

Second chance 751

Chapter 751:

“Received,” Silas said after a five-second pause. His tone shifted, the laziness vanishing. “Now, for the real business. I am formally inviting you to be my date tomorrow night. The Plaza Hotel. The Mayor’s Centennial Charity Gala.”

Cailin frowned. “That’s Hilliard’s territory.”

“It is,” Silas chuckled darkly. “But I have it on good authority that there will be a spectacular public execution. You wouldn’t want to miss Charla English losing her head, would you?”

To see Charla destroyed. To use the Sinclair shield to walk right into Hilliard’s trap.

“Pick me up at seven,” Cailin said coldly, and hung up.

Miles away, on Long Island, the Holloway Estate was suffocatingly quiet.

In the dim parlor, Harper Holloway sat on the Persian rug, her eyes swollen, tears streaming down her face.

Jeraldine Holloway walked in, wearing a silk robe. She looked down at her adopted daughter with a flash of pure irritation. "What's wrong with you now, Harper?"

"Everyone ignores me!" Harper sobbed, her voice cracking. "Ever since those three bastards showed up, I'm nothing! I'm just the garbage you picked up!"

Jeraldine's face turned to stone. "Mind your place. Holloway blood is everything. You're an adopted charity case. Learn to live in the shadows."

The words hit Harper like a physical blow to the stomach. The last thread of her sanity snapped. The resentment and terror she had been holding in exploded.

"I did everything for this family!" Harper screamed, scrambling to her feet. "I even did what Charla told me to do! I did unforgivable things for her!"

Jeraldine froze. She lunged forward, her manicured fingers digging into Harper's arm like talons. "What did you just say? What did you do for Charla?"

Harper whimpered in pain. She squeezed her eyes shut, her body shaking violently. "She... she told me what to say. She put the ideas in my head."

Outside the parlor door, Julian stood perfectly still in the shadows. He held a directional microphone. He recorded every word of Harper's breakdown and sent the encrypted audio file directly to Hilliard's jet.

In the sterile cabin high above the Atlantic, Hilliard sat behind a small desk. He clicked play on the audio file.

He listened to Harper confess how Charla had manipulated her.

Snap.

The expensive fountain pen in Hilliard's hand broke in half. Black ink exploded across his knuckles and the pristine white documents on his desk.

His black eyes burned with the fires of hell. Charla hadn't just hurt Cailin. She had reached her filthy hands toward his children.

Hilliard picked up the secure satellite phone. He dialed a number with no caller ID.

"Notify all media outlets," Hilliard said, his voice the tolling of a death bell. "Tomorrow night, at the charity gala, I'm going to send Charla English straight to hell."

It was 2:00 AM New York time. Hilliard's jet had just touched down at a private airfield in Teterboro. He remained in the cabin, a command center reeking of ozone and vengeance. Deep beneath the Holloway Tower, the Sub-Level 6 extreme-security archive room was bathed in harsh, blinding LED light.

Chapter 752:

Harper sat in a bolted steel chair, wearing only a thin silk nightgown. She was shivering uncontrollably, her teeth chattering.

Across the metal table, a massive screen flickered to life, showing Hilliard's face. He was reclined in his seat, his body almost entirely still — his right arm remained locked in its heavy orthotic brace, the bandaging around his left shoulder barely visible above his collar. He moved only one thing: the index finger of his right hand, the single limb with any freedom left to it, tapping the desk in front of him with slow, deliberate control. Tap. Tap. Tap. The rhythmic sound echoed from the speakers into the soundproof room, driving spikes of panic into Harper's chest.

Julian stepped out of the shadows. He slammed a thick psychological evaluation file and a stack of printed surveillance stills onto the table. The loud bang made Harper flinch violently.

"Tell me," Hilliard commanded from the screen, his voice a flat, dead line. "Every word Charla English put into your head."

Harper looked at the photos. Her psychological defenses crumbled into dust. She began to hyperventilate, tears spilling over her cheeks.

"She... she knew I was terrified of being replaced," Harper sobbed, her voice echoing off the concrete walls. "She told me the triplets were monsters. She said they'd take everything from me."

Harper dug her nails into her own arms. "The allergies. When Elia almost went into anaphylactic shock last year. Charla told me exactly what to mix into the kitchen's special flour jars. She planned it. She wanted the little girl dead."

The muscles in Hilliard's jaw flexed so hard they looked like they might snap the bone. The veins on his forehead bulged against his skin. On screen, his expression hardened into something absolute — a man made of dark iron. His tapping finger went still. Slowly, it curled inward, his right hand closing into a fist that came to rest motionless against the desk. He did not reach for anything. He did not crush anything. He simply went utterly, terribly quiet — and that stillness, that forced restraint, was more suffocating than any act of violence could have been.

Julian immediately turned to the massive digital screen covering the back wall, his fingers flying over a connected tablet. He pulled up the classified files from the safe house arson case five years ago. He bypassed the known shell corporations and traced the ultimate origin of the dark money. Lines of code and banking records cascaded down the screen like a digital waterfall.

The system pinged. A red box highlighted a black-market syndicate account linked to the European underworld. It was a direct match. Charla English hadn't just funded the arsonist who tried to burn Cailin alive; she had sold Holloway corporate secrets to foreign enemies to pay for the hit.

Harper slumped forward on the table, weeping hysterically. "Please, Hilliard. Please forgive me. I just wanted to belong here."

Chapter 753:

Hilliard didn't even blink. On screen, he raised that closed fist from the desk — slowly, with great deliberateness — and flicked his wrist once in the air beside him. A single, quiet gesture, almost nothing. And yet the two guards in the room moved instantly.

Two massive security guards stepped forward. One clamped a hand over Harper's mouth, cutting off her screams. They dragged her out of the steel chair and hauled her toward the heavy vault door. She was going to the Holloway psychiatric facility in upstate New York. She would never see the outside world again.

The heavy door sealed shut. The archive room fell into a suffocating silence.

The massive screen now displayed the complete, undeniable mosaic of Charla English's crimes. Arson. Attempted murder. Kidnapping. Extortion. Fraud.

Every single charge was backed by irrefutable financial ledgers, audio recordings, and physical evidence. It was a legal death trap.

Julian pushed his glasses up the bridge of his nose. "Sir, if I hand this to the FBI right now, Charla English will face consecutive life sentences in a federal supermax. No possibility of parole."

On screen, Hilliard's image seemed to grow darker. He stared at Charla's smiling face in a society photo. The look in his eyes was not rage. It was something colder and far more precise — the calm of a man who had already decided everything and was simply waiting for the clock to run out.

"The FBI is too merciful," Hilliard whispered, the words coated in frost. "I want her to feel the crown on her head. I want her to believe she owns the world. And in that exact second, I will drop the floor out from under her."

His gaze moved from the photo to Julian. "Lock down the evidence chain. Not a single whisper reaches the English family before tonight."

"Understood," Julian said.

“And the surprise video?” Hilliard asked.

“The hacker team has full override control of the main visual systems at The Plaza Hotel ballroom,” Julian confirmed. “We can hijack the feed instantly.”

Miles away, in a sprawling penthouse on the Upper East Side, Charla English was spinning in front of a floor-to-ceiling mirror.

She wore a custom Vera Wang white couture gown that looked dangerously close to a wedding dress. The silk and lace trailed across the floor.

Her mother, Patricia, stood nearby, nursing a glass of champagne with the careful sips of a woman rationing her last bottle. The English family accounts were frozen. The legal fees alone had nearly hollowed them out. But tonight — Patricia had told herself this a hundred times already — tonight would change everything. “You’re going to be the queen of New York, Charla. Once he makes the grand announcement tonight, the banks will unfreeze our credit lines. The English Group will be saved.”

Charla stared at her reflection. Her eyes were wide, glowing with a sick, manic fever. She pressed her hands flat against her stomach, absolutely convinced that the seed of the Holloway empire was currently growing inside her.

Her phone buzzed on the vanity.

Chapter 754:

It was a news alert from a gossip site. A high-resolution paparazzi photo filled the screen. It showed Silas Sinclair, standing in the auction house, forcefully grabbing Cailin's hand in the chaos. But the headline below it screamed a different lie: "HILLIARD HOLLOWAY USES PROXY TO GIFT \$200M DIAMOND TO EX-WIFE!"

The smile on Charla's face shattered.

A wave of toxic, burning jealousy shot straight into her brain. She let out a high-pitched shriek, raised her arm, and hurled the crystal champagne flute at the wall. It exploded into a hundred glittering shards.

"That bitch!" Charla screamed, her face twisting into a demonic mask. "She won't die! She just won't stay dead!"

Patricia jumped back, terrified. "Charla, calm down! Tonight is your day. Cailin is nothing!"

Charla ignored her. She snatched her phone and dialed the number of a ruthless underground PR firm.

"Listen to me," Charla hissed into the receiver, her voice dripping with venom. "Tonight, the second the grand announcement is made, I want you to flood the internet with Cailin Morton's medical records. The fake ones. I want the whole world to read how she went crazy and murdered her own baby. I want her destroyed."

Charla hung up the phone. She looked back at the mirror. Her chest was heaving, but a cruel, twisted smile slowly crept back onto her face. She thought she was holding the ultimate weapon. She had no idea she was already standing on the gallows.

The first rays of morning sun pierced the Manhattan smog, casting long, sharp shadows across the mahogany floor of the Holloway Tower's top-floor executive suite.

Hilliard sat in a state-of-the-art motorized wheelchair behind his desk. His right arm remained fully encased in a heavy plaster cast, secured close to his chest by a black sling, the right sleeve of his suit jacket hanging empty at his side. A network of faint, healing burn scars was visible on the side of his neck, creeping toward his jawline. He stared down at the concrete canyons, his expression unreadable.

Gavin walked into the office. His face was a mask of grim efficiency. He carried a thick manila envelope stamped with a red "TOP SECRET" seal. He placed it squarely on Hilliard's desk.

"The corporate espionage team finished digging into the English Group," Gavin reported, his voice crisp. "We found the kill shot."

Hilliard turned his attention from the window. He picked up the envelope with his left hand and drew out the documents single-handedly.

"The English Group's flagship high-rise project in Brooklyn," Gavin explained. "They used substandard steel to cut costs. Last week, a lower support column buckled. The partial collapse killed seventeen undocumented immigrant workers."

Hilliard stared at the gruesome photographs of crushed hardhats and twisted metal.

“Richard English paid off the local union bosses and used a cartel-linked cleanup crew to bury the bodies in the foundation,” Gavin continued. “To cover the massive financial hemorrhage, they forged billions in revenue. It’s a textbook case of securities fraud, tax fraud, and involuntary manslaughter.”

Hilliard didn’t feel a shred of pity for the English family. He felt a deep, visceral disgust. They were parasites.

Chapter 755:

“If we send this to the federal prosecutor anonymously,” Gavin said, “the English Group stock will hit zero in ten minutes. Richard will die in federal prison.”

Hilliard let out a short, dark laugh. He tossed the bloody photos back onto the desk with his left hand.

“No,” Hilliard commanded, his voice absolute zero. “Break this file down into one hundred encrypted blind boxes.”

Gavin nodded, pulling out his tablet.

“Tonight, when the gala hits its peak,” Hilliard ordered, “I want those blind boxes sent simultaneously to the Wall Street Journal, the New York Times, and the top five short-selling hedge funds in the city.”

Hilliard braced his left hand against the desk and leaned forward. “I want Richard English drinking my champagne when he watches his legacy burn to the ground on live television.”

“It will be done,” Gavin said. He swiped his screen and held the tablet out toward Hilliard. “The final guest list and the security schematics for The Plaza.”

Hilliard took the tablet with his left hand and scanned the list. Every major political figure, banking CEO, and socialite in New York was confirmed. It was a perfect, inescapable arena.

He navigated to the schematic of the grand ballroom, scrolling with his thumb.

“Cut the electronic locks on all fire exits and service doors,” Hilliard ordered. “Weld them shut if you have to. The only way in or out is the main front doors.”

“Sir, that violates a dozen fire codes,” Gavin noted.

“I don’t care,” Hilliard snapped. “Charla walked out of that courthouse a free woman on someone else’s money. She thinks tonight is a coronation. When the show starts, no one leaves. Especially Charla. Her family’s empire is already rubble. Tonight, she loses the last thing she has left — the illusion that she’s won. She’s going to stand under the spotlight and play her part until the bitter end.”

Gavin quickly adjusted the security protocols on the tablet, turning the luxurious ballroom into a gilded cage.

Hilliard dismissed Gavin with a wave of his hand. He sat back in his leather chair. His eyes drifted to the corner of his desk. A small silver frame held a picture of Elia, taken from behind as she ran through a garden.

Hilliard reached out with his left hand and touched the glass. The violent, ruthless CEO vanished, replaced by a father drowning in an ocean of guilt.

“I will make them pay, Elia,” Hilliard whispered to the empty room. “With their blood.”

Down in Times Square, the English family’s PR machine was running at maximum capacity.

A massive, six-story LED billboard flashed a heavily retouched photo of Charla in her white couture dress. The text beneath it read in massive gold letters: THE FUTURE MRS. HOLLOWAY.

But it was a hollow performance. Anyone who knew where to look could see the cracks — the English Group’s accounts frozen, its assets under investigation, its patriarch one leaked document away from handcuffs. The billboard was not a triumph. It was a last, desperate act of theater.

Chapter 756:

Outside The Plaza Hotel, fleets of delivery trucks were unloading thousands of white roses. The red carpet was being rolled out under heavy police protection. Tourists snapped photos, marveling at the obscene display of wealth.

But inside the secure penthouse safe house, Cailin sat in front of a black, military-grade laptop. An alert pinged softly. A one-time encrypted data packet had arrived through a secure channel she and Hilliard’s team had used once before.

She clicked it open. A short, five-second video loop played. It was a perfect digital rendering of the Times Square billboard. But in the video, the pristine image of Charla distorted into a mess of digital static. The name “Hilliard Holloway” fractured, and the letters rearranged themselves.

The word “PRESTON” flashed in bright, violent red.

Then the loop ended, and the file permanently deleted itself from her hard drive.

A cold, knowing smile touched her lips. This was a warning. A private signal. Hilliard wasn’t just going to humiliate Charla. He was going to completely annihilate her reality. And Charla, bailed out by a ghost and propped up by a family name that was already worthless, would never see it coming. The countdown had started.

Cailin closed the laptop. She stood up and walked into her expansive walk-in closet.

Hanging in the center of the room was a garment bag delivered by Silas Sinclair. Cailin unzipped it. Inside was a custom black velvet pantsuit. It was sharp, aggressive, and completely unforgiving. It was armor.

Tonight, she was going to walk right into Hilliard’s guillotine, and she was going to watch the blade fall.

Five hours before the century charity gala.

The Presidential Suite at The Plaza Hotel looked like a war zone of tulle, hairspray, and panic. A dozen elite stylists buzzed around Charla English like terrified worker bees.

Charla sat in the center of the room, staring at a tablet. The screen displayed a trending article about Cailin wearing the two-hundred-million-dollar blue diamond.

Charla's eyes were bloodshot. Her chest heaved. With a sudden, violent scream, she swept her arm across the vanity, sending thousands of dollars' worth of cosmetics crashing to the hardwood floor.

Anna, a terrified junior assistant who had just been hired, flinched and dropped to her knees, frantically picking up shattered powder compacts. Her hands were shaking. Ever since Charla's world had collapsed — the arrest, the bail, the bankruptcy that had swallowed the English family name whole — Anna had watched her employer's grip on reality loosen day by day. She stayed not out of loyalty, but out of fear of what Charla might do if left unwatched.

Charla lunged forward, her fingers twisting into Anna's hair. She yanked Anna's head back.

"The PR firm," Charla hissed, her breath smelling of mint and hysteria. "Are they ready? When does the bitch's medical file go live?"

Anna winced, tears springing to her eyes. "Yes! The bot nets are primed. The second the MC announces the honored guest, the fake abortion records will hit every major news outlet simultaneously."

Chapter 757:

Charla released Anna's hair with a disgusted shove. She turned back to the mirror, smoothing the bodice of her Vera Wang gown. For a moment, her hands stilled. The reflection staring back at her was not the woman she remembered — the woman who had stood beside Hilliard at charity galas, who had worn his ring, who had believed herself untouchable. That woman was gone. What remained was someone out on bail, wearing borrowed diamonds, clinging to a revenge scheme with the desperation of a drowning person.

"He humiliated me in front of everyone," Charla whispered to her reflection, her voice cracking at the edges. "Canceled the engagement. Called me a liability to my face. In public." Her jaw tightened. "He will regret every single word."

Her phone chimed.

Charla picked it up. It was an anonymous text message. No text, just a blurry screenshot. It was the Times Square billboard glitch. The name "Preston" glowing in red static.

Charla's heart stopped. The blood drained from her face, leaving her looking like a corpse.

Preston? Hilliard's exiled, disgraced cousin?

And then the cold realization twisted through her: Hilliard was already retaliating. This wasn't Cailin's doing. This was him — methodical, surgical, and utterly without mercy. The man she had once planned to marry was now dismantling her, piece by piece, and enjoying every second of it.

She frantically dialed Hilliard's private number. It went straight to a cold, automated voicemail.

Charla stared at the phone. He had blocked her personal line weeks ago — she was calling a number he had deliberately left open, just so she could hear the voicemail. Just so she would know he was choosing not to answer. It was the cruelest kind of message.

She threw the phone onto the sofa and forced herself to take a deep breath. But the old lie — it's Cailin, it's a mind game, I won't let her win — wouldn't come this time. She knew exactly who was doing this. And she knew he had the resources, the connections, and the motive to bury her completely.

"Then I have nothing left to lose," she said quietly to her reflection. Her eyes steadied. "Nothing at all."

Deep in the subterranean security hub of The Plaza, Gavin sat in front of a wall of monitors.

A hacker in a black hoodie leaned over his keyboard. "Sir, the anonymous text was delivered. Target's smartwatch shows a massive spike in heart rate. But she's not running."

Gavin smiled, a cold, predatory curve of his lips. The psychological pressure was working — but Charla English was more cornered than they had anticipated. A cornered animal was always the most dangerous variable.

"Hit the lobby signs," Gavin ordered.

The hacker typed a rapid string of commands.

Up in the hotel's opulent marble lobby, a massive digital welcome board displayed the names of the evening's honored guests. Every ten minutes, for exactly zero point one seconds, the screen flickered. The name "Hilliard" vanished, replaced by "Preston."

A group of Wall Street executives standing near the concierge desk stopped talking. One of them rubbed his eyes, looking at the sign in confusion. The seed of doubt was planted.

Across town, in the secure safe house, Cailin was kneeling on the floor.

She wore the black velvet pantsuit. It fit her like a second skin, radiating lethal elegance. She was adjusting the collar of Elia's small, dark blue dress.

Chapter 758:

Aron and Davy sat on the leather sofa, their laptops glowing. Lines of code reflected in their eyes. They had already sliced into The Plaza's exterior traffic cameras.

"Listen to me," Cailin said, her voice firm but gentle. She looked at all three of her children. "You do not leave this apartment tonight. The doors are locked from the inside. Ashely is right here with you."

Elia nodded. She threw her little arms around Cailin's neck and kissed her cheek. "Mommy, you go beat up the bad lady."

Cailin smiled, but her amber eyes were cold as ice. “I will.”

The intercom buzzed. Silas Sinclair’s head of security announced their arrival.

Cailin stood up. She walked to the entryway table. Laid out beside her clutch was a single black leather glove — just the one, for her left hand. She pulled it on slowly, smoothing the soft leather over her fingers until the massive blue diamond beneath was completely concealed.

Her right hand she left bare. The bandaging had been reduced to a slim, flesh-toned medical wrap — the heavy gauze of the previous night replaced after the surgeon’s early-morning visit. It still ached with a deep, bone-level persistence. She had been told, in no uncertain terms, not to use it. She intended to keep that promise for as long as the evening allowed.

She looked at her reflection. One gloved hand. One wrapped hand. Neither particularly elegant. Both entirely deliberate.

She stepped out of the safe house.

Silas Sinclair was leaning against a silver Aston Martin DBS in the private garage. He wore a deep burgundy velvet tuxedo jacket, looking like a devil who had just stepped out of a casino. He was flipping a silver Zippo lighter open and closed.

He looked up, his eyes sweeping over Cailin’s sharp silhouette. His gaze paused — briefly, almost imperceptibly — on her bandaged right hand. He said nothing about it.

He let out a low whistle instead. “You look like the Grim Reaper in couture.”

Cailin walked past him and opened the passenger door herself — with her left hand, the gloved one, the movement precise and practiced. “Drive, Silas. I don’t have time for your games.”

Silas chuckled, sliding into the driver’s seat. The V12 engine roared to life, echoing violently in the concrete garage.

As the Aston Martin shot out into the Manhattan night, two unmarked black Range Rovers pulled out of the shadows, falling into a tight escort formation behind them. The Sinclair vanguard was on the move.

The Plaza Hotel was waiting. The trap was set.

The exterior of The Plaza Hotel was a chaotic sea of flashing lights and shouting voices. The red carpet stretched down the steps, flanked by hundreds of photographers and live-stream cameras.

Inside the grand foyer, the air was thick with the scent of expensive perfume and the sound of a string quartet playing Vivaldi. Waiters in white coats carried silver trays of Dom Pérignon.

But beneath the veneer of extreme wealth, a strange, nervous energy hummed through the crowd.

Near a towering ice sculpture, three hedge fund managers stood in a tight circle, their voices hushed.

Chapter 759:

“Did you see the welcome board?” one of them whispered, glancing nervously toward the entrance. “It flashed again. Preston Holloway.”

“It has to be a glitch,” another replied, though he looked pale. “Hilliard would never let his disgraced cousin near this event. Unless... unless there’s been a boardroom coup we don’t know about.”

The uncertainty was a virus, infecting the elite guests. They smelled blood in the water, but they didn’t know whose blood it was.

Suddenly, a massive roar erupted from the street outside. The paparazzi flashes went into overdrive, strobing so fast it looked like a continuous bolt of lightning.

A silver Aston Martin pulled up to the curb.

A valet rushed forward and opened the passenger door.

A long leg encased in black velvet stepped out. Cailin Morton stood up, stepping onto the red carpet.

The noise from the press corps was deafening. Cailin, the notorious ex-wife, the woman exposed as the underground auctioneer “Cali,” had just crashed the gala of the decade.

Reporters shoved against the barricades, thrusting microphones forward.

“Miss Morton! Are you here to stop the announcement?”

“Is it true you’re facing federal charges?”

“Are you crashing the party?”

Cailin ignored them completely. Her face was a mask of absolute, freezing indifference. She stood tall, her black silk gloves resting casually at her sides. She looked at the flashing cameras with the disdain of a queen looking at peasants.

Silas Sinclair stepped out of the driver’s side. He tossed the keys to the valet and walked around the hood of the car.

He stepped right up to Cailin and smoothly wrapped his arm around her narrow waist.

The burgundy velvet of his jacket clashed violently with her black suit. The visual impact was stunning.

The reporters gasped. The shouting died down to a confused murmur. Silas Sinclair, the elusive heir to a global dynasty, was acting as Cailin Morton's shield.

"Watch your tone, gentlemen," Silas said to the press. He flashed a brilliant, predatory smile, but his eyes were dead cold. "Cailin is my VIP guest tonight. Anyone who disrespects her disrespects the Sinclair family."

The threat was implicit and absolute. The reporters physically took a step back. The Sinclair name carried enough financial weight to crush any media outlet in the city.

Silas guided Cailin up the carpeted steps, away from the cameras.

As they moved out of earshot, Silas leaned his head down, his lips brushing near Cailin's ear.

"How was that, cousin?" Silas murmured, his tone dripping with lazy arrogance. "Am I a good enough shield? Or do you want to make Hilliard really jealous and pretend you're sleeping with me?"

Cailin didn't change her facial expression. She kept her eyes fixed on the hotel doors.

With surgical precision, she drove her elbow backward, burying the sharp point of her bone directly into Silas's ribs.

Silas let out a sharp, breathless grunt. He instantly dropped his arm from her waist and rubbed his side.

“Keep your hands to yourself, Silas,” Cailin said, her voice a low, icy whisper. “We’re using each other. Don’t confuse the arrangement.”

Chapter 760:

Silas lost the smirk. His eyes hardened. “Fair enough. But remember, Cailin — the DNA results are finalized tonight. After this party, you can’t run from who you are.”

Cailin felt a cold knot tighten in her stomach, but she didn’t let it show. “Let’s survive the party first.”

They reached the massive, gilded doors of the grand ballroom. Two ushers in white gloves grabbed the brass handles and pulled the doors open.

The string quartet was playing. Hundreds of guests were laughing and drinking.

The moment Cailin stepped over the threshold, the music seemed to fade. Heads turned. Conversations stopped mid-sentence.

A wave of absolute, stunned silence washed over the room.

Cailin lifted her chin. She didn't shrink under the weight of five hundred stares. She walked into the Holloway family's stronghold like she owned the building, ready to watch it burn.

The silence in the grand ballroom was suffocating. Five hundred pairs of eyes tracked Cailin and Silas as they walked across the plush carpet.

At the main VIP table near the stage, Jeraldine Holloway's face turned the color of spoiled milk. Seeing her former daughter-in-law — the woman she blamed for her family's fractures — strutting into the room was an unforgivable insult.

Across the ballroom, Robert Vance, a rival financial titan whose shipping empire had long competed with the Holloway Group, slammed his champagne glass onto the table. His face was purple with rage. This was his daughter's night of triumph, and he would not allow it to be stolen.

Jeraldine and Robert exchanged a furious look. They stood up simultaneously and marched toward the entrance, flanked by four massive private security guards.

The crowd parted for them, eager to watch the bloodbath.

Jeraldine stopped three feet from Cailin. She looked Cailin up and down with exaggerated disgust.

"Miss Morton," Jeraldine said, her aristocratic voice dripping with venom. "It seems hotel security has failed. We don't allow desperate, discarded women to wander in off the street."

Robert stepped forward, his thick finger jabbing toward the doors. "You have thirty seconds to walk out on your own, Miss Morton. After that, my men stop being polite."

Cailin didn't flinch. She looked at Jeraldine, her amber eyes completely flat.

"Mrs. Holloway," Cailin said, her voice crystal clear and freezing cold, "if I were you, I'd spend less time acting like a bouncer and more time watching the screens. You might miss the main event."

Jeraldine frowned, glancing instinctively at the massive blank screens above the stage. She thought Cailin was just bluffing.

Robert lost his patience. He snapped his fingers at the guards. "Remove her."

Two guards stepped forward, reaching for Cailin's arms.

Silas Sinclair moved. He didn't rush. He simply took one step forward, placing his tall, broad frame directly between the guards and Cailin.

He looked at Robert as if the man were a cockroach.

"Mr. Vance," Silas said, his voice quiet but carrying the weight of a falling anvil. "Before your men touch my date, you might want to call your board. Ask them who holds the controlling interest in your Pacific freight contracts."

