

Second chance 481

Chapter 481:

She reached down and drew the ceramic knife from its sheath on her thigh. The black blade caught the dim light. She pressed the razor-sharp edge against her own wrist, directly over the radial artery.

“Give it to me right now,” Cailin hissed, her eyes wide and manic. “Or I will slice my artery open and spray my infected blood all over your face.”

“No! Don’t! Don’t bleed in here!” Vance shrieked, waving his hands frantically.

He spun around and dropped to his knees behind the desk. His hands shook so violently he could barely press his biometric fingerprint into the hidden wall safe.

The heavy steel door clicked open. Vance grabbed a small, matte-black encrypted USB drive and hurled it across the room as if it were covered in acid.

“Take it!” Vance roared, pressing his back against the wall. “Get the hell out of my penthouse! I need to call a hazmat team!”

Cailin snatched the drive from the air. Her fingers closed tightly around the cold metal.

The adrenaline spike that had kept her standing suddenly crashed. The Devil's Breath surged through her bloodstream with a vengeance. The room spun violently. Her legs felt as though they were made of wet sand.

She turned around and forced herself to walk toward the heavy mahogany doors.

Vance frantically pressed a button beneath his desk. The electronic deadbolts disengaged with a loud clack.

Cailin shoved the doors open and stumbled out into the hallway. The cold air hit her sweat-soaked skin. She drove the USB drive into her clutch. Her vision was narrowing to a dark tunnel.

She had won the psychological battle. But her body was losing the war against the drug still flooding her system.

She had to get out of the building before she lost her mind entirely.

Cailin stumbled out of the St. Regis Hotel's revolving glass doors.

A brutal, freezing Manhattan rainstorm slammed into her. The icy water soaked her black silk dress in seconds, plastering the fabric to her skin. The sudden drop in temperature temporarily shocked her nervous system, pushing back the burning heat of the drug — but her vision continued to warp and twist.

The streetlights bled into long neon streaks. The sound of honking taxis echoed like explosions in her ears.

She fumbled with her clutch, her fingers numb and trembling. She pulled out her encrypted phone to call Ashely, but her thumbs refused to coordinate. The slick device slipped from her grip and clattered onto the wet pavement.

Cailin's knees buckled. She swayed, gravity pulling her toward the concrete.

The screech of heavy tires cut through the rain.

A massive, unmarked black bulletproof SUV swerved violently to the curb, stopping inches from where she stood. The heavy rear door was shoved open from the inside.

"Get in, Ms. Morton! Now!" a voice shouted from the driver's seat.

Cailin blinked through the rain. The streetlights illuminated the driver's face just enough for her to recognize him. It was Gavin Thorne, Hilliard's recently fired executive assistant.

Her survival instincts overrode her confusion. Gavin was an enemy of Preston Holloway, which made him a temporary ally.

Chapter 482:

She bit her lip, tasting fresh blood, and practically crawled into the spacious leather-lined back seat.

The heavy door slammed shut. The SUV roared forward, its massive engine tearing through the storm as it merged aggressively into Manhattan traffic.

The interior was pitch black. Gavin had killed all the cabin lights and the GPS navigation screen to prevent any digital tracking.

Cailin collapsed onto the second-row leather bench and gasped for air, her chest heaving.

The freezing rain was no longer protecting her. The second phase of the Devil's Breath hit her brain like a freight train. Her sensory perception magnified a thousandfold.

The air in the cabin felt impossibly thin. Her skin felt as though it were on fire. She let out a soft, tortured moan, her hands reaching up unconsciously to claw at the tight collar of her soaked silk dress, desperate to relieve the suffocating heat.

She had absolutely no idea that she was not alone in the back of the SUV.

Hidden in the pitch-black shadows of the third-row seating, a man sat perfectly still.

Hilliard Holloway wore a dark dress shirt, his face as pale as a corpse. Every time the SUV hit a pothole, the jarring sent blinding, white-hot agony radiating from his sawed-open sternum.

He stared at Cailin writhing on the seat in front of him. His jaw was clenched so tight his teeth threatened to crack. His massive hands were curled into fists, his fingernails digging so deeply into his own palms that blood dripped onto the floor mats.

They had intercepted Ashely's frantic, unencrypted call to Kegan's lieutenants just twenty minutes earlier, pinpointing Cailin's suicidal solo run to Richard Vance's penthouse. Hilliard had immediately ordered Gavin to tear through the city streets and wait outside the hotel. If she hadn't walked out of those doors within ten minutes, he had been prepared to take a tactical team and slaughter his way up to the penthouse.

She had made it out — but seeing her completely broken and poisoned was tearing his heart into bloody shreds.

"Boss," Gavin whispered, his eyes flicking to the rearview mirror. "She's been dosed. High-grade neurotoxin. She's burning up."

"Hospital," Hilliard commanded. His voice was a terrifying, gravelly rasp, thick with suppressed murderous rage.

"No... no hospitals," Cailin gasped.

She heard the voice through the thick fog of the hallucination and assumed Gavin was talking to himself. She fought the drug, forcing the words out of her burning throat.

“Preston has people... everywhere,” Cailin panted, her fingers curling into the leather seat. “Brooklyn... my safe house. Go to Brooklyn.”

Hilliard stared at her. Even with her brain dissolving under a chemical attack, she was still fighting, still anticipating betrayals. The weight of the trauma she carried crushed his chest far heavier than his physical wounds.

“Listen to her,” Hilliard whispered to Gavin. “Brooklyn.”

Cailin curled into a tight fetal position on the seat. The drug began to severely distort her auditory processing.

The rain drumming against the roof of the SUV transformed, in her mind, into the sound of crashing ocean waves.

Chapter 483:

“Elia...” Cailin sobbed, her voice breaking. Tears mixed with the rainwater on her face. She reached her hands out blindly into the dark air. “Don’t be scared... Mommy is here... I’ve got you...”

Hilliard stopped breathing.

The sound of her crying out for their dead daughter shattered the last remnant of his restraint.

Ignoring the screaming pain in his chest, he slowly, agonizingly pulled himself over the center console, moving from the third row to the second.

He did not dare speak. He knew that if she realized he was there, the shock and hatred would trigger a panic attack her heart could not survive.

He slowly removed his heavy dark suit jacket, still warm with his body heat, and with trembling hands gently draped it over Cailin's shivering, soaked body.

The familiar scent of his cologne — a mixture of cedar and cold rain — instantly enveloped her.

The hallucinogen hijacked the sensory input. Cailin's terrified brain latched desperately onto the scent, recognizing it as an anchor, a phantom shield against the dark ocean flooding her mind.

Cailin let out a shuddering breath. She grabbed the lapels of the suit jacket, pulled it tightly against her chest, and buried her face into the fabric. Her frantic sobbing slowly quieted into soft, exhausted whimpers.

Hilliard sat frozen beside her in the dark. He stared at her clinging to his jacket. His eyes burned with unshed tears.

As the black SUV tore through the storm toward Brooklyn, the silent cabin became the most desperate and heartbreaking sanctuary they had ever shared.

The black SUV skidded to a halt in a dark alleyway in Brooklyn Heights, parking beneath the rusted fire escape of an industrial loft building.

Gavin threw the driver's door open. He popped a large black umbrella and rushed to the rear, pulling the heavy door wide.

Cailin practically fell out of the vehicle. Her legs were completely useless. Gavin caught her by the waist, supporting her entire body weight as he half-carried, half-dragged her toward the private freight elevator.

Hilliard remained hidden in the pitch-black cabin. He watched her disappear into the building. His breathing was ragged. The fresh blood from his torn chest stitches had already soaked through his shirt, sticking coldly to his skin.

The elevator groaned as it carried Cailin to the top floor.

Gavin helped her out. Cailin leaned heavily against the brick wall. Her muscle memory took over. With trembling, blood-stained fingers she punched a twelve-digit code into the electronic keypad.

The heavy steel door clicked open.

"I've got it from here," Cailin gasped, her voice slurred. She shoved Gavin away with surprising force.

She stumbled inside and slammed the door shut in his face, immediately throwing the three heavy mechanical deadbolts and locking herself inside the safe house.

The loft was completely dark.

She didn't turn on the lights. The heat inside her veins was reaching a critical mass. Her skin felt as though it were melting from her bones. She dragged herself across the hardwood floor, her wet silk dress leaving a dark trail behind her.

She crashed into the bathroom door and pushed it open.

Chapter 484:

She reached the massive freestanding clawfoot tub and cranked the cold water faucet to its maximum. Next to the tub stood a commercial-grade ice machine Kegan had installed for her physical therapy. Cailin yanked the bin open, grabbed two massive plastic buckets, filled them to the brim with solid ice, and dumped them directly into the rising water.

The ice cubes crashed against the porcelain with a deafening clatter.

Cailin didn't bother removing her soaked dress. She grabbed the edge of the tub and threw herself over the side, plunging her entire body into the freezing water.

The physical shock was instantaneous and brutal.

The extreme cold violently collided with the boiling chemical fire in her nervous system. Cailin threw her head back, her mouth opening in a silent, agonizing scream. Her muscles cramped instantly, locking her limbs in place.

At that moment, her encrypted phone — which she had dropped on the bathroom counter — lit up.

The shrill ringtone pierced the tiled walls.

Cailin forced her trembling arm out of the ice water. She blindly swiped the screen and hit the speaker button.

“Well, well, well,” Chloé Morton’s mocking voice filled the bathroom. “How was it, Cailin? Did Mr. Vance’s bed skills live up to your expectations?”

Cailin lay in the freezing water. Her teeth chattered so violently they threatened to crack.

“Grandmother said you grabbed the drive and ran,” Chloé laughed, the sound vicious and ugly. “But it doesn’t matter. That penthouse was pumped full of custom-made pheromones. You must feel like your blood is literally boiling right now. Are you begging for a man yet?”

Cailin stared blankly at the ceiling. The ice was numbing her skin, but her mind was razor-sharp with pure, concentrated hatred.

“Chloé...” Cailin whispered. Her voice was weak, but the homicidal malice in her tone dropped the air in the room another ten degrees. “You stupid, pathetic parasite.”

Chloé’s laughter stopped abruptly.

“You think you won?” Cailin sneered, her lips turning a dangerous shade of blue. “Richard Vance is probably hiding in a corner right now, crying like a terrified child and frantically calling a hazmat team to scrub his penthouse clean.”

“You’re bluffing!” Chloé snapped, her voice rising in panic. “You’re a nobody! You’re just a discarded whore!”

“If I survive this night,” Cailin interrupted, her voice a lethal promise, “I am going to take every single dirty financial secret the Morton family has and leak it to the SEC and the Wall Street Journal.”

“I will make sure you and your grandmother are begging for loose change on the subway.”

“You wouldn’t dare—!” Chloé shrieked.

Cailin didn’t have the energy to listen to the rest. She swiped the phone off the counter. It crashed to the floor, the screen shattering, cutting the call dead.

The adrenaline from the confrontation faded.

The ice water was not neutralizing the drug. It was triggering severe hypothermia. Cailin's core temperature plummeted. Her lips turned purple. Her violent shivering began to slow — a lethal sign that her body was giving up.

Her eyes fluttered shut. She slid deeper into the tub, the freezing water rising over her chin.

Outside the heavy steel door of the safe house, Hilliard was dragging his agonizing body up the stairwell. He had refused to wait in the car.

Chapter 485:

He pressed his ear against the cold steel door. He heard the faint sound of running water — and then absolute silence.

"Cailin!" Hilliard roared, slamming his fist against the steel. "Open the door!"

No response.

He knew she was dying. He stepped back, reached into his waistband, and drew the heavy Glock 19 Gavin had given him.

He did not hesitate. He aimed directly at the three mechanical deadbolts.

BANG! BANG! BANG!

The deafening shots echoed through the hallway. The hollow-point bullets shredded the internal locking mechanisms.

Hilliard took two steps back. He gritted his teeth, ignoring the fact that his sternum had been sawed in half days earlier, and launched his entire body weight forward, driving his boot into the steel door beside the handle.

The door burst violently open.

The massive kinetic recoil shot straight up his leg and into his chest. A sickening, sharp crack erupted from his sternum.

Hilliard's vision went instantly black. He stumbled into the dark apartment, choking on the metallic taste of his own blood, and sprinted blindly toward the bathroom.

Hilliard crashed through the bathroom door, his heavy boots slipping on the wet tiles.

His eyes locked immediately onto the clawfoot tub. Cailin was completely submerged beneath the freezing water. Her eyes were closed, her face pale as a corpse. She had stopped struggling entirely.

“Cailin!”

The raw, guttural roar tore from his throat. He dropped the Glock onto the tiles and threw himself over the edge of the tub.

He plunged his bare arms into the freezing water, shoving the floating blocks of ice aside. He grabbed Cailin under her armpits and hauled her violently upward.

Splash.

Freezing water cascaded over the edge of the tub, soaking Hilliard to the knees. Cailin’s head broke the surface. Her lips were a terrifying shade of dark purple. She wasn’t breathing.

Hilliard dragged her out of the tub and laid her flat on the cold bathroom floor.

The extreme physical exertion of lifting dead weight was the final straw for his ruined body. The surgical wires holding his cracked sternum together snapped.

The thick bandages wrapped around his chest turned a brilliant, horrifying crimson in seconds. Massive amounts of hot blood poured from the open wound, soaking his shirt and dripping steadily onto the white tiles, mixing with the freezing puddles of water.

He couldn't feel the pain. His brain had blocked it out entirely.

He dropped to his knees beside her and slapped her cheek hard.

"Wake up! Look at me! Breathe!" Hilliard screamed, his hands shaking as he tilted her head back to open her airway.

Cailin's chest suddenly hitched. She coughed up a violent mouthful of water.

Her lungs pulled in oxygen desperately — but the moment she was out of the ice, the Devil's Breath surged back into her brain with terrifying force.

Her body began to convulse. Her nervous system was caught in a lethal crossfire between severe hypothermia and the boiling chemical aphrodisiac still flooding her blood.

Chapter 486:

"So cold... burning..." Cailin whimpered in semi-consciousness. Her hands weakly clawed at her own chest, trying to tear the freezing, wet silk dress from her skin.

Hilliard understood immediately. She would die of hypothermia if she stayed in the wet clothes.

He gritted his teeth, jaw muscles popping. With trembling, blood-stained hands, he grabbed the collar of her ruined dress and ripped it away, stripping the freezing fabric from her shivering body.

He reached up and yanked two thick white bath towels from the shelf above the toilet and wrapped them tightly around her.

But towels weren't enough. Severe hypothermia required immediate, aggressive core temperature transfer.

He did not hesitate. He ripped his own blood-soaked shirt open, exposing his heavily bandaged, bleeding chest. He pulled Cailin off the floor and dragged her into his lap, wrapping his massive arms around her and pressing her freezing, towel-clad body flush against his burning, feverish skin.

The moment Cailin's drug-addled brain registered the intense heat radiating from him, her survival instincts took over.

She let out a soft, desperate gasp. She instinctively wrapped her arms around his waist, burying her face into the crook of his neck. Her freezing fingers dug into the muscles of his back, her nails dragging deep red lines across his skin as she desperately tried to absorb his body heat.

Hilliard let out a sharp, muffled groan as her movements pressed against his torn sternum.

He tightened his grip and buried his face in her wet hair. He kissed her temple over and over again.

“I’m here... I’ve got you... you’re safe,” Hilliard whispered, his voice a broken, gravelly chant.

The heat transfer began to work. Cailin’s violent shivering slowly subsided.

But as her body warmed, the aphrodisiac tightened its hold on her senses. She began to writhe against him. Her soft lips brushed unintentionally against the pulsing artery on his neck. She let out a soft, needy whimper, her hands sliding up his back.

Hilliard’s breathing turned ragged. Every primal instinct in his blood roared to life.

He bit down on the inside of his cheek until a fresh wave of blood filled his mouth.

He would rather bleed out on this floor than take advantage of her while she was poisoned and out of her mind. He wanted her soul — not a drug-induced surrender.

To anchor himself against the agonizing temptation, he squeezed his eyes shut and focused entirely on the blinding pain in his chest. He held her tighter, letting the fresh blood from his wound slowly stain the white towels wrapped around her.

Minutes bled into hours.

Under Hilliard's relentless, self-sacrificing body heat, the drug finally burned itself out. Cailin's breathing deepened and leveled. The frantic movements stilled. She fell into a deep, exhausted, and natural sleep against his chest.

Hilliard stared down at her peaceful face. The crushing tension in his muscles finally released.

The moment he relaxed, the massive blood loss caught up with him.

A deafening ringing filled his ears. The edges of his vision collapsed into a dark, suffocating tunnel. His head dropped forward, coming to rest against the bathroom wall.

Chapter 487:

He knew he needed to clean up the blood. He needed to leave before she woke up.

But his body refused to obey. His eyes rolled back, and Hilliard Holloway slipped into a deep, silent abyss — his bleeding arms still locked tightly around the woman he loved.

Several hours later.

The pale light of dawn sliced through the gaps in the bathroom blinds, casting sharp golden lines across the white tiles.

Cailin groaned softly. She slowly opened her eyes. Her head pounded with a vicious, throbbing migraine, and her muscles felt as though they had been beaten with lead pipes. The chemical fog of the Devil's Breath was gone, leaving her brain raw and hypersensitive.

She realized she was sitting on the floor, wrapped tightly in heavy bath towels.

She also realized she was leaning against a solid, muscular chest.

A thick, metallic stench assaulted her nose — the unmistakable, heavy smell of fresh blood.

Cailin's eyes snapped fully open. She looked down.

The white towels wrapped around her were soaked in massive dark red stains. The floor beneath her was a literal pool of coagulated blood and melted ice water.

The visual triggered a violent, uncontrollable flashback.

That day. The abandoned chemical plant. The kidnappers. The blood on the floor. Elia.

Her PTSD detonated. Pure, blinding panic hijacked her nervous system. Her brain, still slightly scrambled from the drug, misfired completely. She thought she was still in the hotel. She thought the man holding her was one of Richard Vance's men.

"Get off me!" Cailin let out a blood-curdling, terrified scream.

She drove her elbows violently backward into the man's ribs and scrambled away on her hands and knees, kicking wildly until her back slammed against the wooden vanity cabinet.

Hilliard, deep in hypovolemic shock from blood loss, was jolted awake by the impact.

He slumped sideways, his head striking the edge of the porcelain tub with a dull thud. He groaned, his vision swimming in a blurry grey haze. He tried to push himself upright on one arm and looked toward Cailin, reaching out a weak hand to calm her.

"Cailin... it's okay... don't be scared..." Hilliard mumbled, his voice barely a rasp.

But in Cailin's panicked, traumatized eyes, that large, blood-stained hand reaching toward her was a death sentence.

Her survival instinct seized total control. She reached blindly up to the vanity counter. Her fingers closed around the heavy solid marble base of a decorative bathroom lamp.

Without a microsecond of hesitation, she swung it down with every ounce of kinetic force her terrified body could generate.

CRACK.

The marble smashed directly into the side of Hilliard's head, right where his temple met his hairline.

A fresh spray of bright red blood splattered across the white tiles.

Hilliard's body went instantly rigid. His eyes rolled back, and he collapsed face-first into the bloody puddle on the floor. He did not move. He did not even twitch.

Cailin sat on the floor, her chest heaving violently. She gripped the bloody marble base, ready to strike again.

Chapter 488:

The morning light shifted, fully illuminating the face of the man lying at her feet.

Cailin's breath caught in her throat. Her pupils dilated in absolute, paralyzing horror.

"Hilliard...?"

The marble lamp slipped from her numb fingers, crashing to the floor and shattering into pieces.

She stared at the scene before her — the shattered door locks, the melted ice in the tub, the massive, horrifying tear in Hilliard's chest where his surgical stitches had completely ripped open.

The fragmented memories of the night slammed into her brain all at once. The dark SUV. The scent of his cologne. The burning heat of his body pulling her back from the edge of hypothermia.

He hadn't attacked her. He had ripped his own body apart to save her life.

And she had just crushed his skull.

"No... no, no, no," Cailin choked out, a wave of nausea hitting her stomach.

She crawled frantically across the bloody floor, grabbed Hilliard's shoulder, and rolled him onto his back. His face was covered in blood.

She pressed her trembling fingers against his carotid artery. The pulse was there — but it was a weak, erratic flutter, fading fast.

She couldn't call 911. The NYPD would log the incident, and Preston's spies would find out. He would be entirely at their mercy. They could ensure he never woke up again.

She grabbed her shattered but still-functioning phone from the floor. She dialed the encrypted emergency line.

"Kegan," Cailin said. Her voice shook with a desperate, terrifying edge. "Bring your underground medical team to the Brooklyn safe house. Right now. He is bleeding out."

Fifteen minutes later, the heavy steel door was pushed open.

Kegan Aguirre walked into the bathroom, followed by two men carrying trauma bags.

When Kegan saw Cailin sitting half-naked on the floor, covered in blood and staring blankly at Hilliard's unconscious body, a dark, venomous shadow crossed his eyes.

He understood immediately what had happened. Hilliard had played the ultimate martyr, using his own blood to carve his way back into Cailin's mind.

The jealousy in Kegan's chest flared into a raging inferno, but his face remained a mask of cold stone.

"Hit him with a coagulant and bag him," Kegan ordered his medics, his voice dripping with disgust. "Get this trash out of here."

The medics rushed forward, applying pressure dressings to Hilliard's head and chest.

Kegan walked over to Cailin. He removed his heavy black trench coat and draped it over her trembling shoulders, deliberately blocking her view of Hilliard.

As the medics hoisted Hilliard onto the stretcher, Cailin forced herself to look away. The horrifying expanse of crimson was too blinding, threatening to wash away the dam of pure hatred she had so painstakingly built. She took a slow, shuddering breath and locked all her vulnerability, terror, and residual guilt back into the darkest vault of her mind. The woman sitting on this floor could no longer be Cailin. She had to be Cali.

Chapter 489:

"He will live," Kegan said, his voice low and dangerous. "Now, Cali, it is time you and I had a talk."

The underground medics strapped Hilliard's unconscious, bleeding body onto a collapsible tactical stretcher. They moved with silent efficiency, carrying him out of the bathroom and disappearing down the freight elevator.

The heavy steel door of the safe house clicked shut, sealing the loft in a suffocating silence.

The living room was a mess of shadows and morning light. Cailin sat heavily on the edge of the leather sofa. She pulled Kegan's trench coat tighter around her shivering shoulders and stared blankly at her own hands.

The blood had dried under her fingernails. It felt like a permanent stain.

Kegan walked to the wet bar and poured two fingers of neat whiskey into a crystal glass. He walked back and pressed the cold glass directly into Cailin's palm.

"Drink it," Kegan ordered. "It will kill the shakes."

Cailin didn't argue. She raised the glass and swallowed the whiskey in one brutal gulp. The liquid fire burned down her throat, shocking her system and forcing her brain into absolute, cold clarity.

"Why was he there?" Cailin asked. Her voice was a hollow rasp as she stared at the empty space where Hilliard had been lying.

"Because he is a rabid dog that smells blood and refuses to let go," Kegan sneered, pacing in front of the sofa. The murderous intent in his eyes was completely unmasked.

"Wake up, Cali," Kegan said, his voice sharp and cutting. "He didn't break down that door to save you. He did it to feed his own pathetic guilt. He wants to play the hero so you'll forget that he is the reason Elia is dead."

Cailin flinched. The mention of Elia's name landed like a physical blow to the chest. She looked back down at her blood-stained hands.

Kegan stopped pacing.

He stepped directly in front of her and dropped to one knee.

Cailin froze. Her muscles instinctively tensed, ready to pull away, but Kegan reached out and took hold of her left wrist, his grip firm and unyielding.

He reached into his suit pocket with his free hand and pulled out a square black velvet box. With a sharp snap, he flipped the lid open.

Resting on a bed of black satin was a massive, blood-red ruby, cut with the sharp, merciless facets of a weapon. It caught the morning light and seemed to drink it, glowing with a dark, internal fire.

"Marry me, Cali," Kegan said, looking directly into her eyes, his voice dropping to a low, hypnotic command.

"Blood and fire, Cali," he murmured, his thumb stroking the cold hard facets of the stone. "The color of our war. Not the pale pink of a debutante."

"Say yes, and my entire European empire belongs to you," Kegan promised, his eyes burning with intense, possessive heat. "I will wipe the Holloway family off the map by midnight. I will make Charla English beg for death."

Chapter 490:

He leaned closer, his presence overwhelming. "I will be the legal father to Aron and Davy. No one will ever be able to touch you or those boys again."

Cailin stared at the ruby.

There had been a time when such a promise of absolute protection might have moved her. But as she looked at the glittering stone, she felt nothing. It didn't look like a shield. It looked like a very expensive, very beautiful pair of handcuffs.

Slowly and deliberately, Cailin twisted her wrist. She pulled her hand free of Kegan's grip.

"Kegan," Cailin said. Her voice was devoid of any warmth. "We had an agreement. We are business partners."

Kegan's jaw tightened. The rejection struck his ego like a physical blow.

"Partners?" Kegan's voice darkened. "I mobilized a private army for you. I am preparing to go to war with Wall Street for you. Do you honestly think I did all of that for a business transaction?"

"That was your choice to make," Cailin said.

She stood up, forcing him to look up at her. She met his gaze with absolute, chilling detachment.

“My heart is at the bottom of the ocean with my daughter,” Cailin stated, her words slicing through the air like a scalpel. “I am not a woman anymore. I am a monster built for revenge.”

She let out a short, humorless laugh. “Have you ever seen a man propose to a loaded gun?”

Kegan rose abruptly. His towering frame loomed over her.

“This is about him, isn’t it?” Kegan demanded, his voice vibrating with barely contained rage. “You saw him bleeding on the floor, and your pathetic heart went soft for him again!”

“Shut your mouth,” Cailin snapped. Her eyes flashed with lethal authority. “Do not ever insult me like that again. I smashed his skull with a marble lamp. That is my answer to him.”

She took a step back and pulled the coat tightly around herself.

“I do not need a savior, Kegan. And I will never trade my freedom for a marriage certificate again.”

Cailin turned her back on him and walked toward the bedroom, her posture rigid and unbreakable.

Kegan stood alone in the living room, staring at the ruby in his hand. The veins in his neck bulged.

With a sudden, violent roar, he hurled the velvet box across the room. It smashed against the brick wall, the ruby bouncing off into the shadows.

He took a slow, deep breath, forcing the rage back down.

“Fine, Cali,” Kegan whispered to the empty room. “I can wait. I will wait until you have absolutely nowhere else to run.”

He turned and walked out of the safe house. The real battlefield was waiting for him in a Manhattan hospital.

A completely unmarked, matte-black ambulance bypassed the main entrance of the Holloway Private Hospital in Manhattan. It drove down a restricted ramp and parked in the subterranean VIP garage.

Gavin Thorne, wearing a stolen paramedic jacket, threw the rear doors open. He and another trusted operative quickly unloaded the tactical stretcher. Hilliard Holloway lay unconscious on the canvas, his face ashen, a thick, bloody pressure dressing wrapped around his head.