tailored white suit. She looked through the thick pane of bulletproof glass.

The heavy steel door on the other side opened. A guard shoved Charla English into the booth.

Charla wore a bright orange jumpsuit. Her hair was a tangled, greasy mess. Her face was gaunt, the skin around her eyes bruised and hollow. In just seventy-two hours, the manicured socialite had been reduced to a twitching, broken shell.

Charla picked up the heavy black telephone receiver. Her hands shook violently.

Cailin picked up her receiver. She looked at Charla with absolute, freezing apathy.

"I didn't come here to gloat, Charla," Cailin said, her voice a flat, metallic hum through the speaker. "I came to deliver your receipt."

Cailin lifted a thick stack of legal documents and pressed them flat against the bulletproof glass.

The bold, black letters at the top of the page read: TITLE VII BANKRUPTCY LIQUIDATION — ENGLISH GROUP HOLDINGS.

Charla stared at the paper. Her bloodshot eyes darted frantically over the text.

“Your father was arrested by the FBI at four o’clock this morning,” Cailin stated, her tone conversational, as if reading the weather. “Wire fraud and massive corporate embezzlement. The banks called in your bridge loans.”

Cailin leaned closer to the glass.