

Second chance 411

Chapter 411:

“Thirty seconds before he jumped off the cliff, he received a heavily encrypted command signal. The ping bounced off a localized cell tower.” Gavin paused. “The tower is in Europe, sir.”

“Europe.” Hilliard whispered the word.

His hyper-focused mind immediately began connecting the dots. There was only one person currently hiding in Europe who possessed the psychotic hatred, the intelligence, and the hidden resources to orchestrate this exact nightmare.

Charla English.

But suspicion wasn’t enough. He needed absolute, undeniable proof. And if it was Charla, he was going to wipe the entire English bloodline off the face of the earth.

He turned his head and looked back through the glass at Cailin. A violent, tearing pain ripped through his chest. He knew he didn’t have the right to beg for her forgiveness until he laid the head of the person responsible at her feet.

“Gavin,” Hilliard said, his voice dropping to a chilling, absolute zero. “Mobilize every black-ops asset we have on the European continent. I want the name of every single person within a ten-mile radius of that cell tower.”

“Furthermore,” he continued, “freeze all of Holloway Group’s pending European acquisitions. Liquidate the assets. I need unlimited, untraceable capital.”

Gavin’s eyes widened in shock. “Sir, pulling that much capital will trigger a massive panic in the European markets. The Board of Directors will revolt. Your father will never allow it.”

“Let them burn,” Hilliard snarled, his eyes blazing with a demonic fire. “Right now, the only thing that matters is finding the person who killed my daughter.”

The sheer, physical weight of Hilliard’s killing intent forced Gavin back a step. He bowed his head. “Yes, sir. Right away.”

He turned and sprinted down the hallway to execute the orders.

Hilliard turned back to the window. He placed his large, trembling palm flat against the cold glass, perfectly aligned over Cailin’s pale, sleeping face.

He swore a silent, bloody oath. He would never sign the divorce papers. He would never let her go. He would drag the killer’s corpse to her feet, even if it meant tearing his entire empire apart to do it.

The dull, grey light of early morning filtered through the blinds of the ICU.

Cailin's vitals had finally stabilized. She slowly opened her eyes. The frantic, hysterical panic from the day before was completely gone, replaced by a terrifying, absolute stillness. Her eyes were like frozen lakes — cold, dead, and utterly impenetrable.

Hilliard, who had not moved from the hallway all night, saw her stir. He immediately pushed the heavy door open and stepped into the room.

He walked to the edge of the bed and reached out with his trembling left hand, desperately wanting to touch her fingers, to feel her warmth.

His hand froze in mid-air.

Cailin slowly turned her head and looked at him.

It wasn't anger. It wasn't hatred. It was profound, biological disgust — the way one looks at a rotting carcass on the side of the road.

"Cailin," Hilliard's voice broke. His Adam's apple bobbed as he swallowed the lump of pure agony in his throat. "Are you feeling any better?"

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Cailin didn't blink. She didn't acknowledge the question. A sharp, burning pain lanced through her stomach — a brutal physical echo of the ruptured ulcer — but she locked it away behind a wall of ice. She simply stared at him and let a single word drop from her lips like a shard of glass.

“Leave.”

The word was spoken softly, but it struck Hilliard’s chest with the force of a battering ram. He physically recoiled, the air rushing from his lungs.

“I know you hate me. I am not trying to hide from my sins,” Hilliard pleaded, his voice cracking. “But please, let me stay here. Let me pay for your care. Just until you recover.”

“You disgust me,” Cailin interrupted, her voice a flat, mechanical monotone. “Every breath you take in this room reminds me that you are the man who let go of Elia’s hand.”

All the blood instantly drained from Hilliard’s face. He stumbled backward a step, clutching his chest as though she had physically driven a blade through it.

Cailin didn’t wait for his response. She reached over with her uninjured hand and slammed her palm down on the nurse call button.

The attending doctor and two nurses rushed in seconds later.

“Get this man out of my room,” Cailin ordered the doctor, her voice carrying absolute authority. “If he doesn’t leave right now, I will pull every tube out of my body.”

To prove she wasn't bluffing, she raised her hand and wrapped her fingers around the thick central venous catheter stitched into the side of her neck.

The doctor's face went pale with terror. Ripping out a CVC would cause massive, instant hemorrhaging and a fatal air embolism.

He immediately stepped between the bed and Hilliard. "Mr. Holloway, the patient is in an extremely fragile psychological state. You must leave this room immediately."

Hilliard stared at Cailin's fingers gripping the catheter. He saw the absolute, suicidal resolve in her dead eyes. He knew she would do it.

He raised both hands in surrender.

"Okay. I'm going. Please — don't hurt yourself." His voice was completely shattered. He backed away slowly, his eyes never leaving her face.

When he reached the door, he stopped. He couldn't leave without giving her something to hold onto.

"I tracked the signal to Europe," Hilliard said, his back to her. "I am going to find the person who ordered the hit. I will tear them apart."

Cailin leaned back against her pillows. A cold, mocking smirk touched her lips.

“Save your breath,” she whispered. “When I get out of this bed, I am going to send all of you to hell myself.”

Hilliard’s broad shoulders flinched violently. He opened the door and walked out into the hallway.

The second the door clicked shut, the icy facade on Cailin’s face cracked. A single, scalding tear escaped the corner of her eye and slid down into her hairline.

She wiped it away savagely with the back of her hand, took a deep, shuddering breath, and forced the impenetrable armor back over her soul.

Out in the hallway, Hilliard leaned against the wall. His soul had been entirely hollowed out. He was nothing now but a machine built for vengeance.

Chapter 413:

He pulled his phone from his pocket and dialed Gavin. When he spoke, his voice had returned to the cold, ruthless cadence of a billionaire predator.

“Initiate the Dark Web Bounty Protocol,” Hilliard commanded. “Offer ten million dollars in untraceable crypto. I want the decrypted audio file of that European satellite call. Turn the European underworld upside down. I want a name before the sun sets.”

He hung up. He looked at the room number on the door one last time, then walked toward the elevator. He knew he couldn't face her again until his hands were covered in the killer's blood.

Inside the room, Cailin turned to the nurse.

"Bring me a pen and a legal pad," she said.

It was time to sever every legal chain binding her to the Holloway empire.

Three days later, Cailin's physical condition had stabilized enough for the doctors to move her from the ICU to a standard VIP recovery suite.

For three days, Hilliard had honored his promise not to enter her room. But he remained a constant, haunting presence — standing at the far end of the corridor, staring at her door day and night like a ghost.

Late in the afternoon, his phone vibrated. It was a call from the internal hospital line. Cailin was summoning him, and she demanded he bring his legal counsel.

A heavy, suffocating knot of dread formed in Hilliard's stomach. He called the Holloway family's chief litigator, and together they pushed open the door to Cailin's suite.

Cailin was sitting up in the hospital bed in a loose gown, her face pale and her expression unreadable. Her own private attorney sat in a chair beside her. Resting on the mobile tray table spanning the bed were two thick, freshly printed legal documents.

The bold black letters on the cover page read: No-Fault Divorce Agreement.

Hilliard's eyes locked onto those words. All the air was instantly sucked from the room.

"What is this?" Hilliard asked, his voice tight, suppressing a rising tide of panic. He walked quickly to the foot of the bed.

Cailin's face remained a mask of stone. She picked up Elia's shattered waterproof smartwatch from the bedside table and pressed the playback button.

Elia's weak, trembling voice echoed in the sterile room.

"Mommy, please come find me."

The recording clicked off. The silence that followed was deafening. Hilliard's eyes instantly filled with hot tears.

"That was my daughter's final plea in the dark," Cailin said, her eyes locking onto Hilliard with cold, predatory precision. Every word sent a sharp throb through her bandaged ribs, but she welcomed the

pain, using it to sharpen her focus. “She begged me to find her. And I am going to honor that by erasing you from our lives.”

Hilliard shook his head frantically. He gripped the metal railing at the foot of the bed like a drowning man clutching driftwood. “No. Cailin, please. We can separate. You can go wherever you want. But I will never sign those papers.”

Chapter 414:

“This is not a negotiation,” Cailin’s attorney said, standing up. He handed a supplemental folder to Hilliard’s lawyer. “Mr. Holloway, if you refuse to sign today, we will immediately file for a restraining order using this audio recording as evidence of extreme emotional distress.”

“Furthermore,” the attorney continued, “we will release the full, unredacted details of the hostage exchange at Pier 4 to the global press.”

Hilliard’s lawyer went completely pale. He leaned in and whispered urgently into Hilliard’s ear. “Sir, if the press finds out you traded your daughter for the adopted heir, the stock will plummet. The Board will remove you by tomorrow morning.”

“Forget the Board!” Hilliard roared, violently shoving his lawyer aside. He glared at Cailin, his eyes wild and bloodshot. “You know I don’t care about the money or the title!”

“But you care about the pristine reputation of the Holloway name, don’t you?” Cailin sneered, her lips curling into a cruel, mocking smile. “Otherwise, you wouldn’t have let go of Elia’s hand to save your precious fake heir.”

The words were a poisoned dagger driven directly into Hilliard's deepest vulnerability. He opened his mouth to respond, but no sound came out. He was completely defenseless against the truth.

Cailin picked up a heavy fountain pen and tossed it onto the divorce agreement.

"Sign it," she commanded. "Waive your right to contest the asset division. Waive your right to ever contact me again. It is the absolute least you owe her."

Hilliard stared at the thick stack of papers. His hands were trembling so violently he couldn't even reach for the pen. Signing it meant erasing Cailin from his life forever.

He looked at her, tears spilling over his eyelashes. "If I sign this, are you really going to disappear?"

"Yes," Cailin answered without a microsecond of hesitation. "I am going to take Elia's ashes to a place where you will never, ever find us."

Hilliard closed his eyes. The physical pain in his chest was unbearable. He had no leverage left. Every breath he took in her presence was an insult to their dead child.

He slowly reached out. His trembling fingers brushed against the cold metal of the fountain pen. He picked it up. He held the nib over the signature line, agonizingly trying to force his hand to move.

The heavy door to the suite was suddenly thrown open.

Jeraldine Holloway stormed into the room, her face twisted into an ugly mask of aristocratic fury.

“Hilliard! Have you lost your mind?!” Jeraldine shrieked, pointing an accusing finger at Cailin. “Are you really going to let this woman walk away with half of the Holloway estate?”

Cailin looked at the hysterical matriarch. The smile on her lips widened into something truly terrifying.

The moment had arrived. It was time to drop the bomb that would shatter Hilliard and Jeraldine’s reality into a million bloody pieces.

Jeraldine’s high heels clacked aggressively against the floor as she marched to the bed. She snatched the fountain pen right out of Hilliard’s trembling hand and threw it onto the floor.

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“I will not allow you to sign this humiliating extortion!” Jeraldine screamed, her face flushed with rage. She glared down at Cailin. “This woman failed to protect that little bastard of unknown origin, and now she expects us to pay for it!”

Bastard of unknown origin.

Cailin repeated the words softly in her mind. Then a low, dark chuckle began to vibrate in her chest. It grew louder, echoing off the walls of the hospital room — a chilling, psychotic sound that made the hair on the back of Hilliard's neck stand up.

Cailin stopped laughing abruptly. Her eyes locked onto Jeraldine with the lethal intensity of a striking viper, then shifted slowly to Hilliard.

"Hilliard," she said, her voice dangerously quiet. "When you were standing on that pier and you let go of her hand, what were you thinking? Did you believe that trading a girl with no Holloway blood to save your precious adopted heir was a smart business transaction?"

Hilliard squeezed his eyes shut, his face contorting in agony. "Stop it, Cailin. Please, just stop —"

"I will not stop!" Cailin's voice exploded without warning, hitting the room like a thunderclap. "I want you to know exactly who you sacrificed on that altar!"

She leaned forward, her eyes burning with hellfire, and enunciated every word with brutal, agonizing clarity.

"Elia was my biological daughter. I carried her in my womb while I was running from you five years ago. She was your own flesh and blood."

The words detonated in the room. The air pressure seemed to vanish instantly.

Hilliard's eyes snapped open. His pupils dilated to massive, terrifying proportions. His brain completely short-circuited, plunging him into five seconds of absolute, paralyzing white noise.

"W-what did you say?" Hilliard stumbled backward. His shoulder struck the heavy metal IV pole, knocking it to the floor with a loud crash.

"Impossible! You are lying!" Jeraldine screeched, her voice cracking with panic. "You are just trying to manipulate him for the settlement!"

She seized Hilliard's arm and shook him desperately. "Hilliard, remember the DNA test! The report explicitly excluded you as the father! It said there was absolutely no match!"

Hilliard grasped at the memory like a man falling off a cliff trying to catch a blade of grass. He looked at Cailin, his chest heaving. "The DNA report — Kegan gave me the report —"

"Kegan?" Cailin let out a harsh, mocking bark of laughter. "You actually trusted medical data handed to you by the man who controls the European underground?"

"That report was a fake," she said, ruthlessly shredding his last defense. "Kegan's hackers breached your hospital's secure servers and altered the genetic data one second before it was printed. Your billion-dollar corporate security is a joke to him. He falsified the records to protect Elia from being stolen by you bloodsucking vultures."

Hilliard's breathing became rapid and shallow. His mind raced backward, replaying every interaction. He remembered the crescent-shaped birthmark on Elia's thigh — identical to his own. He remembered the

shape of her eyes, a perfect mirror of his late grandmother's. The puzzle pieces slammed together with sickening, undeniable precision. The truth was an absolute, crushing weight.

Chapter 416:

"She knew," Cailin whispered, delivering the final, fatal strike. "She always knew you were her real father. And when she watched you walk away with Jakobe, the light in her eyes completely died."

"No!"

A horrific, inhuman scream ripped from the very bottom of Hilliard's soul — the sound of a man being torn apart from the inside out.

His legs gave way entirely. He crashed to his knees on the hard floor. He raised his massive fists and began to hammer them against the marble tiles. The heavy, sickening thuds of bone on stone echoed through the room as he tried to physically beat the agony out of his own body.

Jeraldine collapsed onto the visitor's sofa. All the color drained from her face. Her jaw hung open as she mumbled incoherently, "No, it can't be. It can't be."

If it was true, she had forced her son to murder his own child.

The two lawyers stood frozen in the corner, absolutely horrified by the devastating tragedy unfolding before them.

Cailin sat in the bed and looked down at Hilliard, who was sobbing and bleeding on the floor. She felt absolutely zero pity — only the cold, dark satisfaction of absolute vengeance.

She picked up the divorce agreement and pushed it to the very edge of the tray table.

“Now,” Cailin said, her voice devoid of all emotion. “You know exactly what you owe me.”

“Sign it. Take your unforgivable sins, and get out of my sight.”

Hilliard remained on his hands and knees, his forehead resting against the cold marble floor. A horrific, dry retching sound tore from his throat. The psychological trauma of the revelation was so absolute that his body was violently rejecting reality.

Jeraldine was completely catatonic. The family bodyguards had to step into the room and practically drag the stunned matriarch out into the hallway. Her incoherent babbling faded down the corridor.

Cailin watched Hilliard suffer with eyes as cold as a glacier.

Slowly, she reached her right hand beneath her pillow. Her fingers wrapped around the cold, sterile steel of a pair of medical scissors she had stolen from the nurse’s cart during a dressing change earlier that morning.

“Stand up, Hilliard,” Cailin commanded, her voice unwavering. “Sign the papers.”

Hilliard slowly lifted his head. His face was a horrific mask of tears, mucus, and floor dust. The handsome, arrogant billionaire was completely gone, replaced by a broken, pathetic shell.

“I won’t sign,” Hilliard shook his head frantically, his eyes wild with denial. “If I sign, I lose everything. Elia is gone, and I lose you too.”

He tried to push himself up, reaching a trembling hand toward the edge of the bed. “We will find her! I will drain the Atlantic Ocean if I have to! We will do another DNA test! You’re lying to punish me!”

His fractured mind was desperately clinging to the delusion that he could still fix this — that he could buy more time.

The moment his fingers brushed the white bedsheets, Cailin moved.

Chapter 417:

She whipped the stainless steel scissors out from under the pillow. In one fluid, terrifying motion, she reversed her grip and pressed the razor-sharp tips directly against her own right carotid artery.

“Don’t touch me!” Cailin screamed.

She pressed the steel inward. The sharp points instantly pierced her pale skin. A bright red bead of blood welled up, quickly forming a thin line that trickled down the side of her neck and stained the collar of her hospital gown.

Hilliard's hand froze in mid-air. His pupils contracted to pinpricks. It felt as though an invisible hand had crushed his windpipe.

"Cailin! Drop it! Please, drop it!" Hilliard shrieked in absolute terror. He scrambled backward on his knees, terrified that any sudden movement would cause her to flinch.

The two lawyers gasped. Cailin's attorney stepped forward nervously. "Ms. Morton, please don't do this. We have legal avenues to force the signature —"

"Shut up," Cailin snapped at him, her eyes never leaving Hilliard's face.

"Sign it, Hilliard," she said, her voice dropping to a chilling, dead calm. "Or I will finish this right now, and I will make sure you spend the rest of your miserable life knowing that you not only sacrificed your daughter — you drove her mother to her grave. You will have nothing left to atone for."

"One," she whispered, pushing the scissors a millimeter deeper. The trickle of blood flowed faster.

"No! Stop!" Hilliard roared in panic. He whipped his head around and glared at his paralyzed lawyer. "Give me the pen! Give it to me now!"

The lawyer scrambled to the floor, retrieved the dropped fountain pen, and shoved it into Hilliard's trembling hand.

"Two," Cailin said. Her eyes were completely void of fear. She was entirely prepared to take his last chance at redemption from him.

Hilliard lunged forward, slamming his chest against the tray table. He grabbed the thick divorce agreement. His hand shook so violently the pen was a blur.

Just as Cailin opened her mouth to say the final number, Hilliard squeezed his eyes shut and dragged the pen across the signature line. He pressed down with such violent, desperate force that the gold nib tore straight through the thick parchment paper.

"I signed it! I signed it! Put the scissors down!" Hilliard sobbed, holding the torn, signed document in the air like a white flag of surrender.

Cailin's attorney immediately stepped forward, snatched the document from Hilliard's hand, inspected the signature, and shoved the papers into his leather briefcase.

"The agreement is executed," the attorney announced coldly. "As of this moment, Mr. Holloway, you have no legal relationship with my client."

Cailin slowly lowered the scissors. She let them drop onto the blanket. She looked at Hilliard, a tragic, hollow smile touching her lips.

“Get out, ex-husband,” she whispered. The words carried the weight of a tombstone.

Hilliard looked at the blood drying on her neck. He looked at the absolute finality in her eyes and understood — he had been permanently exiled from her universe.

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He slowly pushed himself to his feet and said nothing more. He turned and walked out of the room, shoulders slumped, moving like a man walking to the gallows.

The heavy door clicked shut.

Cailin tilted her head back against the pillows. She stared at the ceiling tiles, and finally — silently — let the tears of her absolute devastation fall.

The violent storm had finally passed, leaving Manhattan bathed in the gloomy, grey light of dusk.

Hilliard’s tactical SUV pulled through the shattered bronze gates of the Holloway estate and parked in front of the main house.

The moment he stepped into the grand foyer, two of the family’s elite internal security guards flanked him. Without a word, they patted him down and confiscated his SIG Sauer pistol and encrypted phone.

“The Patriarch is waiting for you in the study, sir,” the head butler said — his voice stripped of its usual deference, replaced by the cold tone reserved for a condemned prisoner.

Hilliard pushed open the heavy oak doors and stepped into the dim, wood-paneled study.

Preston Holloway, Hilliard’s ruthless cousin and chief rival within the family empire, stood with his back turned, staring out the massive bay windows. Sitting on a leather Chesterfield sofa in the corner was Julian, Preston’s ambitious younger brother, slowly clipping a Cuban cigar with a smirk of pure, predatory amusement on his lips.

“Preston —” Hilliard began.

A flash of silver cut through the air.

Crack!

Preston swung a custom titanium golf club with terrifying speed. The heavy metal head slammed brutally into the center of Hilliard’s back.

Hilliard stumbled forward and dropped to one knee. A blinding flash of pain shot up his spine, but he clenched his jaw, refusing to give his usurping cousin the satisfaction of a groan.

“Look at what you’ve done, you worthless failure!” Preston roared, his face purple with triumphant malice. “You threw away the family’s adopted heir for a woman, and now you’ve let a kidnapping scandal leak to the Wall Street Journal. The entire financial world knows the CEO of the Holloway Group is a coward who traded his own daughter’s life!”

Crack!

Preston swung again. The club struck Hilliard’s right shoulder, driving him completely to the floor. He tasted blood as he bit his tongue.

Julian puffed his cigar and chuckled softly. “Careful, Brother. Don’t break his jaw. He needs to speak clearly when he reads his resignation letter at the emergency board meeting tomorrow.”

Preston threw the dented golf club onto the Persian rug and looked down at his bleeding cousin with absolute, condescending pity.

“Effective immediately, your executive authority is stripped,” Preston declared, delivering the corporate death sentence. “Your board voting rights are frozen. You’ve ruined yourself and handed me the keys to the kingdom.”

“You are confined to this estate until you find the person who orchestrated this disaster and eliminate them. You do not leave these grounds.”

Hilliard pushed himself up onto his hands and knees. He spat a mouthful of bloody saliva onto the expensive rug and looked up, his eyes burning with a psychotic, murderous light.

Chapter 419:

"I don't need your permission to kill," Hilliard growled. "Charla English. I am going to rip her apart with my bare hands."

Miles away, in the quiet VIP hospital room, Cailin sat up in bed. A fresh white bandage covered the puncture wound on her neck.

Ashely sat beside her, studying Cailin's terrifyingly calm expression. "Do you really think this is all Hilliard's fault? He was forced into a corner —"

Cailin turned her head. Her eyes were as sharp as surgical steel. "He wasn't forced. He made a calculated choice to protect his empire."

"But you are missing the bigger picture, Ashely," she continued, her mind working with the cold precision of a supercomputer. "This wasn't just a random kidnapping. It was a highly coordinated assassination. The mercenaries knew the exact blind spots in the estate's security grid. They knew the exact route Hilliard would take. They had inside intelligence."

Ashely gasped. "A mole inside the Holloway family?"

Cailin nodded slowly. "And think about the cliff. That mercenary chose to jump into the freezing ocean rather than take Hilliard's ten billion dollars. That means whoever hired him offered something far more powerful than money — absolute terror, or a fanatic loyalty."

“There is only one person on this planet who hates me enough to orchestrate this, who has the intelligence to manipulate Holloway security, and who would demand my psychological destruction before my death.”

Cailin’s eyes narrowed into dark slits. “Charla English.”

“But Charla is bankrupt and on the run,” Ashely argued.

“She found a new sponsor. Or she found a willing fool inside the Holloway house to act as her proxy,” Cailin said, the image of Annie’s trembling, fake face flashing across her mind.

She sat up straighter, ignoring the shooting pain in her ribs. The fire of vengeance had completely consumed her grief.

“Ashely, get me a secure phone,” Cailin commanded, her voice a hoarse whisper. Her hands, resting on the white blanket, were trembling uncontrollably. She clenched them into tight fists to still them. “Call Kegan. If the law can’t touch Charla in Europe, then I will use the underground. I am going to drag her out of the shadows, and I am going to make her bleed.”

The net was cast.

“Get out of my way,” Cailin hissed, ripping the intravenous line from the back of her hand for the second time in twenty-four hours.

Drops of dark red blood splattered across the pristine white tiles of the hospital floor.

The attending physician stepped in front of the door, hands raised in a desperate plea. He looked at the thick white bandage wrapped around Cailin's neck. "Ms. Morton, your stomach lining has barely begun to heal. If you leave this bed and elevate your blood pressure, the stress ulcer will rupture again. You will bleed to death internally."

Cailin did not blink. Her eyes resembled the surface of a frozen lake in the dead of winter — completely devoid of human warmth.

Chapter 420:

"If you do not move in three seconds, I will have the men waiting in the lobby come up here and move you," she stated. Her voice was a flat, mechanical monotone that carried the absolute weight of a death threat.

The doctor swallowed hard. He stepped aside.

Cailin walked out of the room. She wore a simple black trench coat over her hospital gown. Every step sent a sharp, tearing agony through her fractured ribs, but her brain blocked out the pain entirely. Her body was no longer a vessel for living — it was merely a tool for vengeance.

She pushed through the heavy glass doors of the hospital lobby. The freezing, gloomy Manhattan morning air hit her face.

A massive black bulletproof SUV idled at the curb. Four heavily armed mercenaries in tactical gear stood around the vehicle — Kegan’s elite operators.

One of them opened the rear door. Cailin climbed inside.

“The Holloway Estate,” she commanded, staring straight ahead at the privacy partition. “Do not stop for anything.”

The SUV surged forward, its engine roaring as it tore through the wet city streets.

Forty minutes later, the vehicle arrived at the towering wrought-iron gates of the Holloway estate on Long Island. The gates were locked. Two internal security guards stepped out of the guardhouse, raising their hands to signal the vehicle to stop.

“Drive through it,” Cailin ordered.

The mercenary behind the wheel didn’t hesitate for a microsecond. He slammed his boot down on the accelerator. The reinforced steel bumper crashed into the wrought-iron gates with a deafening crack. The metal hinges shrieked and snapped. The heavy gates were thrown open, slamming into the stone pillars. The security guards dove into the wet grass to avoid being crushed.

The SUV skidded to a halt directly in front of the main house. Cailin pushed her door open before the vehicle had fully stopped.

She stepped out onto the gravel driveway. Three top-tier liquidation lawyers carrying thick leather briefcases stepped out of a trailing black sedan and followed closely behind her.

Cailin marched up the marble steps and kicked the shattered glass from the front doorway out of her path.

The head butler rushed into the grand foyer, his face pale with panic. “Madam, you cannot be here! Preston has forbidden —”

The mercenary at Cailin’s side reached out, grabbed the butler by the lapels of his uniform, and shoved him violently backward. The older man slammed into the wood-paneled wall and slid to the floor, gasping.

Cailin didn’t break her stride. She marched straight down the long, opulent hallway toward the oak doors of the primary study. She nodded subtly to the mercenary beside her. He stepped forward and delivered a devastating front kick. The heavy oak door crashed open, its reinforced hinges snapping.

A thick cloud of expensive cigar smoke and the sharp, metallic stench of fresh blood instantly assaulted her nostrils.

The scene inside was a portrait of brutality.