

Second chance 721

Chapter 721:

Cailin's eyes were fixed on the leather-bound journal. Her mother's handwriting, her innermost thoughts, held hostage by the man whose family had ordered her death. A white-hot, blinding rage surged through her, so potent it was a physical force. She wanted to launch herself at him, to feel his bones break under her hands.

But she chained the monster. She let none of the fury show on her face. Her expression remained a mask of absolute, impenetrable ice.

She let the silence stretch, using it as a weapon. She watched his smug confidence begin to waver, the slightest flicker of uncertainty entering his pale eyes. He had expected tears, or fear, or a desperate lunge for the diary. He had not expected this unnerving, absolute calm.

"Let me see if I understand this," Cailin said finally, her voice so quiet he had to lean forward slightly to hear her over the wind. "You murdered my mother. You hunted a child across two continents. And now you've flown all the way to this godforsaken rock to ask me for a favor?"

Viktor's smile tightened at the edges. "I am offering you a transaction, Ms. Morton. Your life in exchange for a simple piece of information."

Cailin let out a low, soft sound. It was not a laugh. It was a note of pure, freezing contempt.

“Here is my counter-offer,” she said, taking a slow, deliberate step forward. The three red laser dots from the sniper rifles remained perfectly steady on his forehead and chest. “You are going to leave that diary on the ground. You are going to get back in your ridiculous helicopter. And you are going to fly away. And if I ever see your face again, I will not use snipers. I will do the job myself.”

A flicker of genuine surprise crossed Viktor’s face, quickly replaced by a flash of anger. His aristocratic mask slipped. “You are in no position to make threats. You are a cornered animal. You have nowhere left to run.”

“You’re mistaken,” Cailin said, her voice dropping to a lethal whisper. “I’m not the one who’s cornered.”

She raised her left hand slightly, a pre-arranged signal.

From behind the helicopter, two figures in black tactical gear rose silently from the tall grass where they had been concealed. They were members of the Shadow Squad, and they were each holding a compact, cylindrical device.

With a soft thump-thump, two EMP charges were fired, magnetically attaching themselves to the helicopter’s fuselage and engine block.

A fraction of a second later, a brilliant blue-white light pulsed from the devices. The helicopter’s engines died with a sickening whine. The rotor blades spun to a halt. Every single electronic system on the aircraft went dead. The Dauphin was now nothing more than a two-ton paperweight.

Viktor’s head whipped around. His face, for the first time, was a mask of pure, unadulterated shock. He was stranded.

At the same moment, the heavy oak doors of the estate swung open. Kegan Aguirre walked out onto the path. He was not alone. Flanking him were the remaining ten members of the Shadow Squad, their assault rifles held at a low, ready position. An overwhelming, inescapable show of force.

Chapter 722:

Viktor slowly turned back to Cailin. The smug superiority was gone, replaced by the wary, calculating look of a predator who has just realized it has walked into a much larger predator's cage.

"It seems I underestimated you," he said, his voice tight.

"Everyone does," Cailin replied. "It's how I win."

She nodded toward the journal in his hand. "The diary. Put it down."

Viktor hesitated, his knuckles white as he gripped the old leather. It was his only piece of leverage.

"Now, Mr. Argent," Cailin commanded, her voice ringing with an authority that was absolute.

With a look of pure, venomous hatred, Viktor tossed the diary onto the wet gravel between them.

“Take him,” Cailin ordered Gavin through her earpiece.

Two members of the squad moved forward, grabbing Viktor’s arms and wrenching them behind his back. They slammed heavy zip-tie cuffs around his wrists.

Cailin walked forward and bent down, her fingers closing around the cool, worn leather of her mother’s diary. She straightened up, holding it against her chest. It felt like holding a ghost.

She looked at the furious, captured man being restrained by her soldiers.

“You came here looking for a memory,” Cailin said softly. “Now you’re going to spend the rest of your short life in a dark room, giving me all of yours.”

The lowest level of The Crow’s Nest was not a wine cellar or a storage area; it was a reinforced concrete bunker designed to withstand a direct missile strike. The air was cold, sterile, and smelled faintly of ozone.

Viktor Argent was strapped to a solid steel chair in the center of the interrogation room. The zip-ties had been replaced with heavy metal restraints. The lights were harsh, the silence absolute.

Cailin sat across from him at a simple steel table. The diary lay open in front of her. She had spent the last hour poring over her mother’s elegant, looping cursive, the words a painful, intimate window into a life she had never truly known. Her mother wrote of art, of history, of the thrill of discovery, and of a deep, abiding fear for her daughter’s safety.

Kegan stood by the door, a silent, imposing sentinel. Gavin monitored a bank of screens on the far wall, displaying Viktor's biometric data — heart rate, galvanic skin response, pupil dilation.

Cailin looked up from the diary. She had read the entry Viktor had mentioned, the one about the lullaby. Her mother described it as a simple folk song from her childhood, a tune she hummed to put baby Cailin to sleep. There was no mention of a cipher, no hint of a hidden meaning.

"The lullaby," Cailin said, her voice echoing slightly in the stark room. "You were lying. My mother's diary says nothing about a cipher."

Viktor, who had been staring defiantly at the wall, slowly turned his head. A faint, mocking smile touched his lips. "Was I? Or did she simply hide the key so well that even her own diary couldn't be trusted? She was a brilliant cryptographer, your mother. She loved puzzles. Layers within layers."

Chapter 723:

He was good. He was trying to plant seeds of doubt, to turn her mother's memory into a weapon against her.

Cailin closed the diary. "You're wasting my time. I don't need the song. I have you. You are going to tell me everything you know about Argent's operations. You're going to give me the names of the men who killed my mother."

Viktor laughed, a dry, humorless sound. "You think you can break me? My dear, my family wrote the book on interrogation. We perfected it. There is nothing you can do to me that I haven't seen, studied, and inflicted on others a hundred times over."

“I’m not going to break you,” Cailin said, her voice dropping to a chillingly calm register. “I’m going to erase you.”

She nodded to Gavin.

Gavin typed a command into his keyboard. A large monitor on the wall flickered to life. It displayed a live feed of the New York Stock Exchange. The ticker for Argent Group Holdings (AGH) was flashing green, trading at an all-time high.

“Your family’s company went public five years ago,” Cailin stated, her tone conversational. “A bold move. It gave you a massive infusion of capital, but it also made you vulnerable. Public companies have to file quarterly reports. They are subject to SEC regulations. They have shareholders to answer to.”

She gestured to the screen. “At 9:30 AM Eastern Standard Time tomorrow, when the market opens, a story will be leaked to the Wall Street Journal. A story about a high-ranking Argent executive being detained on foreign soil during a failed corporate espionage operation. The story will include high-resolution photographs of your helicopter, disabled on my lawn. It will include your name and your title.”

Viktor’s smirk faltered. A flicker of genuine alarm appeared in his eyes.

“Your stock will plummet,” Cailin continued, her voice a relentless, methodical scalpel. “Your shareholders will panic. Your board of directors will demand answers. Your grandfather will be forced to publicly disavow you. He will call you a rogue agent, a disgraced extremist. He will cut you loose to save the company.”

She leaned forward, her amber eyes locking onto his. “You came here as the heir to an empire, Viktor. But by lunchtime tomorrow, you will be a man with no name, no family, and no future. You will be a ghost. And then... then we can have a real conversation. Because ghosts have nothing left to lose. And nothing left to protect.”

The color drained from Viktor’s face. The bravado, the arrogance, the years of training — it all evaporated in the face of absolute, crushing corporate annihilation. He wasn’t afraid of pain. He was terrified of irrelevance.

His heart rate on Gavin’s monitor spiked dramatically. His carefully constructed world was crumbling around him.

“You’re bluffing,” he whispered, but the words lacked conviction.

“Am I?” Cailin picked up a satellite phone from the table. She held it out to him. “Here. Call your grandfather. Ask him what he’s willing to sacrifice to keep his stock from flatlining. You? Or a few old secrets?”

Chapter 724:

Viktor stared at the phone as if it were a venomous snake. The perfect, elegant trap had closed around him. He was utterly, completely defeated.

The satellite phone sat on the steel table between them, a black plastic arbiter of Viktor Argent’s fate. The silence in the interrogation room stretched, thick and heavy. Viktor’s eyes were locked on the phone, his breathing shallow. The digital readout on Gavin’s monitor showed his heart rate leveling out,

replaced by the flat line of dawning, hopeless resignation. He knew Cailin was right. In the cold calculus of his family's empire, he was an expendable asset.

He finally raised his head, the arrogance gone, replaced by a hollow, defeated look. "You win," he rasped, the words tasting like poison in his mouth. "What do you want to know?"

Cailin leaned back in her chair. The hunt was over; the dissection could begin. "Everything. Start with the man who pulled the trigger. The man who operated the laser."

Viktor's jaw tightened. "His name is Jaeger. A freelance assassin. German special forces washout. He's a ghost. No records, no known location. Argent uses him for wet work when they need absolute deniability."

"You will give me a way to find him," Cailin stated. It was not a request.

"I can't," Viktor said, shaking his head. "No one can. Jaeger communicates through a series of dead drops and encrypted channels. He initiates contact, not the other way around. He's a true professional."

"Everyone has a weakness," Cailin said, her voice cold. "A vice. A pressure point. What is his?"

Viktor hesitated, then a cruel, bitter smile twisted his lips. He was going down, but he could still pull others into the fire with him. "He has a passion for rare antiquities. Specifically, pre-war German cartography. He's obsessed with finding a collection of maps that were stolen from a Berlin museum in 1945. It's the one thing that can draw him out of the shadows."

Cailin's mind instantly connected the dots. Her mother, the art historian. The stolen Nazi art. The ledgers. It was all intertwined.

Before she could press him for more, Kegan, who had been silent by the door, stepped forward. He placed a tablet on the table in front of her.

"You have an incoming priority call," Kegan said, his voice grim. "From New York."

Cailin's stomach dropped. There was only one person who would use that specific encrypted channel.

She swiped to accept the call. Hilliard's face appeared on the screen. He was not in his office. He was in the back of his Maybach, the city lights blurring behind him. His face was pale, his jaw set like granite. The bandage on his right hand was gone, revealing angry, scarred knuckles.

"Cailin," he said, his voice a low, urgent rumble. "I have a problem."

The words sent a jolt of alarm through her. Hilliard Holloway did not have "problems." He had obstacles, which he obliterated. For him to use that word meant something was catastrophically wrong.

"What is it?" she asked, her own voice tight.

Chapter 725:

"It's Preston and Jeraldine," he said, his voice laced with disgust. "After you took control of the children's shares, you became the second-largest voting power in the company. It effectively castrated them. They've been scrambling, trying to find a way to regain leverage."

He paused, running a hand over his face. "An hour ago, they filed an emergency petition in family court. They are suing for full custody of Aron, Davy, and Elia."

The air left Cailin's lungs in a rush. "On what grounds? A judge threw out their last claim."

"This time, they came prepared," Hilliard growled. "They're not claiming you're an unfit mother. They're claiming you are a dangerous one. They've hired a private intelligence firm to track you. They have photos of the Shadow Squad at the Aberdeen airport. They have satellite images of an unidentified helicopter at your estate. They are painting a picture of a woman who has voluntarily involved her children in a private war. They are arguing that the Holloway estate, with its established security, is the only safe place for the heirs."

Cailin felt a wave of nausea. They were twisting her attempts to protect her children into a weapon against her.

"The judge is a known associate of the English family," Hilliard continued, his voice turning colder. "He's corrupt, but he's careful. He hasn't granted their petition yet, but he has issued a temporary injunction. You are ordered to return to New York with the children and appear for a mandatory hearing in seventy-two hours. If you fail to appear, he will issue a warrant for your arrest on charges of international kidnapping."

It was a perfect, legal checkmate. She was being summoned back into the very city she had just escaped, forced to walk back into the heart of the Holloway empire.

"I'll handle the judge," Hilliard said, his eyes burning with a dark promise. "But you have to come back. If you defy a federal court order, you lose all credibility. You lose everything."

Cailin looked from Hilliard's grim face on the screen to Viktor Argent, the smirking assassin's paymaster strapped to a chair in her basement. She had just captured a key piece in her mother's murder, and now she was being dragged back across the world to fight a battle she thought she had already won.

Her two worlds, the ghosts of her past and the monsters of her present, were about to collide.

The return flight to New York was a long, silent descent into a storm Cailin knew was waiting. The lush, green sanctuary of the Scottish coast was replaced by the hard, glittering grid of Manhattan. She was a queen returning to a hostile court, forced to play by their rules.

They didn't go to the Tribeca penthouse. Hilliard, in a rare act of strategic foresight that wasn't purely possessive, had insisted they use a neutral location. He had booked the entire top floor of the Baccarat Hotel, a fortress of crystal and steel that his security team, now merged with Kegan's, had turned into an impenetrable command center.

Chapter 726:

The children were exhausted and confused. Elia clung to Cailin's hand, her eyes wide with apprehension at the sight of the city she associated with fear and loss. Aron and Davy were quiet, their usual confident energy replaced by a somber, protective watchfulness.

As soon as they were settled in the sprawling presidential suite, Cailin convened a war council. Kegan, Gavin, and Ashely gathered around a glass dining table.

“The hearing is in two days,” Cailin began, her voice crisp and focused. “Preston and Jeraldine’s entire case rests on the idea that I am willingly endangering the children. We need to dismantle that narrative completely.”

Gavin slid a tablet across the table. “We’ve already begun. Our legal team is filing a counter-motion, citing Preston’s history of corporate malfeasance. We’re also preparing a full psychological evaluation of the children, conducted by a top child psychologist, testifying to the trauma they experienced at the Holloway estate.”

“It’s not enough,” Cailin said, shaking her head. “A corrupt judge can bury motions and discredit expert witnesses. We can’t win this fight in the courtroom. We have to win it before we even walk through the door.”

She looked at Ashely. “I need the press. I need a story. Not a press release, a narrative. I want an exclusive interview with a journalist who is young, hungry, and has a reputation for taking down powerful men. I want to frame this not as a custody battle, but as an attack on a widowed mother by a greedy, antiquated patriarchy trying to steal her children’s inheritance.”

Ashely’s eyes lit up. “I know exactly who to call. Melissa Chen at the New York Times. She’s a Pulitzer winner. She’d kill for a story like this.”

“Good,” Cailin said. She then turned to Kegan. “While the media is focused on the family drama, I need you to handle our guest.”

She was referring to Viktor Argent, who was currently sedated and secured in a discreet, private medical facility in an undisclosed location, under the watch of the Shadow Squad.

“What are your orders?” Kegan asked.

“He’s the key to finding Jaeger,” Cailin said. “He mentioned a collection of rare German maps. I want you to use every resource The Vault has to locate that collection. I don’t care what it costs. Buy it. Steal it. I want it in our possession by the time I walk out of that courtroom.”

It was a long shot, a desperate gamble, but it was the only lead she had.

The door to the suite opened, and Hilliard walked in. He wore a simple, dark grey sweater and trousers, no suit, no tie. He looked tired, the lines around his eyes deeper than she’d ever seen them. He stopped in the entryway, a respectful distance away, as if hesitant to intrude on her space.

He was holding a small, simple cardboard box.

“I, uh, brought something for Elia,” he said, his voice quiet, almost uncertain. It was a tone she had never heard from him before. He walked over to where Elia was sitting on the sofa and knelt down in front of her.

He opened the box. Inside was a small, fluffy, golden retriever puppy, its tail wagging furiously.

Chapter 727:

Elia gasped, her eyes widening. She reached out a trembling hand and touched the puppy's soft fur. The puppy immediately began licking her fingers, and for the first time in days, a genuine, radiant smile broke across Elia's face.

Cailin watched, her heart clenching in her chest. It was a calculated move, a transparent attempt to win his daughter's affection. But it was also... gentle. It was thoughtful. It was a side of Hilliard she had never seen.

He looked up, his amber eyes meeting Cailin's across the room. There was no demand in his gaze, no possessiveness. There was only a quiet, desperate plea. Let me help. Let me be a father.

The wall she had so carefully constructed around her heart trembled. Just for a second. Before she could say anything, her personal phone, the one with the encrypted Sinclair channel, buzzed on the table.

She picked it up. It was a text from Silas.

The Argent Group knows you're in New York. My father has intelligence suggesting they are not going to wait for you to find the lullaby. They are planning to extract the information directly from the source. They're targeting your children.

The blood drained from Cailin's face. This wasn't just a custody battle anymore. It was a hunt. And the bait was sitting on the sofa, giggling as a puppy licked her chin.

The Baccarat Hotel suite, which had momentarily felt like a sanctuary, instantly transformed into a gilded cage. The threat from Silas's text was a physical presence in the room, a cold poison seeping through the crystal walls.

Hilliard saw the color drain from Cailin's face. He pushed forward in his motorized wheelchair with urgent, practiced precision, the quiet hum of the motor cutting through the silence as he crossed the room toward her — the gentle father vanishing, replaced by the ruthless protector.

"What is it?" he demanded, his voice a low growl.

Cailin showed him the phone. He read the text, and a terrifying, glacial calm settled over his features. The muscles along his jaw locked with a sickening pop.

"Gavin," Hilliard's voice was a blade of ice. He didn't raise it, but every operator in the room snapped to attention. "Full lockdown. No one in or out of this hotel without my direct authorization. I want every single access point — staff elevators, laundry chutes, ventilation shafts — secured. I want every guest on this floor and the floors directly above and below us vetted. Now."

Gavin nodded and melted out of the room, speaking quietly into his comms. The invisible security net around them tightened, becoming a web of steel.

Cailin turned to Kegan. "The children cannot leave this suite. Under any circumstances." Her eyes then fell on Ashely. "Ash, I need you to stay with them. Keep them distracted. Keep them calm."

Ashely, though visibly terrified, nodded, her expression hardening with resolve. She went to the sofa, scooping up the puppy and beginning a game of fetch with Elia, creating a small, fragile bubble of normalcy in the suffocating tension.

Chapter 728:

Hilliard looked at Cailin. For the first time, they were not adversaries, not ex-lovers, but two commanders facing a common enemy. “They won’t risk a direct assault here,” he said, his mind — still the sharpest weapon in the room, untouched by the wreckage of his body — working through the tactical possibilities. “The collateral damage would be too high. They’ll try to isolate one of the children. A snatch-and-grab. The hearing tomorrow is the most vulnerable point. We’ll be in a public building, surrounded by civilians.”

“It’s the perfect hunting ground,” Cailin agreed, her mind racing. “Preston and Jeraldine’s lawsuit... it’s not just a legal attack. It’s a tactical one. They are forcing my children into a kill box.”

A horrifying thought solidified in her mind. “Did Preston know? Could he be working with Argent?”

“I don’t know,” Hilliard admitted, the uncertainty galling him. “He’s greedy and pathetic, but I never thought he was a traitor. I’ll have my people tear his entire life apart. If he’s connected to them, I’ll find it.”

The next twenty-four hours were a blur of tense preparation. Cailin and Hilliard worked side by side at the glass table, a strange, unspoken truce settling between them. His wheelchair was positioned at the head of the table, his immobilized arms a constant, mute testament to what Argent had already cost him — but his voice never wavered, his commands never slowed. They mapped out the courthouse, planning entry and exit routes. They reviewed the backgrounds of the judge’s staff, the bailiffs, the janitors. Every person was a potential threat.

Kegan, meanwhile, worked his own dark magic. He came to Cailin late that night, his face grim. “I found the maps,” he said in a low voice. “The entire pre-war Berlin collection. It’s being sold in a private, black-market auction in Prague in three days. Jaeger will be there. It’s our only chance to get to him.”

“Prague,” Cailin breathed. The timing was impossible. She was trapped in New York.

Hilliard, who had overheard, turned his wheelchair toward them. “I’ll go,” he said without hesitation.

Cailin’s head snapped up. “No. You need to be here. You’re the only one who can control the judge.”

“Gavin can handle the tactical team here,” Hilliard countered. “My lawyers can handle the legal battle. And I—” he held her gaze, unflinching, though the effort of keeping his voice steady against the dull roar of pain in his chest was visible in the rigid set of his jaw, “—I am the only one with the resources, the contacts, and the ruthlessness to walk into that auction room, outbid a gathering of criminals, and identify Jaeger for my team to take. I won’t be pulling triggers, Cailin. I don’t need to. I just need to be the face at the table. My men will do the rest.”

It was a concession to reality — an acknowledgment of what his broken body could and could not do. But the offer itself was no less dangerous for it. Walking into a black-market auction in Prague, in a wheelchair, with both arms compromised, surrounded by armed criminals — it was an act of extraordinary, almost reckless courage.

He was offering to walk into the fire in her place. He was offering to be her weapon, her executioner, with no expectation of reward.

Chapter 729:

She stared into his amber eyes, seeing the raw, desperate need to atone, to protect, to prove he was more than the man who had hurt her. She saw, too, the faint tremor at the corner of his mouth that he was working very hard to suppress — the pain he refused to acknowledge, the body he was willing to spend.

“Fine,” she whispered, the word feeling like a surrender. “Go. But Hilliard... if you get yourself killed, I will never forgive you.”

A ghost of a smile, the first she had seen in days, touched his lips. “Understood.”

The morning of the hearing, the air outside the Manhattan Family Court was a chaotic circus. The story Ashely had leaked had exploded. Protesters held signs that read “Justice For Cailin” and “Holloway Greed Kills Families.”

Cailin stepped out of an armored SUV, flanked by Kegan and a wall of Shadow Squad operators. She wore a severe, tailored grey suit, her face a mask of cold determination. The children were not with her. On the advice of their psychologist, they had been left at the hotel, protected by another team of guards.

She walked up the courthouse steps, a queen walking into battle. As she reached the top, she saw them. Preston and Jeraldine, surrounded by their lawyers, their faces pinched with fury and humiliation at the media storm.

Cailin’s eyes met Preston’s. She expected to see anger. Instead, for a fraction of a second, she saw something else.

Fear. Pure, abject terror.

And in that instant, she knew. He wasn't just a greedy old man. He was a pawn in Argent's game. He had made a deal with the devil, and the devil had just sent the bill. The trap was not just for her children. It was for her. And it was about to spring.

The fear in Preston's eyes on those courthouse steps burned into Cailin's mind. It was not the arrogance of a man winning a custody battle. It was the raw, suffocating terror of a man holding a live grenade.

Argent was pulling his strings. The realization hit Cailin with the force of a physical blow, turning the blood in her veins to ice. This courtroom circus wasn't just a distraction — it was a designated kill box, and walking through those heavy oak doors meant stepping directly into the crosshairs.

Without missing a beat, Cailin tapped the concealed comms unit in her ear. "Kegan, abort," she ordered, her voice a whip-crack of pure authority over the encrypted channel. "The threat is inside the building. Have Hilliard's legal team file an emergency continuance immediately. Cite the volatile crowd outside and a credible, imminent threat to my life. We are shutting this hearing down before it even starts."

"Copy that, Boss. Evac protocol engaged," Kegan's voice returned instantly, the Shadow Squad operators immediately tightening their formation around her.

Cailin didn't just turn and flee; she executed a flawless tactical retreat. Her amber eyes turning hard and flat, she ignored the shouting reporters and the flashing cameras, descending the steps and leaving Preston staring after her in bewildered panic. Her high-powered lawyers would tie the judge in legal knots for weeks with security injunctions, ensuring her children remained legally untouchable in the interim.

Chapter 730:

She did not waste another second on Preston. The real war would not be fought in front of a judge in the harsh light of day. It would be fought tonight, on her territory.

With the legal crisis temporarily frozen, she could focus on the impending bloodbath. Ten hours later, the sterile, chaotic air of the courthouse was replaced by the heavy, suffocating opulence of The Vault's VIP lounge.

Deep beneath the streets of Manhattan, the underground auction house was sealed off from the early winter winds by thick velvet curtains and reinforced steel doors. Crystal chandeliers cast a warm, deceptive glow over the room.

Charla English lurked in the shadowed alcove near the entrance of the VIP lounge, her fingers wrapped so tightly around a stolen crystal flute of Dom Pérignon that her knuckles were stark white. She wore a crimson designer gown that belonged to a past life, her chin tilted up in a desperate display of arrogance. She was trying to project power, trying to mask the cold, hard reality that her family's empire was currently bleeding out in bankruptcy court and she was a despised pariah. It was a miracle she was even standing here, let alone breathing free air. A week ago, Cailin had exposed her for the murder of Amerigo Holloway, sending her straight into police custody. But a mysterious shadow backer — undoubtedly tied to the Argent syndicate — had swooped in, posting a staggering, astronomical bail and muddying the evidence just enough to temporarily spring her. She wasn't an invited guest tonight; she was a desperate fugitive who had used the last of her black-market connections to crash the event. This was her final chance to secure a powerful ally or enact her revenge.

Blair hovered a half-step behind Charla, her eyes darting around the room in sheer panic, playing the role of the coerced accomplice.

"Charla, we shouldn't be here," Blair whispered frantically, trying to shrink away from the stares of the nearby socialites. "If the board members see you — if anyone remembers the murder charges... Your

new anonymous backers might have paid the bail, but you are a walking scandal. If security checks our forged invitations, they will throw us out.”

A few feet away, three hedge fund managers exchanged a look of pure, unadulterated disgust as they recognized her. They did not say a word. They simply turned their backs, taking their bourbon glasses and stepping out of Charla’s social orbit entirely, treating her like a contagious disease.

Charla felt the sting of their dismissal like a slap to the face. Her stomach twisted into a hard knot of pure venom. The jealousy and hollow vanity inside her chest grew like a toxic weed, choking her breath.

Then the heavy brass doors of the VIP lounge were pulled open by two silent attendants. The string quartet playing in the corner seemed to miss a beat.