

Second chance 401

Chapter 401:

Hilliard looked at his daughter, then down at Cailin. A fragile, desperate smile touched his lips. He thought the nightmare had ended. He thought his violent rescue had bought him redemption.

Cailin lay in his arms and looked at his tear-streaked face.

Slowly, the corners of her mouth moved. It wasn't a smile of relief. It was a cold, sickening grimace of absolute disgust.

She placed her bloody hands flat against Hilliard's chest. Her arms trembled violently from the lacerations tearing across her muscles, but with a sudden, desperate surge of pure and unadulterated hatred, she drove her palms against him. It wasn't a powerful shove — but the sheer, venomous rejection in the gesture caught him completely off guard, forcing him backward.

Hilliard fell onto the concrete floor. He stared up at her, eyes wide with confusion. "Cailin?"

Cailin bit down on her lip until she tasted fresh copper, fighting the blinding, suffocating pain radiating from her fractured ribs and her shredded back. Her vision swam with black spots, but the image of Hilliard's face burned them away. She gripped the cold iron frame of the torture chair, knuckles white, and forced herself to stand. Her legs shook violently. She swayed, her bare feet leaving trembling, bloody footprints on the concrete — and she fiercely batted away the hands of the tactical operators who rushed to assist her.

Hilliard scrambled to his feet. "Cailin, don't. Don't dirty your hands. I will have him taken to a black site. I will make him suffer for what he did to you."

Cailin didn't look at him.

She reached down and pulled the combat dagger from the killer's thigh holster. She knelt beside the bleeding man, grabbed his hair, and pressed the blade hard against his throat.

"Look at him," Cailin ordered, her voice echoing like ice cracking in a silent room. She pointed the tip of the dagger toward Hilliard. "Repeat exactly what you told me before the lights went out."

The killer looked at Hilliard's confused, panicked face. Despite the agonizing pain in his shattered knees, a cruel, bloody smile spread across his lips. He knew he was a dead man — but he could still take Hilliard's soul to hell with him.

"Mr. Holloway," the killer coughed, spitting blood onto the floor. "Your wife already knows. She knows you weren't forced at the pier. She knows you looked at the guns — and you actively chose to let go of your daughter's hand to save the adopted boy."

The words hung in the dead, silent air of the concrete room.

Hilliard's face turned the color of ash. The blood drained completely from his head, leaving him dizzy and nauseous. His eyes widened in absolute, paralyzing terror.

He looked at Cailin. The lie he had desperately tried to bury — the horrific truth he believed no one would ever know — had been dragged into blinding light.

“Cailin,” Hilliard stammered, his voice trembling. He took a step toward her, hands raised in a pathetic gesture of surrender. “Cailin, please. You have to understand —”

The sound of the slap was deafening. It cracked off the concrete walls like a gunshot.

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Cailin had swung her right hand, her arm visibly trembling from the excruciating pain of her torn muscles, but the strike carried the full weight of her shattered soul. Her palm connected perfectly with Hilliard’s cheekbone. The blow snapped his head violently to the side. The skin split, and a thick stream of dark blood ran immediately from the corner of his mouth.

The entire room froze. The two operators closest to Hilliard took a half-step forward, bodies tensing — but a nearly imperceptible shake of his head stopped them cold. His eyes, filled with a terrifyingly vacant despair, never left Cailin’s face. He was accepting his sentence.

Hilliard didn’t raise a hand to touch his bleeding face. He stood there, completely destroyed, looking at the woman he loved.

Cailin stood inches from him, her hand stinging and coated in his blood.

“Hilliard Holloway,” she said. Her voice was no longer angry. It was a dead, hollow void — the sound of a judge delivering a final, irreversible execution order.

“From the exact second you let go of my daughter’s hand,” Cailin whispered, her eyes locking onto his, “you died to me.”

Hilliard let out a broken, pathetic sob and fell to his knees in front of her.

“I won’t kill you,” Cailin continued, looking down at him as if at something already rotting. “I am going to let you live. Because I want you to be awake when I systematically tear down the Holloway empire. I want you to watch as I take everything you sacrificed my daughter for — and burn it to ash.”

She turned her back on him.

She walked to the tactical operator holding Elia and gently took her unconscious daughter into her arms, ignoring the searing pain that tore through her shoulder. The weight of the child was an agony that pulled at every wound — but it was also the only thing holding her upright. The only reason to keep breathing.

She walked out through the shattered blast door and stepped into the cold rain, leaving Hilliard Holloway kneeling alone in the dark, bloody ruins of his own making.

“Jeraldine — she was going to jump off the balcony. I had no choice. I panicked. I —”

Cailin stepped out through the shattered blast door. The freezing, torrential rain instantly soaked through her shredded tactical vest, chilling her bleeding skin to the bone.

She held Elia's unconscious body tightly against her chest. The little girl felt terrifyingly light, her small head resting limply against Cailin's collarbone.

Behind her, Hilliard stumbled out of the darkness, moving like a corpse whose strings had been cut — eyes vacant, fixed on Cailin's back as he followed her into the storm.

Around them, the elite tactical operators were rapidly establishing a secure perimeter in the muddy courtyard. One of them, a broad-shouldered man named Rourke who had been on Hilliard's personal detail for three years, moved toward Cailin.

"Ma'am, let me take the girl," Rourke said, his voice calm and professional. "The extraction vehicle is ready. We'll have you both out of here in thirty seconds."

Cailin's entire body was screaming in protest, but her arms were failing. She reluctantly allowed Rourke to take Elia's small, limp body from her.

Then the world dissolved into chaos.

Chapter 403:

Rourke didn't turn toward the extraction SUV. He spun around, drew his sidearm, and fired two shots with brutal, devastating precision. Two of Hilliard's operators collapsed into the mud.

Rourke was the mole.

A deafening, high-pitched screech erupted from a concealed LRAD sound cannon mounted on one of the mercenaries' abandoned trucks — activated by a remote detonator in Rourke's hand. It felt like ice picks driven directly into Cailin's eardrums. Simultaneously, a bank of military-grade strobe lights on the vehicle's roof flared to life. The blinding, pulsating white light instantly destroyed the night vision of every surviving operator in the courtyard.

In the chaos, Rourke sprinted away from them, clutching Elia to his chest.

"No!" Cailin shrieked. It was a sound of pure, biological terror.

She ignored the agony in her back and lunged forward, her bloody fingers digging into the mud — but her legs gave out and she collapsed.

The violent betrayal shattered the paralyzing fog in Hilliard's brain. He saw his own man — a man he had trusted with his life — sprinting away with Elia.

He drew the SIG Sauer from his thigh holster with his left hand, let out a roaring, guttural scream, and charged blindly into the wall of rain and disorienting light.

But Rourke was already moving. He sprinted toward the rear of the factory and leaped onto a waiting all-terrain vehicle. The ATV's engine roared, its heavy tires tearing up the mud as it launched toward the dark coastline.

Hilliard didn't stop. He threw himself into the nearest tactical Jeep and seized the uninjured operator in the passenger seat by his vest. "Drive!" he roared. "Follow him! Now!"

The operator slammed the accelerator to the floor. The Jeep fishtailed wildly before rocketing after the ATV.

Cailin shoved away the medic trying to hold her down. She spat a mouthful of blood onto the ground, dragged herself into another idling SUV, and slammed it into gear — her bloodshot eyes fixed on the taillights disappearing ahead.

The chase tore across desolate, rocky terrain.

The ATV skidded to a violent halt at the very edge of a massive coastal cliff. Fifty feet below, the black, raging waters of the Atlantic crashed against jagged rocks.

Hilliard's Jeep slammed on the brakes, sliding sideways and stopping ten yards away. The operator kicked his door open. Hilliard was right behind him, his left hand raising the pistol — but his hand was shaking so violently he couldn't hold the sights aligned.

Rourke stepped off the ATV and stood inches from the sheer drop. He held the unconscious Elia tightly against his chest, using her small body as a human shield.

Hilliard dropped the gun. It clattered against the rocks.

He fell hard onto his knees in the freezing mud.

“Name your price,” Hilliard begged, his voice cracking, tears mixing freely with the rain on his face. “Ten billion. Fifty billion. I will give you the entire Holloway empire. Just put her down.”

Rourke looked at the kneeling billionaire and let out a cold, hollow laugh. He reached up to his tactical headset. “Target secured at the edge. Confirming final instruction.”

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He paused, listening to the voice in his ear.

“Understood,” Rourke said. “Cleaning the target.”

Cailin’s SUV slammed into the back of Hilliard’s Jeep. She threw her door open and scrambled over the slippery rocks.

“Elia!” she screamed, reaching her bloody hands out toward the dark sky.

Rourke looked at the two broken parents. There was no hesitation in his eyes whatsoever.

He leaned backward.

Gravity took over.

Cailin and Hilliard unleashed a simultaneous, agonizing scream that tore their vocal cords raw.

They watched as the traitor and the tiny girl plummeted into the pitch-black void — swallowed instantly by the roaring, freezing waves fifty feet below. There was no splash. There was nothing but the violent, churning black water.

Hilliard didn't even draw a breath. He sprinted past Cailin and launched his massive body off the cliff, diving straight into the deadly ocean.

Cailin collapsed at the edge. She slammed her hands into the mud, fingers digging so frantically into the earth that her fingernails cracked and tore away, leaving bloody smears across the rocks.

Minutes later, the deafening chop of helicopter blades cut through the storm.

Rather than risk a landing on the treacherous cliff edge, Kegan's black chopper hovered aggressively ten feet above the ground. The powerful downdraft whipped the rain into a frenzy. Kegan didn't wait for the winch — he grabbed the thick tactical fast-rope and slid down, his boots hitting the mud with a heavy thud. He sprinted toward the cliff and seized Cailin around the waist just as she tried to throw herself over the edge. He pinned her thrashing, bleeding body to the muddy ground.

Down in the water, the tactical operators had thrown a rescue line. They hauled a gasping, half-drowned Hilliard up the side of the cliff. He collapsed onto the rocks, vomiting seawater, his hands empty.

Kegan didn't look at Hilliard at first. He dropped to his knees in the freezing mud beside Cailin, hands trembling as he checked her pulse — his eyes wide with frantic, desperate terror. Seeing her completely broken and bleeding shattered his usually impenetrable composure with a devastating grief.

Only then did he slowly turn his gaze toward the ocean, and finally toward the gasping billionaire. The grief transmuted instantly into towering, volcanic rage.

"Look what you've done!" Kegan roared over the deafening wind, his voice cracking. "My air support was sent on a wild goose chase by a ghost signal from your network! We were delayed by fifteen critical minutes! Your own man did this! Look what your family has cost her! You disgust me!"

The words struck Hilliard's brain like a lightning bolt. Your own man. His eyes widened in absolute, paralyzing horror as the full magnitude of his failure assembled itself in his mind — he had played God with lives, calculating risks like a boardroom transaction, and the result was the ultimate, irreversible tragedy.

Chapter 405:

Cailin couldn't hear any of it. The sheer, apocalyptic trauma of watching her child fall into the abyss caused her blood pressure to spike violently.

She gasped for air. A thick stream of dark red blood erupted from her mouth and splashed across Kegan's jacket.

Her eyes rolled back. Her body went completely limp in the mud.

The harsh, blinding glare of surgical lights pierced through Cailin's eyelids.

The steady, monotonous beep of a heart monitor was the first sound that registered in her brain — a sterile, mechanical rhythm that clashed violently with the roaring ocean still echoing in her ears.

She forced her eyes open. The white ceiling tiles of the Manhattan private ICU swam into focus. She felt the sharp pull of IV lines taped to the backs of her hands and the heavy, restrictive bandages wrapped tightly around her fractured ribs.

Then the overpowering stench of clinical bleach hit her nostrils.

It triggered an immediate, catastrophic somatic flashback. The bleach smelled like cold rain. The white sheets felt like the freezing mud at the edge of the cliff.

"Elia!"

The scream ripped from Cailin's throat, raw and bloody.

She shot upright from the mattress. The sudden, violent movement tore at her broken ribs, sending a blinding flash of agony through her torso — but her brain ignored it completely. She ripped her right

arm forward. The IV needle was torn from her vein. Drops of dark red blood splattered across the pristine white sheets.

The heart monitor's alarm began to shriek. A duty nurse rushed into the room, eyes wide with panic, reaching out to press Cailin's shoulders back down against the pillows.

Cailin possessed the terrifying, hysterical strength of a mother who had lost her child. She shoved the nurse backward with her bloody hand.

She swung her bare feet over the edge of the bed. They hit the freezing linoleum floor. She stumbled toward the hallway, her hospital gown flapping open.

The attending physician and two male orderlies intercepted her just outside the door, forming a human wall and seizing her arms.

Cailin's eyes were dilated and completely wild. She grabbed the doctor by the front of his white coat, her broken fingernails digging into the fabric.

"Where is my daughter?" she demanded, her voice a raw, raspy hiss. "Did the Coast Guard find her? Tell me!"

The doctor's face softened with a terrible, heavy pity. He couldn't meet her eyes.

“Ms. Morton,” he said quietly, “the Coast Guard expanded the search grid to fifty nautical miles. But they haven’t found a body. There are no signs of life.”

No signs of life.

Those four words struck the fragile glass of Cailin’s sanity like a sledgehammer.

Her mind simply refused to process the reality. She plunged instantly into a severe, acute post-traumatic psychotic break.

She looked down at the polished marble floor of the hospital corridor. The grey veins in the stone began to shift and churn, transforming into deep black water. She could hear the waves crashing. She could hear Elia crying at the bottom of the sea, calling for her mommy.

Cailin dropped to her knees.

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She slammed her hands against the hard marble and began clawing frantically at the floor, her already broken fingernails scraping the stone, leaving faint streaks of blood.

“I’m coming, baby!” Cailin sobbed, digging at the solid ground, trying to pull her daughter out of the hallucination. “Mommy’s got you!”

One of the orderlies reached down to lift her. Cailin spun around like a rabid lioness and sank her teeth viciously into the man's forearm. In her broken mind, anyone trying to stop her was the mercenary coming to take Elia away.

The orderly cried out in pain and wrenched his arm back.

Cailin's agonizing, guttural wails echoed down the sterile hallway — a sound of such pure, unfiltered maternal agony that two young nurses near the desk covered their mouths, tears streaming down their faces.

The doctor checked the portable monitor. Cailin's heart rate was spiking past 180 beats per minute. Her body was going into severe shock. She was going to trigger a cardiac arrest.

"Get five milligrams of Haldol and Ativan, stat!" he barked. "We need to sedate her now!"

The two orderlies grabbed Cailin, lifted her thrashing body off the floor, and slammed her back onto the hospital bed. They quickly secured heavy medical restraints around her wrists and ankles, locking her to the metal frame.

Cailin stared up at the ceiling. The fight drained suddenly from her muscles. Tears rolled down her temples and soaked into her hair.

"It's my fault," she whispered to the empty air. "I didn't protect her."

The nurse approached with a syringe. The cold needle pierced the vein in Cailin's arm.

Her body went rigid for a fraction of a second.

The heavy sedatives flooded her bloodstream. The frantic, burning energy in her limbs turned to cold lead. Her eyelids grew impossibly heavy. The white walls began to warp and fade to grey.

But in the final microsecond before the darkness took her completely, the image of Elia falling was replaced.

She saw Hilliard kneeling in the mud, offering his money. She saw Charla's face, smiling.

A terrifying, razor-sharp clarity crystallized in the very center of Cailin's dilating pupils. It was the birth of an absolute, merciless vengeance.

Then her eyes closed. The heart monitor slowed to a steady, rhythmic beep. The room fell dead silent.

The doctor wiped a bead of sweat from his forehead, picked up her chart, and scribbled: Severe acute stress reaction. Strict suicide watch.

Outside the room, a pair of furious eyes watched Cailin through the slats of the window blinds.

Ashely Trevino stood in the hallway, fists clenched so tightly her knuckles had gone white. She looked at her best friend — broken, bandaged, and chemically subdued — strapped to the bed.

Ashely turned away from the window and walked toward the elevator. She couldn't fix Cailin's heart. But she could sure as hell start making the people responsible bleed.

Ashely stepped off the elevator on the top floor of the hospital. Her high heels clicked against the polished floor with the rhythmic, terrifying cadence of a ticking time bomb.

She marched directly toward the VIP waiting lounge.

Chapter 407:

Inside the glass-walled room, Hilliard sat slumped on a leather sofa, his clothes still damp from the ocean. He stared at the floor, looking like a hollowed-out shell of a human being. His mother, Jeraldine Holloway, stood over him, dabbing at his forehead with a warm towel. To the side, Annie — Jeraldine's sycophantic personal assistant — hovered nervously with a steaming cup of expensive coffee.

The sight of this family maintaining their sickening, wealthy facade while Cailin lay strapped to a bed in a chemical stupor made the blood roar in Ashely's ears.

She stormed into the lounge.

Before anyone could react, she snatched the porcelain cup right out of Annie's hands and hurled it at the floor between Hilliard's boots. The cup shattered with a deafening crash. Hot coffee and sharp ceramic shards exploded across the expensive rug.

Jeraldine shrieked and jumped backward. Annie gasped, covering her mouth and shrinking into the corner.

"You bloodsucking parasites!" Ashely screamed, pointing a trembling finger directly at Hilliard's face. "How dare you sit here drinking coffee?!"

Two hospital security guards rushed toward the lounge doors.

Hilliard slowly raised his left hand. He didn't look up, but the subtle, authoritative gesture stopped the guards dead in their tracks.

He lifted his head. His eyes were completely bloodshot, the skin around them bruised and sunken. His voice sounded like it was scraping across broken glass.

"Ashely," Hilliard rasped. "How is Cailin?"

"Don't you ever say her name with your filthy mouth!" Ashely roared, tears of pure rage spilling down her cheeks. "She is strapped to a bed, pumped full of tranquilizers because her mind is breaking! And her daughter is presumed dead at the bottom of the ocean!"

Jeraldine stepped in front of her son, spine stiffening with the arrogant posture of a billionaire matriarch. “Watch your tone, Ms. Trevino,” she snapped coldly. “This was a tragic accident. Hilliard is a victim here too.”

The word “accident” made Ashely laugh. It was a harsh, psychotic sound.

She stepped directly into Jeraldine’s personal space. “An accident? You traded that little girl’s life to get your precious heir back. That’s not an accident. That’s murder.”

Annie peeked out from behind Jeraldine’s shoulder and put on her most pathetic, trembling voice. “Ms. Trevino, please calm down. Grandmother has already prepared compensation for the loss —”

Smack.

The sound of the slap cracked sharply against the glass walls of the lounge.

Ashely hadn’t hesitated for a fraction of a second. She struck Annie across the face with such vicious force that the assistant stumbled backward and collapsed onto the sofa. A bright red handprint bloomed instantly across Annie’s pale cheek.

“You don’t get to speak, you fake, manipulative little brat!” Ashely spat, standing over the crying girl.

Jeraldine turned purple with fury. She called Ashely a classless savage. Her hands shaking with anger, she reached into her Birkin bag and pulled out a thick legal document, slamming the folder onto the glass coffee table.

“This is a fifty-million-dollar irrevocable trust fund,” Jeraldine declared, her voice dripping with condescension. “The moment Cailin signs the non-disclosure agreement, the money is hers. It is more than enough compensation.”

Ashely looked at the document bearing the gold-embossed Holloway crest. A wave of physical nausea washed over her.

She picked up the heavy folder. She looked Jeraldine dead in the eye.

Chapter 408:

With a furious, guttural scream, she slammed the folder down hard against the sharp edge of the glass table. The heavy binding cracked and split. She tore at the loosened pages, sending dozens of sheets of thick parchment fluttering through the air. She threw the two ruined halves directly at Hilliard. The pieces landed on his shoulders and in his hair like dirty snow. He didn’t even flinch.

“Fifty million?” Ashely hissed, her voice vibrating with hatred. “You think you can put a price tag on Elia’s life? The blood debt your family owes can only be paid in blood.”

Jeraldine shook with rage and threatened to have the Holloway legal team sue Ashely into bankruptcy.

Suddenly, Hilliard moved.

He stood up. He grabbed his mother by the arm and shoved her roughly toward the door, his eyes wild and burning with a terrifying, self-destructive fury. A low, animalistic growl escaped his throat.

“Get out,” he said. “Take your disgusting money and get out of this hospital right now.”

Jeraldine shrank back, visibly frightened by the murderous look in her own son’s eyes. She said nothing more. She seized the weeping Annie by the wrist and practically fled the lounge.

Hilliard collapsed back onto the sofa. He buried his face in his hands. His broad shoulders began to shake violently as silent, agonizing sobs tore through his body.

Ashely looked down at the broken billionaire. She felt absolutely zero pity.

“Save your tears, Hilliard,” she said coldly, turning toward the door. “Because when Cailin wakes up, she is going to destroy every single one of you.”

She walked out, leaving Hilliard alone in the ruins of the shredded trust fund, drowning in an ocean of his own regret.

Hours later, the heavy chemical fog of the sedatives began to lift from Cailin’s brain.

She slowly opened her eyes. The ICU room was dim. Ashely was sitting in a chair beside the bed, her eyes red and swollen from crying.

Ashely saw her wake up and immediately leaned forward, gently taking Cailin's cold hand.

Cailin didn't speak. Her eyes bypassed Ashely entirely and locked onto the small bedside table.

Resting there was a clear plastic evidence bag. Inside it was Elia's pink, waterproof smartwatch — the only thing Kegan's recovery team had found wedged in the rocks at the base of the cliff.

Cailin's hand began to tremble violently. She reached out. Ashely choked back a sob, unsealed the plastic bag, and placed the watch into Cailin's palm.

The glass screen was shattered into a spiderweb of cracks, but the waterproof casing had protected the internal hardware.

Operating purely on muscle memory, Cailin ran her thumb over the side of the watch and pressed the emergency audio playback button.

A soft electronic chime sounded in the quiet room.

Then Elia's voice filled the air.

It was weak. She was panting heavily, her breathing ragged. She had recorded it while lying alone in the dark shipping container.

"Mommy..." Elia's tiny voice trembled with the absolute, unfiltered terror of a child surrounded by darkness. "I'm scared. It's so dark in here. Mommy, my tummy hurts. I miss you."

Outside the hospital room door, Hilliard had been standing like a stone gargoyle. When he heard that voice, his entire body seized. He slumped heavily against the doorframe, his breath catching in his throat.

Chapter 409:

"I want to go home," the recording continued, punctuated by small, gasping sobs that sliced through Cailin's heart like a rusted scalpel. "Tell daddy — tell him I'm sorry I wasn't brave. Mommy, please come find me."

The recording ended with a soft, muffled sob, followed by dead static.

There was no profound philosophy in the little girl's final words. There was only pure, primal fear — and a desperate cry for her mother to save her from the nightmare. That absolute, helpless suffering from a five-year-old was the final, devastating blow to Cailin's physical body.

She gripped the shattered watch so tightly the broken glass cut into her palm. Her chest heaved violently. A horrific, wet gurgling sound rose in the back of her throat.

Cailin pitched forward over the side of the bed.

She opened her mouth, and a massive surge of dark, coagulated blood erupted violently from her lips, splattering across the white blankets.

The doctor later explained it as a textbook case: the extreme, unrelenting psychological trauma had triggered a massive stress ulcer in her stomach lining, causing it to rupture. She was hemorrhaging.

Ashely screamed in pure panic, slamming her hand repeatedly onto the emergency call button.

Out in the hallway, Hilliard heard the scream and the wet, terrible sound. His legs gave out completely. He crashed to his knees on the hard linoleum, grabbed fistfuls of his own hair and pulled until his scalp bled, letting out a muffled, agonizing wail of pure despair.

Doctors and nurses sprinted past him and burst into the room to begin emergency hemostasis. The room descended into chaotic shouting.

While the desperate fight for Cailin's life unfolded, a very different scene was taking place in the dark, deserted stairwell at the far end of the hospital corridor.

Annie stood in the shadows. She pulled a heavy, unregistered burner phone from her pocket and dialed an international number.

The line clicked open. Charla English's lazy, triumphant voice floated through the speaker. "I hear it rained quite heavily in New York today."

Annie touched her swollen, red cheek, eyes narrowing with vicious resentment. "Your plan almost got me killed! That crazy bitch Trevino slapped me in public!"

Charla laughed coldly. "A little physical discomfort is a small price to pay. Hilliard's precious heir is traumatized and useless, and the little bastard girl is dead."

"Now," Charla continued, her voice dripping with venom, "with Elia gone and Jakobe broken, you are the only one Jeraldine has left to rely on. Play your cards right, keep feeding her that sweet, loyal poison, and her personal fortune will be yours. The trust is just the beginning. Aren't you tired of being just an assistant?"

A flash of pure, unadulterated greed twisted Annie's young face, making her look demonic in the dim stairwell light. "It better be worth it. You promised you would wipe the digital trail clean."

"Relax," Charla said. "Dead men don't talk." She hung up.

Annie slipped the burner phone back into her pocket. She took a slow breath, instantly morphed her expression back into that of a terrified, innocent victim, and pushed the stairwell door open.

Chapter 410:

Back in the ICU, the doctors had managed to stop Cailin's bleeding. She lay against the pillows, pale as a ghost. But as she stared at the ceiling, the last shred of human warmth in her eyes had been completely washed away by the blood.

The midnight hours dragged on. The lights in the ICU corridor were dimmed to a sterile, cold blue. Cailin had fallen into a deep, medically induced sleep after the emergency blood transfusion.

Hilliard stood outside her room looking like a statue carved from pure misery. His forehead was pressed against the heavy glass of the observation window. His eyes were bloodshot and completely unblinking as he stared at the woman lying motionless on the bed. His expensive shirt was still stiff with dried mud and seawater from the cliff. He radiated an aura of absolute, suffocating death.

The rapid click of dress shoes echoed down the quiet hallway. Gavin Thorne, Hilliard's chief executive assistant, approached quickly, clutching a heavily encrypted tablet. He stopped two paces behind his boss, looked at Hilliard's ruined state, and hesitated before speaking.

"Sir," Gavin said, his voice a low, cautious whisper. "The Coast Guard just sent an update."

Hilliard spun around instantly. A terrifying, desperate light flared in his dead eyes. "Did they find Elia?"

Gavin looked down at the floor and slowly shook his head. "No, sir. They found Rourke's body. It washed up on the rocky shore of Long Island."

The light in Hilliard's eyes extinguished, instantly replaced by a black, bottomless rage.

“The coroner confirmed massive internal trauma from the fall and subsequent drowning,” Gavin continued, reading from the tablet. “But his fingerprints have been burned off, and his dental records are a ghost. He carried absolutely zero identifying markers.”

Hilliard snatched the tablet from Gavin’s hands and swiped violently across the screen, staring at the gruesome photos. He ground his teeth together so hard his jaw popped.

“What about the money?” Hilliard growled. “I want the wire transfers. I want to know who bought this man.”

“We tracked the offshore payment,” Gavin said, his face pale with stress. “The funds were routed through six layers of the Monero cryptocurrency laundering protocol. It’s untraceable. The final node points to a shell company registered in the Cayman Islands.”

“Keep digging! Rip the board of directors of that shell company apart!” Hilliard roared, his voice echoing down the empty hall.

“We did, sir. The registered owner of the shell company is a homeless man who died of an overdose three years ago. The financial trail is a complete dead end.”

Hilliard let out a roar of absolute frustration. He slammed the encrypted tablet against the polished marble wall. The screen shattered into a thousand pieces, raining onto the floor.

“There is no such thing as a perfect crime!” he snarled, pacing the hallway like a caged, starving wolf.
“Money leaves a footprint! Find it!”

Gavin steadied himself and offered the final, fragile piece of intelligence. “Our Dark Web cyber team managed to pull a fragment of data from Rourke’s destroyed satellite phone.”

Hilliard stopped pacing. He locked his gaze onto Gavin. “Speak.”