

Second chance 431

Chapter 431:

“Cailin, are you sure?” Ashely asked, her voice trembling slightly. “I know the misunderstanding about the necklace was cleared up, and Hilliard never actually betrayed you with it. But it is still the starting point of all this agony — the beginning of the nightmare. Why would you wear that to your daughter’s funeral?”

Cailin turned her head and looked out the window at the dark, gathering storm clouds.

“Because,” she said, her voice hollow and dead, “rubies are the exact color of fresh blood.”

Ashely shivered. She pulled a long, flat ebony box from her bag alongside the jewelry case. “This is the other item you requested. The security scanners won’t pick it up.”

Cailin took the flat box, her fingers brushing over the cool ebony surface. With a faint, almost inaudible click, she opened it just enough to slide the matte-black ceramic tactical folding knife into the deep, hidden pocket of her mourning gown.

Night had fully descended over Manhattan. Heavy rain lashed against the reinforced glass windows of Cailin’s penthouse safe house. Outside her door, Kegan’s armed mercenaries stood guard in absolute silence.

Cailin walked into the soundproof study and pushed the heavy steel door shut behind her, turning the deadbolt with a sharp click. She crossed to the windows and drew the thick blackout curtains tightly closed, ensuring no optical surveillance could penetrate the room.

She sat down at the heavy oak desk and opened a military-grade encrypted communication terminal. Her fingers moved rapidly across the keyboard, entering a thirty-two-character dynamic passcode known only to her and Kegan.

The screen blinked green. A secure, peer-to-peer video link was established with a hidden underground bunker in Switzerland.

The monitor flared to life. Two five-year-old boys appeared on the screen — identical faces framed by dark hair, their deep-set eyes the exact same piercing shade as Hilliard Holloway's.

"Mommy!" Aron and Davy shouted in unison. Their faces lit up with pure, innocent joy at the sight of their mother.

But their smiles vanished in an instant.

The boys possessed IQs well over 150. They instantly analyzed what the screen revealed: Cailin's pale, sunken cheeks; the thick white bandage wrapped around her neck; the absolute, crushing despair radiating from every line of her posture.

Aron's small fingers flew immediately to a keyboard off-screen. The reflection of scrolling code flashed in his dark eyes. "Mommy, where is Elia? I am scanning the New York grid, but I cannot find the GPS signal from her smartwatch."

Davy leaned closer to the camera, his small hands curling into tight fists. “Who hurt you? Was it that bastard Hilliard? Did he do this to you?”

Cailin looked at the faces of her two brilliant, beautiful sons. A massive, suffocating wave of grief crashed into her chest. She wanted to reach through the screen and hold them, but she was trapped inside a nightmare. She bit down hard on the inside of her cheek, using the sharp physical pain to stop the tears from falling.

“Aron. Davy. Listen to me,” Cailin said. Her voice trembled violently, but she forced herself to speak clearly. “Elia... she went somewhere very far away. She is not coming back.”

The silence that followed was absolute — the heavy, suffocating silence of a vacuum.

Chapter 432:

The boys were only five years old, but their genius-level intellects meant they fully comprehended the biological permanence of death.

Clack.

Aron dropped the digital stylus he had been holding. It bounced off his desk. His pupils dilated rapidly. His small chest began to heave as he hyperventilated, his mind struggling to process the trauma.

“No!” Davy suddenly screamed. He kicked his chair backward with such force that it crashed into the wall behind him, his eyes instantly filling with hot, furious tears. “That is impossible! Uncle Kegan sent soldiers to protect her!”

Cailin closed her eyes. The tears finally breached her defenses, sliding down her pale cheeks. “It was Charla English. And it was the Holloway family. They let it happen.”

The moment those two names left Cailin’s lips, the agonizing grief on the boys’ faces mutated. It twisted into a terrifying, cold-blooded rage that was entirely unnatural for children their age.

Aron slowly sat back down in his chair. He pulled his black hoodie over his head. His fingers returned to the keyboard and moved so fast they became a blur. The green light of the monitors reflected in his eyes, making him look like something born from a digital nightmare.

“I am going to burn their networks to ashes,” Aron whispered, his voice stripped of every trace of childish innocence.

Davy pulled open a desk drawer, took out a black tactical combat knife, and slammed the blade hard into the wooden desktop. “Mommy, let me fly to New York. I want to cut that woman’s skin off.”

“No. You stay in Switzerland. You do not leave that bunker,” Cailin ordered sharply. “That is a direct command.”

She leaned closer to the camera, her eyes locking onto her sons. “Uncle Kegan and I will handle the physical punishment. But I need you to do what you do best.”

“I want you to wipe the Holloway and English families off the digital map. I want them erased.”

Aron looked up at the camera. “Understood, Mommy. Protocol Ruin is initiated.”

“From this exact second,” he stated coldly, “a polymorphic ransomware virus is infecting every single server in the Holloway financial grid. It is irreversible.”

Davy pulled the knife free from the desktop. “I am hacking into Charla’s European asset database. I am draining her offshore accounts to zero. She will be a penniless fugitive.”

“I want them to realize they have lost absolutely everything the second Elia’s funeral ends,” Cailin said.

She reached out and cut the connection. The screen went black.

Cailin slumped back in her chair, her body completely drained of energy.

Thousands of miles away, in the freezing Swiss bunker, two five-year-old boys wiped the tears from their faces. The massive server racks surrounding them roared to life, spinning up to maximum capacity.

An invisible, catastrophic digital tsunami was already racing across the Atlantic. The countdown to the absolute destruction of the Holloway empire had begun.

The morning of the memorial service arrived with a suffocating, oppressive gloom. A freezing drizzle fell over the sprawling lawns of the Holloway estate in Long Island.

Chapter 433:

Hundreds of black umbrellas formed a dark, undulating sea across the manicured grass. The absolute elite of New York society — politicians, hedge fund managers, and socialites — stood in solemn silence, their breath pluming in the cold air.

At the front of the crowd, Cailin stood before a massive wall of white lilies. She wore a severe, high-necked black mourning gown, and around her pale neck rested the heavy, blood-red Holloway ruby necklace. She looked like a beautiful, soulless statue carved from ice.

On the outer edge of the crowd, Nadine, the disgraced former director of the Obsidian auction house, huddled beneath a dark purple trench coat. She had bribed a perimeter security guard to sneak onto the grounds. Her eyes gleamed with a toxic, vindictive joy as she stared at Cailin.

Nadine watched Ashely step away to coordinate the media cameras. Seeing her opening, she pushed through the crowd of mourners and walked directly up to Cailin.

“Oh, my. What a tragic sight,” Nadine whispered, her voice dripping with false sympathy yet pitched just loud enough for the surrounding billionaires to hear. “The great, untouchable Cailin, weeping over an empty box.”

The nearby guests turned their heads in shock. Even in the cutthroat world of the elite, openly mocking a grieving mother at a funeral was an unthinkable taboo.

Cailin slowly turned her head. Her eyes locked onto Nadine's face — her expression completely blank, devoid of anger or sorrow. She looked at Nadine the way a predator regards a dead insect.

Nadine mistook the silence for weakness. She leaned in closer, a cruel smirk twisting her lips.

"I guess it makes sense they couldn't find a body," Nadine hissed venomously. "A little bastard girl who doesn't even know who her real father is... ending up as fish food at the bottom of the ocean is quite fitting, don't you think?"

The air around them seemed to freeze instantly. The raindrops felt like shards of ice against the skin.

Cailin did not shout. She did not argue. She simply tilted her head slightly to the right.

In the next instant, she lunged forward — not with any elegant martial technique, but with raw, gravity-assisted force. She seized a thick handful of Nadine's meticulously styled hair with her left hand, ignoring the blinding flare of agony from her fractured ribs. She twisted her wrist, locking her grip, and violently yanked Nadine's head downward.

"Ahhh!" Nadine shrieked in sudden agony, her scalp feeling as though it were being torn from her skull. She lost her balance and stumbled forward. Cailin used the woman's own momentum against her, shoving her shoulders down hard. Nadine's knees buckled under the sudden pressure, and she crashed onto the wet, muddy grass, her purple coat soaking up the filthy water.

Before Nadine could raise her hands in defense, Cailin stepped forward. She planted the stiletto heel of her shoe firmly on the back of Nadine's neck and drove her face directly down into a deep puddle of thick, freezing mud.

Glug.

Muddy water rushed into Nadine's open mouth and up her nose. She began to thrash wildly, her hands clawing desperately at the wet grass, trying to push herself up.

Chapter 434:

But Cailin possessed the terrifying, adrenaline-fueled strength of absolute rage. She locked her knee and pressed her entire body weight down onto Nadine's neck, pinning her face beneath the surface of the mud like a vice.

The surrounding guests gasped in sheer terror. Several wealthy women screamed and backed away, dropping their umbrellas.

The estate security guards froze where they stood. They looked at Cailin — the woman who now legally controlled half the Holloway empire — and not one of them dared to step forward.

"Kneel. And apologize," Cailin commanded. Her voice was not loud, but it cut through the sound of the rain with lethal clarity.

Nadine was suffocating. Her lungs burned for oxygen. Muffled, desperate gurgling sounds rose from beneath the mud.

Cailin yanked Nadine's head up by the hair for exactly one second, allowing her to gasp a desperate lungful of air.

Then she slammed her face back down into the mud.

Mud splattered across Cailin's expensive black dress. She did not care.

"I will say it one last time," Cailin whispered, leaning down so only Nadine could hear her. "Apologize, or I will hold you under until your lungs fill with dirt."

Nadine's mind broke in pure panic. When Cailin pulled her head up again, she was covered in thick brown slime, mucus and tears streaming down her face.

"I'm sorry! I'm sorry! Please!" Nadine shrieked hysterically, coughing up muddy water.

Cailin opened her hand and dropped Nadine back into the grass like a discarded piece of refuse. Nadine curled into a fetal position, sobbing and retching violently.

Cailin reached into her pocket, withdrew a pristine white silk handkerchief, and slowly wiped the mud from her fingers. She turned her icy gaze toward the terrified crowd of billionaires.

“Does anyone else have an opinion they would like to share about my daughter?” Cailin asked.

The crowd stood in absolute, paralyzed silence. No one dared to even breathe.

Ashely rushed forward with two burly security guards and pointed at the sobbing, mud-covered Nadine on the ground.

“Drag her out of here and throw her on the street,” Ashely ordered. The guards grabbed Nadine by the arms and hauled her away.

Ashely turned to Cailin. She took in the mud splattered across the black dress, the blood-red ruby necklace resting against pale skin, and felt a deep, visceral shiver run down her spine.

“Are you okay?” Ashely asked softly, stepping forward to hold an umbrella over Cailin’s head.

Cailin pushed the umbrella away and let the freezing rain hit her face. “Tell the string quartet to start playing. The main cast has arrived.”

A low, mournful cello melody began to drift across the wet lawn.

The heavy iron gates of the estate swung open. A procession of six black Rolls-Royce Phantoms rolled slowly up the gravel driveway. Their doors opened in unison. The core members of the Holloway family stepped out, surrounded by a phalanx of bodyguards holding massive black umbrellas.

Preston Holloway walked at the front, his face a mask of furious, barely contained humiliation. Being blackmailed into attending a funeral for an illegitimate child was the ultimate insult to his pride.

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Behind him walked Jeraldine Holloway in an extravagant black lace mourning gown, leaning heavily on the arm of her sycophantic assistant, Annie. Jeraldine kept her eyes fixed on the ground, refusing to look in Cailin's direction.

The last vehicle in the procession was not a Rolls-Royce. It was a battered, mud-splattered tactical SUV.

The door opened, and Hilliard stepped out. He was completely unarmed and carried no umbrella. His black suit was soaked through with rain and sweat, and his right hand was heavily bandaged, the white gauze stained a deep, rusty red from the wound Cailin had inflicted the day before. He had flown straight back from the massacre in the Swiss Alps, his clothes still carrying the faint, metallic stench of gunpowder and death.

Hilliard walked like a reanimated corpse. His eyes were hollow and completely devoid of life, locked onto the white urn at the front of the lawn.

As the Holloway family approached the altar, the whispers in the crowd died instantly. The air pressure seemed to drop, becoming thick and suffocating.

Preston stopped a few feet from Cailin and glared at her. “We are here. We played your little game. Now unfreeze the corporate accounts.”

Cailin did not even look at him. “Patience, Preston. The ceremony hasn’t even started. You haven’t shed your tears yet.”

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Jeraldine’s face twisted in disgust. She could not hold her tongue. “We graced you with our presence. Do not push your luck. We are not going to stand here and weep for a—”

“Shut your mouth, Mother!” Hilliard suddenly roared. His voice was a raw, agonizing scrape that startled everyone in the crowd.

He ignored his family entirely. He walked past them, his boots sinking into the wet grass, and stopped directly in front of the white urn.

Then his knees buckled.

Hilliard collapsed onto the muddy ground, falling hard onto his knees and bowing his head before the urn. In a single moment, he abandoned all dignity in front of the most powerful people in New York.

Jeraldine gasped in horror. "Hilliard! Have you lost your mind? Stand up! You are embarrassing the Holloway name!"

Preston's face flushed with fury. He snapped his fingers at two bodyguards. "Get him off the ground."

The guards stepped forward and reached for Hilliard's arms.

"Don't touch me," Hilliard roared. The sound tore from his throat with such raw, animalistic force that both guards flinched back as if struck by a physical blow. His eyes burned with a suicidal madness that promised a violence more terrible than any firearm.

The guards froze, slowly raised their hands, and backed away. The crowd erupted in terrified gasps. The former CEO of the Holloway Group had been reduced to a cornered, grieving beast.

Cailin looked down at Hilliard kneeling in the mud. Her eyes were completely empty.

"Did you find her in Europe?" Cailin asked coldly.

Hilliard lowered his head. Tears mixed with the rain on his face. "She escaped to Dubai... but I slaughtered every single man she hired. I will find her, Cailin. I swear to God."

"What a touching display of fatherly devotion," Cailin said, her voice dripping with venom. "It is a pity you are too late."

Chapter 436:

The priest nervously stepped up to the podium and began to read a somber eulogy.

The rain intensified, soaking Hilliard where he shivered in the mud. Jeraldine stood rigid beside him, shaking with rage.

Behind Jeraldine, Annie felt the terrifying, oppressive tension pressing down on her like a physical weight. She was a mole, and the guilt and fear made her heart pound frantically. She tried to quietly take a step backward, to hide herself behind a taller guest.

As she stepped back, the heel of her shoe caught the edge of the heavy metal stand supporting the massive wall of white lilies.

Clang.

CRASH!

The heavy metal stand buckled under the sudden shift in weight. The massive circular wreath of white lilies tipped backward and slammed violently onto the wooden altar.

The deafening noise cut the priest's eulogy short. Hundreds of white petals exploded into the air and rained down onto the muddy grass.

Annie shrieked in terror, throwing her hands over her mouth and stumbling backward. The color drained from her face entirely.

Jeraldine whipped her head around and glared at the assistant. "You clumsy idiot! Can you not even stand still?"

But as Jeraldine turned back toward the altar, her eyes swept across the wooden surface, and her voice caught in her throat.

The fallen wreath had been concealing something.

Her eyes widened to impossible proportions. Standing directly behind the white urn was a massive, solid gold cross nameplate — completely hidden by the flowers until this moment. Now, the rain washed over its polished surface, making it gleam brilliantly against the grey sky.

Engraved deeply into the gold were two lines of thick, black text.

Preston, standing closest to the altar, squinted and subconsciously read the words aloud, his voice carrying over the silent crowd.

"In Loving Memory of... Elia Morton-Holloway."

Holloway.

That single word hit the crowd like a shockwave. A collective, sharp intake of breath echoed across the lawn. The billionaires and socialites stared at the gold plate in absolute, stunned disbelief.

Jeraldine's entire body began to tremble violently. She pointed a shaking finger at the nameplate, her voice rising to a hysterical screech.

"What is the meaning of this?!" Jeraldine screamed at Cailin. "How dare you defile our family charter! You cannot put the Holloway name on a bastard child!"

Preston's face contorted in fury. "This is a legal violation! Guards, smash that plate right now!"

Hilliard, still kneeling in the mud, slowly raised his head. His bloodshot eyes locked onto the gold nameplate.

His mind simply stopped functioning. The world around him faded into absolute silence.

Morton-Holloway.

His pale, trembling lips moved soundlessly, repeating the hyphenated surname over and over again.

"If anyone touches that plate, I will put a bullet in their kneecap," Cailin announced. Her voice was not loud, but it carried the absolute, terrifying authority of a dictator.

She walked slowly down the wooden steps of the altar and stopped directly in front of Jeraldine. A cruel, merciless smile touched her lips.

"A bastard child?" Cailin asked softly.

Chapter 437:

Then she turned her back to Jeraldine and faced the crowd of shocked billionaires, raising her voice so that every single person on the estate could hear her.

"Open your eyes and look at the truth," Cailin's voice rang out like a bell of doom. "The little girl lying at the bottom of the ocean was not some random orphan."

"She was the child I carried in my womb for nine months. She was Hilliard Holloway's biological daughter. She was the true, first-in-line blood heir to the Holloway empire."

BOOM.

The truth detonated over the lawn with the force of a nuclear bomb.

Jeraldine's legs gave out completely. She collapsed into the mud, her expensive black umbrella tumbling away in the wind. She stared blankly at the grass, her mind fracturing. "No... no... the DNA report... the report said zero match..."

Preston froze like a statue, a cold sweat drenching his back. If the girl had been the true heir, then his entire coup to seize power had been built on a catastrophic mistake.

The crowd erupted into chaotic whispers. The elite guests turned to look at the Holloway family with expressions of absolute horror and disgust. They were looking at a family of child-killers.

Hilliard's mind was being torn apart by a hurricane of memories — the crescent-shaped birthmark on Elia's thigh, the exact shape of her eyes, Kegan's mocking smile in the basement.

"The DNA report..." Hilliard choked out. He dragged himself through the mud, crawling toward Cailin like a dying man crossing a desert. "Kegan... Kegan hacked the hospital servers... didn't he?"

Cailin looked down at him. Her eyes blazed with the dark, intoxicating thrill of absolute vengeance.

"Yes," Cailin said, her voice a lethal blade slicing through his soul. "He altered the data to protect her. Because he knew that if you found out she was yours, you would steal her from me."

Hilliard grabbed his own chest. He could not breathe. His lungs were paralyzed.

“And you,” Cailin leaned down, delivering the final, fatal blow. “You stood on that pier. You looked your own flesh and blood in the eyes, and you let go of her hand. You traded your biological daughter to save a fake.”

“HHHHHHHHHH!!”

A horrific, inhuman shriek erupted from the very depths of Hilliard’s soul — a sound of such pure, absolute agony that the surrounding guests covered their ears.

Hilliard threw his head back toward the raining sky. He raised his hands and dug his fingernails into his own scalp, tearing at his hair and ripping clumps of it from his head. He dragged his nails down his cheeks, leaving deep, bloody scratches across his face.

He was completely, utterly destroyed. The guilt of having killed his own child shattered his sanity into a million irreparable pieces.

Jeraldine watched her son mutilate himself in the mud. The realization that she had forced him to do it finally broke her. Her eyes rolled back in her head, and she fainted dead away, collapsing face-first into a freezing puddle.

Chapter 438:

The torrential rain washed over the estate, turning the pristine lawns into a swamp of mud and despair. But no amount of rain could cleanse the suffocating stench of sin that clung to the Holloway family.

Hilliard remained on his knees in the mud. He had stopped screaming. In its place, a low, guttural, animalistic sobbing racked his massive frame as he slammed his forehead repeatedly against the edge of the wooden altar steps.

Thud. Thud. Thud.

“I killed her... I killed my own baby...” Hilliard chanted the words like a cursed mantra. Blood from the scratches on his face mixed with the mud, dripping onto his ruined white shirt.

The guests backed away in horror. The security guards stood frozen, completely paralyzed by the sheer magnitude of the tragedy unfolding before them.

Cailin stood perfectly still, looking down at the man who had destroyed her life. She watched him suffer the ultimate psychological torture.

But she felt no joy. There was no triumphant rush of adrenaline — only a vast, empty, freezing void inside her chest. Destroying Hilliard had not brought Elia back.

Cailin slowly crouched down in the mud.

She reached out with her pale, freezing hand and gently placed her palm against Hilliard’s blood-stained cheek, forcing him to stop bashing his head against the wood.

Hilliard gasped at her cold touch. He seized her wrist with both hands, clinging to her like a man falling into an abyss.

“Kill me,” Hilliard begged. His eyes were wide, completely shattered, pleading with her. “Please, Cailin. I can’t live with this. I don’t deserve to breathe. Kill me and let me go to the bottom of the ocean with her.”

Cailin stared into his broken eyes. A tragic, beautiful, and utterly terrifying smile slowly curved her lips.

“Okay,” Cailin whispered softly. “I forgive you.”

As the words left her mouth, her right hand moved. From the deep hidden pocket of her mourning gown, her fingers closed around the cold, smooth handle of the ceramic tactical folding knife she had secured earlier.

Without a flinch, without a single microsecond of hesitation, Cailin reversed her grip on the handle.

She drove her arm forward with every ounce of strength left in her broken body.

SHUCK.

The razor-sharp ceramic blade pierced effortlessly through Hilliard's wet suit jacket. It sliced through his shirt, slipped perfectly between his ribs, and buried itself deep into the left side of his chest, stopping millimeters from his heart.

Hilliard's entire body went rigid. His eyes snapped wide open and stared directly into Cailin's face.

He did not try to block her arm. He did not pull away. In the final fraction of a second before the blade struck, his body had leaned forward, willingly embracing the lethal blow.

A torrent of hot, dark red blood erupted from the wound, spraying across Cailin's pale face and black dress, blooming like dark roses in the rain.

"Murder! She stabbed him!" A woman in the crowd finally shattered the silence with a hysterical, piercing scream.

Total chaos erupted. Guests scrambled backward, slipping and falling in the mud.

Chapter 439:

Ashely screamed in pure horror and shoved her way through the panicking crowd, sprinting toward the altar. "Cailin! What did you do?!"

Hilliard slumped forward, his chin coming to rest on Cailin's shoulder. Thick blood bubbled past his lips.

He turned his gaze to her profile. A faint, peaceful smile touched his bloody mouth.

“Thank you,” Hilliard whispered, his breath rattling in his chest.

His massive body went completely limp. He slid from Cailin’s shoulder and crashed heavily into the mud, lying motionless on his back. The black handle of the ceramic knife protruded from his chest, trembling slightly from the impact.

Cailin remained crouched where she was. She looked down at her bloody hands.

The adrenaline that had been keeping her alive for the past five days suddenly vanished. The absolute finality of her revenge severed the last thread holding her physical body together.

A blinding, catastrophic pain exploded in her abdomen. The stress ulcer, aggravated by days of extreme emotional trauma and physical exertion, violently ruptured.

Cailin’s face turned the color of ash. She gasped for air, but her lungs refused to expand.

She doubled over. A massive volume of dark, coagulated blood erupted from her mouth, splashing directly onto Hilliard’s motionless chest.

Her organs were failing. Her body was shutting down.

Cailin's eyes rolled back. She collapsed forward, her fragile body falling directly on top of Hilliard in the bloody mud.

Ashely threw herself onto the ground beside them, screaming frantically for an ambulance and pressing her hands against Cailin's bleeding mouth.

At that exact moment, the two massive LED screens flanking the altar — which had been displaying a slideshow of white lilies — flickered and went pitch black.

A second later, lines of glowing green code began to cascade rapidly down both displays.

A massive, dripping red skull logo materialized in the center of the screens.

Beneath the skull, bold, pulsing text appeared for the entire world to see:

PROTOCOL RUIN COMPLETE. HOLLOWAY GROUP ASSETS: LIQUIDATED. SYSTEM INTEGRITY: 0%.

Thousands of miles away, two genius children watched the chaos unfold through a hacked security camera.

The torrential rain of the Long Island storm hammered against the muddy lawn of the Holloway estate.

The massive LED screens flanking the altar flickered violently. The images of white lilies were gone. In their place, a glowing neon-green skull logo pulsed with a slow, rhythmic menace.

The harsh green light cast an eerie, sickly glow over the carnage on the grass. It looked like a scene dragged straight out of hell.

Ashely fell to her knees in the freezing mud, her designer dress instantly soaked in brown sludge. She slammed her hands over Cailin's mouth and nose. Thick, dark blood was pouring from Cailin's lips at a terrifying rate — the stress ulcer in her stomach had completely ruptured.

"Help her!" Ashely shrieked, her vocal cords tearing with the force of the scream. "Somebody call an ambulance!"

Chapter 440:

Less than two feet away, Hilliard's massive body lay motionless in an expanding pool of blood. The matte-black handle of the ceramic tactical folding knife protruded from his left pectoral muscle, rising and falling in a microscopic, agonizingly slow rhythm — the only physical proof that his heart was still fighting to beat.

Panic erupted among the elite guests. Billionaires and socialites yanked their phones from their pockets, fingers trembling as they tried to dial 911.

"My screen is locked!" a hedge fund manager yelled, tapping his phone frantically.

Every mobile device connected to the estate's local network displayed the same green skull logo. The ransomware virus deployed by the five-year-old twins had completely paralyzed the local grid.

Preston Holloway stood near the altar, rain plastering his hair to his forehead. He stared at the skull on the main screen, then looked down at the bleeding patriarch of his family.

Preston's brain bypassed human empathy entirely. He went straight to capitalist survival.

If the world found out that the CEO had been stabbed at a funeral and the corporate network had been hijacked, Holloway Group stock would plummet to zero before the opening bell.

"Do not let anyone make a call!" Preston roared, pointing at the tactical security team. "Confiscate their devices!"

He turned to the head of security. "Form a human wall. Herd every guest and every media personnel into the main house. Cut off all sightlines to this lawn. Immediately."

The heavily armed guards moved at once, shoving protesting billionaires toward the mansion doors.

Two senior medical consultants retained exclusively for the Holloway family rushed out of the main house carrying heavy titanium trauma kits. They sprinted through the mud and dropped to their knees beside Hilliard.

One of the doctors roughly shoved Ashely backward.

“Get out of the way,” the doctor snapped, ripping Hilliard’s wet shirt open to expose the knife wound. They did not spare a glance at Cailin.

Ashely fell backward into a puddle. She tasted dirty water and copper.

She looked at Cailin’s face. Cailin’s skin was the color of wet ash. Her breathing had stopped completely.

Ashely grabbed a jagged piece of landscaping stone from the mud and hurled it directly at the back of the medical consultant. The stone struck the doctor’s shoulder blade with a hard thud.

“Save her first!” Ashely screamed, her eyes wild with animalistic fury. “Her organs are failing! Look at her!”

Two security guards lunged forward. They grabbed Ashely’s arms, twisted them painfully behind her back, and forced her face-down into the wet grass. She kicked and thrashed, but the men pinned her down with their heavy combat boots.

A loud, piercing siren cut through the sound of the storm.

Three blue-and-white NYPD patrol cars arrived at the front gates of the estate. Officers stepped out and drew their weapons, demanding entry.

They could not get in. Two massive Holloway armored transport vehicles were parked horizontally across the driveway, forming an impenetrable steel barricade.

Preston's private attorney jogged through the rain toward the gates, holding up a laminated legal document.