

Second chance 421

Chapter 421:

Hilliard lay face down on the Persian rug, his white dress shirt soaked dark with blood. Preston stood over him, a titanium golf club raised high, his face twisted in an ugly mask of rage. Julian sat on the leather sofa in the corner, a smirk frozen on his lips.

When the doors crashed against the walls, Preston's arms jerked to a halt. The club hovered in the air.

Julian sat up straight. His cigar dropped onto the glass table.

Hilliard heard the noise. He slowly, agonizingly lifted his head from the bloody carpet. His right eye was swollen shut. Blood dripped from his split lip. When his one good eye focused on the doorway and found Cailin standing there, a sudden, pathetic spark of hope ignited in his shattered pupils.

His fractured mind instantly created a delusion. He thought she had come back for him.

"Cailin," Hilliard rasped. The sound was a wet, broken gurgle.

He dragged his massive, battered body across the rug, his ribs grinding together with every movement, and reached out with a trembling, blood-soaked left hand, desperately trying to grasp the hem of her black trench coat.

Cailin looked down at him — the man who used to rule the financial world, now crawling at her feet like a beaten dog. She felt nothing but a deep, biological disgust.

She looked right past Hilliard and locked her dead eyes onto Preston.

“Put the club down, Preston,” she said coldly. “You are damaging my property.”

Preston lowered the golf club, his chest heaving. “Your property? You have no power here anymore, Cailin. You are trespassing.”

Cailin snapped her fingers. The lead lawyer stepped forward and slammed a massive stack of legal documents onto the mahogany desk. The sound echoed like a gunshot.

“That is the executed divorce agreement,” Cailin stated, her voice cutting through the cigar smoke. “It transfers exactly fifty percent of Hilliard’s equity, liquid assets, and real estate holdings directly into my name.”

Preston sneered, stepping toward the desk. “I am the acting Patriarch now. I will tie those assets up in litigation for the next decade. You will not see a single penny.”

“If you do not sign the immediate release forms right now,” Cailin countered, her voice dropping to a lethal whisper, “I will use my new equity to trigger the emergency freeze clause in the Bankruptcy Code. I will freeze the entire operational cash flow of the Holloway Group by noon. Your stock will crash before the market closes.”

Preston's arrogant sneer vanished instantly. A cold sweat broke out on his forehead. He knew she wasn't bluffing. She had the legal right and the psychotic motivation to burn the company to the ground.

Down on the floor, Hilliard's hand finally reached Cailin's ankle. His bloody fingers wrapped weakly around the leather strap of her shoe.

"Cailin," Hilliard begged, tears cutting tracks through the blood on his face. "Please. Let me command the Coast Guard. I have to find Elia. I have to bring her back."

Cailin stopped speaking to Preston. She looked down slowly at the large hand gripping her ankle.

A flash of pure, unadulterated hatred broke through the ice in her eyes.

She lifted her foot.

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Without a single microsecond of hesitation, she brought the sharp stiletto heel of her shoe down directly onto the back of Hilliard's right hand and pressed her entire body weight into it.

Hilliard let out a horrific, agonizing scream. His body convulsed on the floor. But he refused to let go. He tightened his grip and sobbed hysterically — he would rather have his bones crushed by her than be completely ignored.

“You do not have the right to speak her name,” Cailin hissed, her voice crawling out of a grave. “Your dirty hands will only contaminate her ashes.”

The words struck Hilliard with a force infinitely more devastating than the golf club. His fingers went completely slack. His hand fell away from her shoe, leaving a smear of blood on the black leather. He collapsed onto the rug, his body curling into a tight fetal position as he wept.

Julian watched from the sofa. A cold shiver ran down his spine. The woman standing in the room was no longer a human being. She was a demon born from grief.

Cailin looked back at Preston. “Sign the papers. Now.”

Preston swallowed his pride. He threw the golf club aside, snatched a pen from the desk, and signed his name aggressively across the transfer documents.

Cailin’s lawyer collected the papers and gave her a quiet nod.

Cailin turned and walked toward the door without looking down at Hilliard again.

“I will find the killer!” Hilliard suddenly roared, his voice shredding his vocal cords. He dragged himself toward the door, leaving a trail of blood on the carpet. “I swear to you, Cailin! I will bring you Charla’s head!”

Cailin paused in the doorway. She didn't turn around.

"By the time you find her," she said, her voice echoing in the hallway, "her bones will have already been fed to the dogs."

She walked out of the estate, leaving the broken billionaire drowning in his own blood and regret.

Hilliard pushed himself up against the doorframe. He coughed violently, spitting blood onto his own shirt. He shoved away the butler's attempt to help him stand. His eyes — burning with a terrifying, absolute madness — swept across the room.

He stumbled toward a bookshelf, his bleeding right hand leaving smears on the spines of leather-bound first editions. He yanked a specific volume — *The Art of War* — and a hidden compartment behind it clicked open. He reached inside and pulled out a backup encrypted phone.

He dialed his assistant. "Gavin," Hilliard growled, his voice a demonic rasp. "Activate every Dark Web tracking protocol we possess. Track the massive offshore wire transfers that moved through her proxy accounts this morning. I want a general region, a flight path — anything. I will tear apart the entire European continent if I have to. Find where she landed before the sun sets."

Meanwhile, Cailin sat in the back of the speeding SUV, staring blankly at the passing trees.

Her phone vibrated in her pocket. A secure line.

She answered it. “Kegan.”

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“Cailin.” Kegan’s voice was heavy, filled with a dark, suffocating sorrow. “The Coast Guard just called me. They found something washed up on the rocks at Montauk Point.”

Cailin’s lungs stopped working. The phone slipped slightly in her hand.

The torrential rain hammered against the roof of the bulletproof SUV as it tore down the Montauk Highway. The sky was a bruised, violent purple — a perfect mirror of the storm raging inside Cailin’s chest.

The vehicle slammed its brakes and skidded to a violent halt on the wet asphalt of the Coast Guard base helipad.

Cailin shoved the heavy door open before the driver could put the vehicle in park. She stumbled out into the freezing downpour without waiting for an umbrella, her black trench coat instantly soaking through and clinging to her fragile frame.

She ran toward the low concrete building that served as the base’s temporary medical examiner facility. Her lungs burned with every breath. The fractured ribs in her chest ground together. She felt nothing.

Kegan was already standing outside the heavy metal doors, wearing a black tactical windbreaker, completely drenched. His usually cold, calculating eyes held a rare and devastating sorrow.

He saw Cailin sprinting toward him. He stepped forward and positioned his broad shoulders in front of the door.

“Cailin, wait,” Kegan said, his voice thick with emotion. He reached out to take her arms. “You do not need to see this. Let me handle it.”

Cailin shoved her hands against his chest with a burst of hysterical, biological strength, forcing him backward.

“Move!” she shrieked. Her voice was raw and bloody, tearing through the sound of the rain.

Kegan did not fight her. He absorbed the blow, jaw tightening, and let out a heavy, defeated sigh. He stepped aside and opened the door.

Cailin stumbled into the brightly lit, sterile room. The smell of bleach and saltwater instantly assaulted her senses, making her stomach churn.

In the center of the room sat a stainless steel examination table.

There was no body on the table.

There was only a large, transparent plastic evidence bag.

Inside the bag was a child's pink windbreaker jacket. The bright color had been washed out and faded by the violent ocean saltwater.

Cailin's legs turned to lead. She forced herself to take one agonizing step forward, then another, until her stomach pressed against the cold edge of the metal table.

She stared down at the plastic bag.

It was the exact jacket Elia had been wearing the day she was kidnapped. Right over the left breast pocket was a massive, jagged tear in the fabric. The edges of the torn nylon were stained with dark, coagulated blood that had turned almost black.

The Coast Guard commander stepped forward from the corner of the room, holding a clipboard against his chest, his face grim.

"Ma'am," he said quietly, "our search and rescue divers found this snagged on a coral reef ten nautical miles from the drop zone."

Cailin did not look at him. She kept her eyes on the bloodstain.

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“The ocean currents in that specific sector are extremely violent,” the commander continued.
“Combined with the razor-sharp rocks at the base of the cliff, the survival rate for a five-year-old child in those conditions is zero.”

Zero.

That single word drove a rusted spike through the center of Cailin’s brain. It shattered the very last, pathetic shard of denial she had been clinging to.

Cailin did not cry. Her tear ducts were completely dry. Her eyes turned a terrifying, bloodshot red.

Her hands trembled violently as she reached out, unzipped the evidence bag, and pulled the wet, ruined jacket free. The smell of the ocean and dried blood rose into her face.

She pressed the small piece of clothing tight against her chest. She buried her face into the cold, damp fabric, opened her mouth, and a horrific, bone-chilling wail ripped from her throat. It was not a human sound. It was the sound of a mother whose soul was being physically torn from her body.

Kegan walked up behind her. He took off his dry overcoat and draped it over her violently shaking shoulders.

“My intelligence network intercepted the Dark Web chatter,” he said, his voice dropping to a lethal, icy register. “The funds that paid the mercenary were routed through a Swiss proxy. It was Charla English’s money.”

The wailing stopped instantly.

Cailin slowly raised her head from the jacket. The devastating grief in her eyes evaporated, replaced without transition by a pure, black, absolute killing intent.

She turned to face Kegan. She bit down on her lower lip until a drop of fresh blood welled up and trickled down her chin.

“I want her dead,” Cailin whispered. The temperature in the room seemed to drop ten degrees.

“Death is too easy,” she continued, her voice vibrating with venom. “I want to inflict every single ounce of pain my daughter felt onto her. I want her to beg for death for days before I finally give it to her.”

Kegan looked at the woman standing before him. She had completely abandoned her humanity. He nodded slowly.

“My strike team has already locked onto her coordinates,” he said. “She is hiding in a heavily fortified safe house in the Swiss Alps.”

“I am going,” Cailin said, carefully folding the bloody jacket and clutching it to her chest like a newborn.

“No, you are not,” Kegan replied firmly, seizing her shoulders. “You are staying right here in New York. You are going to host the most public, high-profile memorial service this city has ever seen. You are going to force every single member of the Holloway family to stand in the mud and face what they have done.”

His eyes flashed with predatory hunger. “I will go to Europe. I will do the dirty work. I will bring that woman’s head back to you in a box.”

Cailin stared into his eyes. She knew he was right — she needed to stay to execute the final psychological destruction of Hilliard’s family. She gave a slow, deliberate nod.

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At that exact moment, inside a dimly lit underground server room in Manhattan, Gavin Thorne handed a decrypted tablet to Hilliard. On the screen was a glowing heat map of financial routing nodes.

“Sir, we couldn’t pinpoint the exact safe house — her digital footprint is too heavily scrubbed,” Gavin reported, his fingers trembling. “But the bulk of her emergency funds just pinged off a regional server near the Swiss Alps. She’s hiding somewhere in the Engadin valley.”

Hilliard sat on a metal folding chair, still wearing his blood-soaked dress shirt. A medic was attempting to wrap fresh bandages around his crushed right hand. Hilliard ignored the man entirely.

He snatched the tablet with his left hand and stared at the glowing red dots on the screen. His eyes turned into black, bottomless pits of rage.

He reached over and ripped the painkiller IV line from his own arm. Blood sprayed across the medic's face.

"Get me a Gulfstream jet," Hilliard commanded, his voice a low, terrifying growl. "No flight plan. No tail numbers."

Gavin stepped forward, his face pale with panic. "Sir, your ribs are fractured. Your hand is destroyed. Preston has locked down your passport and confined you to the estate. You cannot leave the country."

Hilliard stood up. The sudden movement caused his broken ribs to shift, sending a blinding wave of agony through his torso. He welcomed it — the pain kept him awake.

He reached into the tactical bag on the table, pulled out a black Glock 19, and racked the slide. The sharp, metallic clack echoed through the server room.

"Anyone who tries to stop me from getting on that plane will take a bullet to the head," Hilliard stated.

He grabbed a black tactical vest and shoved his arms through the straps, ignoring the fresh blood seeping through his shirt. He had to reach Charla before Kegan did. Killing her was the only way he could ever look Cailin in the eyes again.

Two massive, unstoppable forces of vengeance were now converging on the exact same coordinates in Europe.

The subterranean parking garage beneath a luxury Manhattan high-rise was completely silent, save for the low, aggressive rumble of three black tactical SUVs idling in the shadows. Thick white exhaust plumed into the cold, damp air.

Hilliard stood beside the lead vehicle. He wore a heavy Kevlar vest over his ruined, blood-stained shirt. His face was the color of ash, and a thick sheen of cold sweat coated his forehead. His right hand was tightly wrapped in gauze, the white fabric already blooming with fresh red stains.

Gavin stood at the open trunk of the SUV, rapidly checking the magazines of suppressed assault rifles. This was not a corporate extraction. This was an illegal, black-ops assassination mission.

The sharp glare of LED headlights suddenly swept across the concrete pillars. A silver Aston Martin roared down the ramp and slammed its brakes, stopping inches from Hilliard's boots.

The driver's side door swung open. Julian Holloway stepped out in a tailored Italian suit, wearing his trademark mocking smirk.

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He looked at Hilliard's tactical gear and whistled softly. "Well, Cousin. You look absolutely terrible. I highly doubt Customs and Border Protection is going to let a bleeding man with an unregistered arsenal board a flight."

Hilliard didn't engage. He reached into his tactical vest with his good hand, pulled out a thick sealed envelope, and slammed it down onto the hood of the Aston Martin.

"Those are the master access codes to the Holloway offshore trust funds in the Cayman Islands," Hilliard said, his voice a harsh, scraping sound devoid of all emotion.

Julian's smirk vanished instantly. His eyes locked onto the envelope with pure, unfiltered greed. He picked it up and quickly inspected the unbroken wax seal.

"You are handing me the keys to the kingdom," Julian said, looking up with suspicion. "What exactly are you buying with this?"

"I am buying your eyes," Hilliard growled, stepping closer. "I am leaving the country. I do not trust Preston. That arrogant fool might try to use the family's security apparatus to intimidate Cailin during the memorial service."

Julian let out a short, incredulous laugh. "Are you insane? That woman just drove a stiletto heel through your hand and stripped you of half your net worth. And you want to pay me to protect her?"

"What she does to me is her right," Hilliard hissed. He lunged forward, grabbing the lapels of Julian's suit with his left hand and slamming him back against the hood of the car. He pulled the Glock from his holster and pressed the cold steel barrel directly into Julian's stomach.

"But if anyone in the Holloway family touches a single hair on her head while I am gone," Hilliard said, "I will come back and burn this entire city to the ground with you inside it."

Julian felt the hard metal against his ribs. He saw the absolute, psychotic certainty in Hilliard's bloodshot eyes. He raised both hands slowly.

"Deal," Julian said, his voice tight. "I will make sure Preston stays in his lane. She will be perfectly safe to host her little funeral."

Hilliard shoved him away, holstered the weapon, and climbed into the back of the tactical SUV. The convoy immediately sped out of the garage and vanished into the dark Manhattan streets.

Two hours later, a sleek, unmarked Gulfstream G650 tore through heavy storm clouds over the Atlantic Ocean.

Inside the cabin there were no flight attendants — only six heavily armed mercenaries sitting in absolute silence, checking their gear.

Hilliard sat in a wide leather seat near the cockpit. A private combat medic worked over him urgently, injecting a massive dose of synthetic morphine and broad-spectrum antibiotics directly into his vein, tightly suturing the gaping hole in his right hand, and wrapping his shattered ribs in a rigid compression brace. Every breath was a jagged, blinding agony that threatened to drag him into unconsciousness, but he forced his eyes to stay open.

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His left hand was wrapped tightly around the broken, sticky caramel apple stick Elia had given him. He squeezed it until his knuckles turned white. The sharp, splintered wood dug into his palm, and the physical pain grounded him — kept the suffocating wave of guilt from crushing his lungs entirely.

Gavin sat across from him, typing furiously on a ruggedized military laptop. He projected a three-dimensional thermal map onto the cabin monitor.

“The target is located in an abandoned ski resort deep in the Swiss Alps,” Gavin reported, pointing to the glowing red dots. “It is an off-the-books property owned by the English family. Thermal imaging shows twenty-four armed hostiles patrolling the perimeter. It is a fortress, sir. We need to coordinate with local heavy support.”

“No,” Hilliard commanded, his voice as cold as liquid nitrogen. “We hit them fast. Once we breach the doors, I want every single person inside that building put down. Except Charla.”

Suddenly, the three-dimensional map on the monitor violently glitched. The screen dissolved into a storm of green and grey static.

“What is happening?” Hilliard demanded, leaning forward. The sudden movement wrenched at his broken ribs, forcing a sharp hiss of pain through his teeth.

Gavin’s fingers flew across the keyboard. His face went pale. “Sir, someone just hit the resort with a highly targeted localized logic bomb and a directional microwave emitter. All internal network servers, external communications, and backup power grids belonging to that compound have been completely fried — without alerting the Swiss military or triggering a national security incident.”

Hilliard’s heart slammed against his ribcage. He knew instantly what it meant.

Kegan was already there.

“Tell the pilot to push the engines past the redline!” Hilliard roared, ignoring the agonizing pain in his chest. He grabbed the back of the seat to pull himself upright.

“Kegan will kill her instantly,” Hilliard muttered, his eyes wide with panic. “He will just put a bullet in her brain. That is too merciful. She owes Elia a debt of blood, and I have to be the one to collect it.”

The Gulfstream shuddered violently as the pilot pushed the throttles to maximum thrust. The jet screamed through the night sky, racing toward the European continent.

Back in New York, Cailin stood before the floor-to-ceiling windows of her secure penthouse, looking down at the glittering city lights. She held the bloody pink jacket against her chest.

The trap was set. The wolves were hunting.

The freezing wind howled through the jagged peaks of the Swiss Alps. The sky was just beginning to turn a bruised, pale grey as dawn approached.

Two black, unmarked Black Hawk helicopters hovered silently over the snow-covered roof of the abandoned ski resort.

Hilliard stood at the open side door of the lead chopper. The freezing air whipped his hair and stung his pale face. He grabbed the thick fast-rope with his uninjured left hand, wrapped his legs around it, and slid down into the blinding snow. His heavy combat boots hit the ground with a dull thud.

His tactical team dropped seconds later, immediately forming a defensive perimeter and raising their suppressed assault rifles toward the heavy oak doors of the main lodge.

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Hilliard drew his Glock and kicked the doors open, fully expecting a barrage of automatic fire to tear through the entrance.

Instead, a wave of hot, metallic air hit his face. The smell of blood was so thick it coated the back of his throat.

The grand lobby was a slaughterhouse.

Over twenty heavily armed mercenaries lay scattered across the expensive wooden floor. None of them had managed to fire a single shot. Every body bore the same fatal wound — a precise slit across the throat, or a single bullet hole directly between the eyes. The blood pooling on the floor was still steaming in the cold mountain air. The massacre had happened less than ten minutes ago.

Gavin stepped over a body, his boots slipping slightly in the blood. He swallowed hard. “Boss — this wasn’t a firefight. This was an execution.”

Hilliard ignored him. He moved through the carnage, ears straining for any sign of life.

A faint, muffled scream echoed up through the floorboards beneath his feet.

Hilliard signaled his team. They moved swiftly toward the heavy iron door leading to the basement. He raised his boot and kicked it off its hinges.

He descended the concrete stairs with his gun raised.

The basement was illuminated by a single, blindingly bright halogen work light.

In the center of the room, a massive, heavily tattooed man was pinned against the concrete wall. Thick steel spikes had been driven through his wrists and ankles, physically crucifying him to the stone. Blood poured from his wounds and pooled around his boots.

This was Bloodhound — the Dark Web broker who had organized Elia's kidnapping.

Standing a few feet away, completely untouched by the gore, was Kegan. He wore a perfectly tailored black suit and was calmly wiping blood from a serrated tactical knife with a pristine white towel.

Silas, Kegan's chief enforcer, stood in the shadows. The moment Hilliard entered the room, Silas raised his weapon and placed a laser sight directly on the center of Hilliard's chest.

Hilliard's men instantly raised their rifles in response. The cramped basement became a powder keg.

"You are late, Holloway," Kegan said, his voice dripping with aristocratic boredom. He tossed the bloody towel directly onto Bloodhound's face.

"Where is Charla?" Hilliard roared, completely ignoring the red laser dot on his chest. He marched straight toward Kegan, eyes burning with psychotic fury.

"She ran," Kegan replied coldly. "While my men were cleaning up the perimeter, she used a hidden maintenance tunnel to escape into the mountains. But I have already locked down the entire valley."

Hilliard turned violently toward the man nailed to the wall. He reached down to his tactical belt, drew a heavy combat knife, and drove it into Bloodhound's left thigh.

"Tell me her extraction route!" Hilliard screamed. He grabbed the handle and twisted it brutally inside the muscle tissue.

Bloodhound let out a horrific, ear-piercing shriek. His body convulsed against the steel spikes, but he clamped his jaw shut. "I don't know. She's a ghost."

Chapter 429:

Kegan stepped forward and placed his hand firmly over Hilliard's wrist. "Your interrogation methods are too emotional. He will pass out from the pain before he talks."

He reached into his suit pocket and produced a medical syringe filled with a thick, clear liquid — a massive dose of synthetic epinephrine. Without a word of warning, he drove the needle into the side of Bloodhound's neck and pushed the plunger down.

"This will keep his heart beating and his brain fully conscious," Kegan said, his smile a terrifying, soulless expression. "He will feel every single nerve ending."

For the next five minutes, the two men who controlled billions of dollars and vast underground empires abandoned all human morality. They worked together in the damp basement, inflicting a level of agony upon Bloodhound that defied comprehension. The room echoed with sounds no human throat should make.

Finally, Bloodhound's mind shattered completely.

"Geneva!" he sobbed, blood bubbling from his lips. "She has a private jet waiting at the Geneva executive terminal — tail number N773. She's flying to Dubai!"

Kegan didn't ask a second question. He raised his knife and sliced cleanly through Bloodhound's carotid artery.

A spray of hot arterial blood splashed across Hilliard's tactical vest.

Kegan turned to look at him. "Geneva airport. We play by the rules of the jungle now. Whoever catches her first gets the privilege of ending it."

Hilliard wiped the blood from his cheek with the back of his bandaged hand. He said nothing. He turned around, sprinted up the stairs, and yelled for his men to move.

The final race had begun.

The atmosphere inside the elite Manhattan funeral parlor was suffocating. The air was thick with the cloying, sweet scent of thousands of white lilies.

Cailin stood alone in the center of the viewing room. She wore a tailored, pitch-black mourning dress that offered no warmth. She stared blankly at a pristine white marble urn resting on a velvet pedestal.

The urn was completely empty. There were no ashes to bury.

Ashely walked in, her high heels clicking softly on the hardwood floor, holding a digital tablet. "The media perimeter is secure," she reported, her voice hushed. "The major networks have agreed to a muted live-stream of the exterior arrivals. The world is watching."

Cailin slowly reached out and traced the cold rim of the empty urn with her pale fingertips. "And the Holloway family?"

Ashely's jaw tightened with anger. "Preston's secretary sent a formal decline. They claim the core board members are locked in a mandatory video conference for the European merger. They refuse to attend a memorial for an 'outsider.'"

When Cailin heard that word, the corner of her mouth twitched. A slow, terrifying smile spread across her face — completely devoid of warmth or sanity.

"Bring me the tablet," she commanded.

Ashely handed it over. Cailin tapped the screen of the specialized device Aron had encrypted for her and pressed a single red icon, activating the untraceable backdoor her son had already planted deep within the system. The custom malware instantly bypassed standard security protocols and linked her directly into the Holloway Group's central communication mainframe.

Chapter 430:

Miles away, inside the glass-walled boardroom at the top of Holloway Tower, Preston sat at the head of the massive mahogany table, gold pen in hand, ready to sign the final authorization for a thirty-billion-dollar acquisition. The other board members watched him with greedy anticipation.

The massive holographic display at the end of the room suddenly flickered. The financial charts vanished.

Cailin's pale, ice-cold face appeared on the screen, projected ten feet tall before the room.

The board members gasped. Preston slammed his hands on the table and stood up. "What is the meaning of this?! Security, cut the feed immediately!"

"Don't bother, Preston," Cailin's voice boomed through the surround-sound speakers, chilling the blood of every man in the room. "I have locked the network."

She held the executed divorce agreement up to the camera.

"According to this legally binding document, I now possess fifty percent of Hilliard Holloway's equity," she said smoothly. "Combined with the retail proxy votes I acquired through the Obsidian network, I now hold absolute veto power over this board."

Preston's face turned a violent shade of purple. "You are insane! If you veto this merger, the stock will plummet! You will lose billions!"

"I do not care about your money," Cailin said, her eyes moving across the terrified faces of the billionaires at the table. "I want your physical presence."

"Tomorrow morning at ten o'clock. The Long Island estate. Elia's memorial service."

She pressed a single red button on the tablet.

Instantly, the holographic screen flashed red. A system warning appeared, indicating that the thirty-billion-dollar escrow account for the merger had been frozen.

“If every single core member of the Holloway family — including you, Preston, and Jeraldine — does not show up wearing black, I will vaporize thirty billion dollars of your market cap before the sun sets,” Cailin promised.

The boardroom fell dead silent. The men looked at each other in absolute terror. They knew she wasn’t bluffing. She had nothing left to lose.

Preston ground his teeth until his jaw ached. He was trapped. “Fine. We will be there.”

“Make sure you bring your best fake tears,” Cailin sneered, and cut the feed.

Back in the funeral parlor, Ashely stared at Cailin in equal parts awe and fear. “You forced them to come. But why? What are you planning to do to them?”

Cailin didn’t answer immediately. She reached into her black handbag and pulled out a small, velvet-lined box. She opened it slowly.

Inside lay a heavy, solid gold nameplate. The polished metal caught the dim light and gleamed with a harsh, unforgiving brilliance.

"I am going to wait until they are standing in front of the cameras, feeling arrogant and untouchable," Cailin whispered, her eyes fixed on the engraved letters. "And then I am going to rip their skin off."

Ashely couldn't make out the words on the metal, but the sheer malice radiating from Cailin made her stomach drop.

"Go to the vault," Cailin ordered, closing the box with a sharp snap. "Bring me the ruby necklace. The one Hilliard gave me."