

Second chance 441

Chapter 441:

“This is now a matter of national financial security!” the lawyer shouted over the storm, blocking the police captain. “The CEO of the Holloway Group has been attacked, and we suspect corporate espionage. We have enacted an emergency protocol, and the FBI is taking jurisdiction. Your units need to maintain a perimeter until the federal agents arrive. You do not have clearance to enter this scene.”

The police captain glared at the lawyer, but the sudden invocation of federal jurisdiction and the specter of a Wall Street crisis physically bound his hands.

A deafening, rhythmic thumping began to vibrate in the chests of everyone on the lawn.

Two AgustaWestland medical helicopters, painted matte black with the Holloway crest, tore through the low storm clouds. They descended rapidly, their massive rotors whipping the rain into a blinding horizontal spray.

The hurricane-force wind from the blades sent floral wreaths skidding across the grass. The solid gold nameplate — engraved with Elia’s name — was flipped over into the mud. Dirty water splashed across Preston’s expensive suit. He did not flinch.

The choppers touched down hard on the lawn.

Paramedics shoved two titanium stretchers out of the side doors and sprinted toward Hilliard first. They rapidly connected temporary life-support tubes to his neck and chest before lifting his massive, bleeding frame onto the first stretcher.

A second team of medics finally reached Cailin.

The lead medic pressed two fingers to Cailin's neck. "No pulse. Push one milligram of epinephrine. Now."

A medic jammed a long needle directly into Cailin's thigh. They waited three agonizing seconds.

"I have a faint rhythm. Bag her and move!"

They lifted Cailin onto the second stretcher and sprinted toward the second helicopter.

Ashely felt the security guards' grip loosen as the chopper engines roared. She violently jerked her arms free, leaving her torn sleeves in their hands. She scrambled to her feet and sprinted blindly through the mud, lunging at the second stretcher just as it was being lifted into the cabin. Her fingers locked onto the cold metal railing in a death grip.

"Let go!" a medic yelled, trying to pry her fingers loose.

"I am going with her!" Ashely screamed, her knuckles turning white.

The flight doctor glanced at the dropping blood pressure on the monitor. He did not have time to fight a hysterical woman. He reached out, grabbed Ashely by the collar of her ruined dress, and hauled her up into the cabin. The heavy sliding door slammed shut.

Both helicopters lifted off simultaneously, banking sharply over the Long Island Sound and racing toward the elite private hospital in Manhattan.

The lawn fell suddenly quiet, save for the rain. A vast, bloody crater of mud was left behind. The gold nameplate lay half-buried in the dirt.

Preston watched the helicopters disappear into the storm. He reached out and demanded a communication device. His lead bodyguard handed over a heavy military-grade satellite phone. Preston dialed furiously, but only harsh, rhythmic static answered him. The line was dead.

He looked up at the sky, a cold realization dawning on him. Kegan's network was not merely digital — it was atmospheric. Military-grade signal jammers were almost certainly active in the area, cutting him off completely.

Chapter 442:

"Damn it!" Preston roared, hurling the satellite phone into the freezing mud. He grabbed the bodyguard by the tactical vest. "Run to the subterranean emergency bunker. Use the analog hardlines — they are physically severed from the main grid. Get me the crisis PR team on Wall Street." His voice was devoid of any human emotion, yet vibrating with absolute urgency. "Tell them we have a situation. Now."

Inside the second helicopter, the cabin was bathed in harsh white light.

A high-pitched, continuous alarm shrieked from the cardiac monitor. Cailin's heart was failing.

"Ventricular fibrillation! Charge to two hundred!" the doctor yelled.

He pressed the heavy defibrillator paddles directly onto Cailin's pale, wet chest. Her body violently arched off the stretcher as the high-voltage electricity slammed through her muscles.

Ashely huddled in the corner of the small cabin, hugging her knees to her chest and shaking uncontrollably. She stared at Cailin's lifeless face, silently begging whatever god was listening to keep her friend alive.

In the first helicopter, the situation was equally catastrophic.

"Blood pressure is tanking! Forty over palp!" the trauma surgeon shouted over the engine noise. "The knife nicked the pericardium. He has cardiac tamponade — the blood is crushing his heart."

There was no time for anesthesia. There was no time for a sterile field.

The surgeon grabbed a thick hollow plastic tube and a scalpel. He sliced a two-inch incision between Hilliard's ribs and drove the tube into the chest cavity with raw physical force.

A geyser of dark, almost black blood erupted from the tube. It sprayed across the cabin, coating the windows and the surgeon's visor in a thick layer of red.

Fifteen minutes later, both choppers descended onto the rooftop helipad of the Manhattan private hospital.

A team of twenty trauma specialists was already waiting.

Hilliard's stretcher was pulled out first. The wheels slammed against the concrete, and he was rushed directly into Cardiovascular Operating Room One. The chief surgeon was already scrubbed in, holding a bone saw, ready to crack open Hilliard's sternum.

Cailin's stretcher followed seconds later. She was rushed into the Intensive Care Unit's negative pressure isolation room, where nurses immediately connected her to a dialysis machine and an ECMO bypass circuit, forcing oxygen into her failing blood.

Ashely tried to follow Cailin, but a heavy frosted glass door slid shut in her face.

The red SURGERY IN PROGRESS light illuminated above it.

Ashely's legs finally gave out. She slid down the cold glass wall, her bloody hands resting on her knees.

The entire VIP floor was instantly swarmed by Holloway private security contractors in black suits. They locked down the elevators and the stairwells. The hospital became a fortress.

The elevator at the end of the long corridor chimed. The doors slid open.

Jeraldine Holloway stepped out, leaning heavily on her adopted daughter, Annie. Jeraldine's expensive black lace dress was caked in dried mud. Her hair was a wild, tangled mess. Her eyes were completely hollow, devoid of any light or sanity. She had been locked in a severe catatonic state ever since the horrific realization that she had handed her own flesh and blood to murderers. She did not so much walk as allow herself to be dragged forward by Annie, her feet shuffling mindlessly against the marble floor.

Jeraldine's dragging footsteps barely made a sound on the polished marble floor of the VIP corridor.

Chapter 443:

She saw Ashely sitting on the ground outside the surgical suite. The sight of Cailin's best friend did not trigger rage, but a primal, paralyzing terror. Jeraldine's mouth opened and closed in a silent, agonizing scream. Her body began to tremble violently, a meaningless repetitive twitch overtaking her frail shoulders. She shrank back against the wall, her fingers clawing weakly at her own throat as if trying to dig out the guilt suffocating her from within.

"Don't look at her, Mother," Annie whispered tearfully, trying to shield Jeraldine's face. "Just keep walking."

Ashely stood up, her eyes burning with cold fury. She looked at the pathetic, broken shell of a woman before her. "You are the one who forced him to hand his own flesh and blood over to kidnappers," Ashely said, her voice a low, lethal blade. "You are the murderer. And your mind knows it."

The words struck Jeraldine like a physical blow. Her eyes rolled back, and her knees gave out completely. She collapsed into Annie's arms, her breathing fracturing into rapid, shallow gasps — trapped forever in the prison of her own shattered psyche.

"Enough."

A deep, resonant voice echoed from the far end of the corridor, carrying the absolute, crushing weight of ruthless corporate ambition.

Preston Holloway walked slowly toward them. The mud on his trousers was still damp, but his posture was rigidly straight. Four massive bodyguards flanked him in perfect synchronization. With Hilliard incapacitated, Preston had instantly seized the vacuum of power. He was now the undisputed Acting Chairman.

Preston stopped in front of Jeraldine. He looked at her hyperventilating, catatonic form with profound disgust.

"Get her out of my sight," Preston commanded coldly, glancing at Annie. "Lock her in a private psychiatric wing. She is an embarrassment."

Annie flinched as if she had been struck. The sheer physical intimidation radiating from Preston forced her to swallow her tears. She trembled silently as the security guards helped her pull Jeraldine down the hall.

The hospital's public relations director hurried toward them, clutching a leather binder to his chest and sweating profusely.

"Sir, the perimeter is locked down," the PR director reported, his voice tight. "The media is contained. But Wall Street is already hearing rumors of an assassination. We need to issue an official press release immediately to halt the panic selling."

Preston took the binder. He did not open it. He ripped the thick stack of papers in half with surprising physical force and dropped the pieces onto the floor.

"A press release is an explanation," Preston said, his eyes narrowing into cold slits. "We do not explain. We erase."

He turned his gaze to the PR director. "Wire ten million dollars from the family's Super PAC directly to the offshore account of the NYPD Commissioner. Tonight."

"Classify every single piece of physical evidence and witness testimony under the National Security Threat protocol," Preston ordered. "If any guest breathes a word to the press, hit them with federal felony charges for corporate espionage."

"And the media?" the PR director asked, his hands shaking.

Preston's expression was carved from ice. "Feed them an exclusive. Hilliard Holloway suffered a massive, acute myocardial infarction due to chronic exhaustion. A heart attack."

The PR director swallowed hard. He gritted his teeth. "And the woman? She stabbed him in broad daylight. Are we not sending her to a federal penitentiary?"

Chapter 444:

"You are a fool," Preston sneered, stepping closer so his voice dropped to barely above a whisper. "If we put her in a courtroom, the prosecution will demand motive. The truth about Elia's bloodline and our hostage exchange will become public record."

"Do you want the Holloway stock to become worthless paper?" Preston demanded.

The PR director closed his mouth. The logic was absolute.

"As long as she is breathing in this hospital, she is our asset," Preston said, turning his head toward the frosted glass doors of the ICU. "If she dies from her ulcer, it is a tragic medical complication. If she survives, she will be transferred to a private psychiatric facility. Permanently."

Ashely stood a few feet away, listening to the casual, terrifying calculation of human life. A cold shiver ran down her spine. She slowly slid her hand into the pocket of her ruined dress, her thumb feeling for the side button of her phone, trying to blindly activate the voice recorder.

A bodyguard standing to her left caught the subtle shift in her shoulder.

He moved with terrifying speed. He grabbed Ashely's wrist, twisted it sharply, and yanked the phone from her pocket. He handed the device to Preston.

Preston glanced at the screen. He dropped the phone onto the marble floor, lifted his heavy leather shoe, and brought it down hard. The glass screen shattered into a hundred pieces. He ground his heel into the motherboard until nothing remained but wreckage.

"Ms. Trevino," Preston said, his tone perfectly polite and utterly chilling. "On this floor, the only electronic signals I permit are the heart monitors."

He gave a subtle nod.

Two bodyguards stepped forward. They grabbed Ashely by her biceps, lifting her feet slightly off the floor, and dragged her down the hall. They shoved her into a small, windowless family waiting room and locked the heavy door from the outside.

The corridor fell back into a dead, suffocating silence. The red surgical light above Hilliard's door continued to blink.

Preston walked to the floor-to-ceiling window at the end of the hall. He looked down at the glittering lights of Manhattan, convinced he had successfully placed a lid on the boiling cauldron.

He had no idea that thousands of miles away, in a freezing bunker, the polymorphic virus unleashed by the twins had already bypassed the secondary firewalls. The digital slaughter had only just begun.

Three days later.

Inside the negative pressure isolation room of the Intensive Care Unit, the only sounds were the rhythmic hiss of the ventilator and the slow, monotonous beep of the cardiac monitor.

Cailin lay flat on the narrow bed. Her skin was translucent, blending almost seamlessly with the sterile white sheets.

Her index finger twitched.

The harsh fluorescent light above the bed pierced through her eyelids. She squeezed her eyes shut as a sharp pain shot through her temples.

She slowly opened them. The ceiling tiles were blurry. A harsh chemical smell invaded her nostrils — a sickening mixture of industrial bleach, rubbing alcohol, and liquid iodine.

Her brain rebooted. Physical sensation rushed back in a violent wave.

Chapter 445:

The memory hit her like a blow to the chest. She saw Elia's faded pink windbreaker. She saw the dark, coagulated blood soaked into the nylon. She heard the wet, tearing sound of the ceramic knife sliding between Hilliard's ribs.

Cailin's stomach violently convulsed.

A massive wave of post-traumatic stress hijacked her nervous system. She jerked her body sideways and leaned over the metal bedrail. She opened her mouth and began to dry heave violently. Because her stomach was completely empty from the massive ulcer hemorrhage, there was nothing to expel — only a thin stream of bitter, yellow bile onto the floor.

The violent muscular contractions tore at her healing abdominal tissues. A blinding, searing pain ripped through her core, making her gasp for air.

The heart monitor beside the bed instantly spiked, emitting a rapid, high-pitched alarm.

The heavy glass door swung open. An ICU nurse rushed into the room, her rubber-soled shoes squeaking on the linoleum. She reached out and pressed Cailin's shaking shoulders back toward the mattress.

"Ms. Morton, you need to lie flat!" the nurse said, panic edging her voice. "Your organ failure markers just stabilized. You are going to tear your stitches!"

Cailin reacted like a cornered predator.

She shoved the nurse's hands away with a sudden burst of adrenaline. Her eyes were wide, bloodshot, and completely devoid of human warmth. Her chest heaved as she fought to pull oxygen into her lungs. Her lips were cracked and bleeding.

"Where is Ashely?" Cailin rasped. Her throat felt as though it were lined with broken glass.

The nurse took a step back, visibly unsettled by the pure, concentrated intensity in Cailin's eyes. "Your friend is in the waiting room down the hall."

"Hilliard," Cailin demanded, her voice dropping to a flat, mechanical monotone. "Is he dead?"

The nurse swallowed hard, avoiding Cailin's gaze. "Mr. Holloway is in the trauma ICU next door. He is... still in a coma."

Not dead.

The physical reality of those two words made Cailin's heart contract painfully. A cold, suffocating disappointment washed over her, instantly followed by a surge of renewed, toxic hatred.

She looked down at the back of her left hand. A thick plastic intravenous catheter was taped to her skin, feeding clear fluids into her vein.

Cailin's expression turned to stone.

She reached over with her right hand, grabbed the plastic hub of the IV, and ripped it out of her flesh.

“Stop!” the nurse screamed.

A stream of dark red blood spurted from the open vein, splattering across the pristine white bedsheets.

The nurse lunged forward to apply pressure to the wound. Cailin swept her arm across the bedside table, sending a plastic water pitcher and a glass cup crashing to the floor.

“Get out,” Cailin hissed. The sound was barely human.

The nurse stumbled backward and bolted from the room to find the attending physician.

Cailin ignored the blood dripping from her hand. She threw the thin blanket off her legs, swung her bare feet over the edge of the bed, and planted them on the freezing tile floor.

Chapter 446:

Her leg muscles had atrophied from three days of unconsciousness, and her core had been entirely hollowed out by the massive internal hemorrhaging. The moment she put any weight on her legs, her body catastrophically failed her.

She crashed heavily onto the floor. Her kneecaps slammed into the hard tiles, sending a shockwave of pain up her femurs. The fresh stitches in her abdomen pulled taut, and a blinding, white-hot agony tore

through her nervous system. She gasped, curling into a tight fetal position on the cold floor, unable to command her own limbs to move.

She did not cry out. She bit down on her lower lip until she tasted fresh blood. She grabbed the metal bedrail with her bloody hand and desperately tried to haul her trembling body upward, but her arms gave out. She collapsed back onto the tiles, panting heavily — a prisoner in her own ruined flesh.

The glass door pushed open.

Julian Holloway stood in the doorway, a cruel smirk on his face. He leaned against the doorframe, taking in the sight. “Well, well. Trying to make a run for it?” he taunted.

Behind him, the door to the family waiting room clicked open. Julian gave a subtle nod to the guards. “Preston wants her to stew in there, but I think a little field trip would be far more entertaining. Let her out.” The guards, intimidated by his authority as a Holloway, reluctantly unlocked the door.

Ashely slipped into the hallway. Her eyes found Cailin’s room instantly, and tears flooded them the moment she saw Cailin crumpled on the floor. She rushed forward and wrapped her arms tightly around Cailin’s fragile waist.

“Cailin, please,” Ashely begged, her voice breaking. “Get back in bed. You are going to kill yourself.”

“I am not going to die,” Cailin said. She rested her chin on Ashely’s shoulder, staring blankly at the wall. “Not until I watch them burn.”

Cailin pushed Ashely back slightly, her eyes locked in a terrifying, obsessive stare. “Take me to him. Get a chair.”

Ashely looked at the blood dripping from Cailin’s hand. She knew there was no stopping her. She gave a slow nod, ran out to the hallway, and returned moments later with a standard hospital wheelchair. She gently, painstakingly lifted Cailin’s broken body into the seat and draped a loose hospital gown over her trembling shoulders.

Together, they pushed through the heavy glass doors of the isolation room and stepped out into the VIP corridor.

The air was sharp with antiseptic. Three Holloway security guards in black suits were stationed near the elevator. When they saw Cailin being wheeled toward them — looking like a vengeful, paralyzed ghost in a blood-stained gown — they physically recoiled, taking an involuntary step backward, unsettled by the sheer aura of death surrounding her.

Cailin ignored them. Her bare feet rested limply on the metal footrests as Ashely pushed the wheelchair down the long hallway, the rubber wheels squeaking softly against the polished tiles, heading straight for the trauma ICU. Cailin needed to see the monster’s ruined body with her own eyes.

Chapter 447:

At the far end of the VIP corridor, the trauma ICU was separated from the hallway by a massive wall of one-way observation glass that emitted a faint, icy blue tint beneath the hospital lights.

Cailin leaned forward in the wheelchair and wheeled herself until she was inches from the glass. She pressed her pale, trembling fingers against the cold, smooth surface and stared through it without blinking.

Inside the room, Hilliard lay on the bed.

His massive chest was completely bare, wrapped in thick layers of sterile white gauze stained with a faint yellowish-red seepage. Thick transparent plastic tubes snaked out from between his ribs, draining dark fluid into a canister on the floor. A thick endotracheal tube was shoved down his throat, taped aggressively to his face.

The mechanical ventilator hissed loudly beside the bed, forcing his chest to rise and fall in an unnatural, rigid rhythm. The green line on his cardiac monitor was weak, barely registering a pulse.

He looked like a hollowed-out corpse.

Cailin stared at the man who had once possessed the power to crush Wall Street with a single phone call. Now he was entirely dependent on a machine to inflate his lungs.

Her face remained completely motionless. Her eyes were dry. There was no pity, no lingering affection, no regret. She looked at him the way one regards a crushed insect on the pavement.

The sharp, rhythmic click of expensive leather shoes echoed down the hallway.

Julian Holloway strolled toward them in a perfectly tailored navy-blue suit, a steaming cup of artisan latte in his right hand and a relaxed, mocking smirk on his lips.

“Tsk, tsk. What a profoundly moving tableau,” Julian drawled, stopping a few feet away.

He glanced at the fresh blood dripping from Cailin’s hospital gown. “The ex-husband lies inside waiting for the reaper, and the ex-wife drags her half-dead corpse down the hall to pay her respects. Shakespeare would weep.”

Ashely stepped in front of Cailin, her fists clenched. “Back off, Julian. You have no business being here.”

Julian ignored Ashely entirely. He stepped closer to the glass and looked at Hilliard’s ruined chest.

“You have excellent aim, Cailin,” Julian said, taking a sip of his coffee. “The blade severed the left anterior descending artery. A millimeter to the right and he would have bled out on the grass.”

The chief trauma surgeon walked out of a nearby office, holding a metal clipboard. He saw Cailin by the glass and frowned, clearly uncomfortable, but strict orders from Preston Holloway prevented him from calling security.

“Doctor,” Julian smiled, gesturing toward Cailin with his coffee cup. “Why don’t you give our resident assassin a medical update?”

The surgeon cleared his throat, looked at his clipboard, and immediately clamped his mouth shut. He shook his head nervously. "I am sorry, Mr. Holloway. Acting Chairman Preston has placed a strict gag order on the patient's file. I cannot disclose any details to unauthorized personnel."

"Oh, how incredibly boring," Julian sighed, rolling his eyes. He took another sip of his latte and turned his predatory gaze back to Cailin.

Chapter 448:

"Fortunately, money still talks in this sterile fortress," Julian whispered, leaning down until his face was inches from Cailin's ear. "I bought a junior radiology tech a very nice sports car an hour ago. Let me paint you the picture the good doctor is too terrified to share."

Julian's smile stretched wider. "His Glasgow Coma Scale is at a three. The absolute lowest score before death. His brain was starved of oxygen for far too long. He is a vegetable, Cailin."

A vegetative state.

Ashely inhaled sharply and turned to look at Cailin, expecting some kind of reaction.

Cailin did not blink. Her breathing remained perfectly even.

"What?" Julian leaned in, his voice dropping to a harsh whisper. "Not even one fake tear for the man who loved you? You really are a cold-blooded monster."

He pressed further. "He mobilized the family's darkest assets to play hero for you. He vanished off the grid chasing ghosts to wash his conscience clean, and he still ended up taking a blade to the chest from the very woman he was trying to impress. And you feel absolutely nothing."

Cailin slowly turned her head. Her eyes locked onto Julian. The sheer, absolute zero temperature of her gaze made his smirk falter.

"He went off the grid to wash the blood off his own hands," Cailin said. Her voice was a dry, rasping whisper, but it cut through the air like a razor. "Not for me."

"He physically handed Elia to the men who killed her," she continued, her voice flat and factual. "That knife in his chest is the debt he owed."

Julian swallowed hard and took a subconscious step back.

Cailin turned her face back to the glass and looked at Hilliard's motionless face.

"If he becomes a vegetable," Cailin whispered, her voice echoing softly against the glass, "that is the perfect punishment."

"Let his brain remain conscious, trapped inside a paralyzed body, rotting in the dark for the rest of his natural life. Let him scream inside his own head every single day."

The trauma surgeon shuddered, the hair on his arms standing up. The words were so visceral, so utterly devoid of humanity, they made him nauseous.

Ding.

The brass elevator doors at the end of the hall slid open.

The sharp, aggressive clack of stiletto heels struck the marble floor.

Two of Preston's bodyguards stepped out first, their eyes sweeping the corridor with cold professionalism. They positioned themselves on either side of the elevator doors. Only then did Charla English step out.

She was dressed in a spectacular haute couture black mourning dress. A wide-brimmed black hat partially obscured her face, and dark sunglasses covered her eyes. Four men in sharp grey suits — high-powered defense attorneys — flanked her like a pack of hunting dogs.

It was a calculated, impossible illusion. Just three days ago she had been a hunted fugitive fleeing a Swiss bunker. But Preston Holloway, desperate for the English family's multi-billion-dollar liquidity injection, had utilized the Holloway Group's sovereign diplomatic channels. He had secretly extradited her back to New York, bypassing federal customs entirely and placing her under his direct protection. She was Preston's golden goose, and she knew exactly how to play the part of the untouchable survivor.

Chapter 449:

Charla stopped in the middle of the hallway. She slowly lowered her sunglasses. Her eyes locked onto Cailin sitting in the wheelchair by the glass.

A slow, vicious smile stretched across Charla's face.

Charla pulled the dark sunglasses from her face. She had deliberately irritated her eyes with drops to make the sclera bloodshot, perfectly playing the role of the devastated fiancée.

She marched down the corridor, her stilettos striking the marble like a hammer. The four defense attorneys matched her aggressive pace.

"You psychotic bitch!" Charla shrieked, pointing a manicured finger directly at Cailin's face. "How dare you show your face here!"

She turned her head, projecting her voice toward the security guards and the trauma surgeon. "Are you all blind?! There is a woman who committed attempted murder sitting right in front of you! Arrest her!"

The lead attorney stepped forward smoothly and pulled a crisp legal document from his leather briefcase.

"Under the New York State Penal Law," the attorney announced loudly, "Ms. Morton's actions constitute attempted murder in the first degree. We are well within our rights to execute a citizen's arrest and detain her until the NYPD arrives."

Two of Charla's private bodyguards immediately stepped forward and reached for Cailin's wheelchair.

Ashely threw herself in front of Cailin and slapped the bodyguard's hand away with a sharp smack.

"Don't touch her!" Ashely roared, her chest heaving. "You take one more step, and I will break your fingers!"

Charla let out a sharp, mocking laugh and stepped closer, her eyes flashing with toxic delight.

"You are a cursed plague, Cailin," Charla spat, her voice dripping with venom. "You got your own bastard daughter killed, and now you tried to slaughter Hilliard. Everyone who touches you dies."

Cailin did not look at the bodyguards. She did not look at the lawyers. Her dead, hollow eyes locked entirely onto Charla's face.

The intensity of that stare was so unnatural, so predatory, that a cold sweat broke out on the back of Charla's neck. She instinctively took a half-step backward.

Before the altercation could escalate, the heavy thud of leather dress shoes echoed from the waiting room down the hall.

"Stand down."

Preston Holloway walked slowly into the corridor. His voice was quiet, but the sheer authority in his tone froze everyone in place.

“Ms. English,” Preston said, his eyes hard and unforgiving. “This is the private medical floor of the Holloway family. This is not a courtroom.”

Charla immediately shifted her posture, adopting a fragile, victimized stance. “Preston, I am Hilliard’s fiancée. I cannot just stand by and watch the woman who tried to kill him walk free.”

Preston stepped forward, his gaze boring into hers. “There was no attempted murder,” he stated, addressing Charla’s lead attorney directly. “There was an unfortunate medical complication. A heart attack. That is the official narrative that secures your capital injection.”

His eyes narrowed. “Any individual who attempts to involve law enforcement in this private family matter will be treated as a hostile threat to the Holloway Trust.”

Chapter 450:

The lead attorney swallowed hard. He was well acquainted with the power of the Holloway Super PAC. He quickly folded the document and stepped back, signaling the bodyguards to retreat.

Charla ground her teeth together, her jaw muscles twitching. She despised Preston for prioritizing the stock price over throwing Cailin in a cell, but she knew she was completely dependent on his protection to stay out of a European black site.

Denied her legal victory, she decided to inflict maximum psychological damage instead.

She stepped directly up to Cailin, close enough that Cailin could smell the expensive floral perfume masking the scent of her sweat.

“Do you want to know a secret?” Charla whispered, leaning in until her breath brushed against Cailin’s ear.

“Hilliard chased me all the way to that abandoned ski resort in Europe. He tortured my broker. He acted like a rabid dog.”

Charla’s lips curled into a sadistic smile. “But he was too late.”

“Tell me, Cailin,” she whispered, her voice saturated with cruelty. “When your little girl was sinking to the bottom of the freezing ocean... do you think she cried for her mommy?”

The words acted like a serrated blade sawing directly into Cailin’s exposed nerves.

Cailin’s pupils dilated massively. A surge of blinding, white-hot rage exploded in her chest, overriding the physical weakness of her body. Her right hand curled into a tight fist. She pulled her arm back to strike.

But her body betrayed her.

She had not eaten in four days. She had lost massive amounts of blood. The sudden exertion triggered a severe drop in her blood pressure. Black spots swam across her vision. Her muscles locked, and her fist stalled in midair.

Charla saw the weakness. Her eyes lit up with malicious triumph.

She raised her right hand high and put the full weight of her shoulder into the swing.

SMACK.

Charla's palm struck Cailin's left cheek with devastating force. The sharp crack of flesh against flesh echoed down the hallway. Cailin's head snapped to the side, and five bright red finger marks bloomed instantly on her pale skin.

The impact destroyed Cailin's fragile balance. She slumped sideways in the wheelchair, her shoulder slamming hard against the metal armrest, a thin trickle of fresh blood leaking from the corner of her mouth.

Cailin's shoulder blade hit the thick glass with a dull thud. She slid down slightly, her breathing ragged, the metallic taste of blood filling her mouth.

Charla looked at her stinging red palm and let out a breathless, triumphant laugh. “That was for Hilliard, you murdering bitch.”

The words barely left Charla’s lips before a shadow blurred violently in her peripheral vision.

Ashely did not scream. She did not hurl an insult. She bypassed verbal communication entirely.

She planted her left foot, rotated her hips to generate maximum kinetic energy, and swung her right fist in a brutal, unhesitating arc.

Her knuckles slammed directly into the center of Charla’s face.

CRUNCH.

The sickening sound of cartilage snapping echoed through the corridor.