

Second chance 491

Chapter 491:

Gavin had already bribed the night-shift security supervisor. They moved like ghosts through the service elevators, pushing the stretcher directly into Hilliard's designated trauma ICU suite.

They hoisted his heavy body onto the hospital bed.

Gavin immediately grabbed the tangle of wires and tubes. He reattached the EKG leads to Hilliard's chest, slipped the pulse oximeter over his finger, and secured the oxygen mask over his face.

The cardiac monitor hummed to life, emitting a steady, rhythmic beep.

Gavin stepped back and wiped the sweat from his forehead. He reached out to adjust the IV drip.

Suddenly, Hilliard's index finger twitched.

A second later, his eyes snapped open.

His vision swam in a sickening grey blur for a full minute before the harsh hospital lights snapped into focus. A wave of agony from his chest and the side of his head threatened to drag him back under the

black tide of unconsciousness. He fought it, gritting his teeth until he tasted blood. Only after conquering that first crushing wave of pain did he manage to regain control.

“Boss...” Gavin whispered, freezing in place. “How do you feel?”

“I’m not dead,” Hilliard rasped. His voice was a weak, gravelly whisper, but the tone was absolute steel.

He stared at the ceiling for two seconds, processing his physical limitations.

“Hit the call button,” Hilliard commanded. “Tell them I just woke up.”

He closed his eyes. He intentionally slowed his breathing, forcing his facial muscles to relax into a state of extreme, pathetic vulnerability. He was preparing to play the role of a broken man who had miraculously emerged from a coma.

Gavin slammed his palm onto the red emergency call button on the wall, then immediately slipped out the side door, disappearing into the blind spot of the hallway cameras.

The piercing alarm echoed through the VIP wing.

Less than thirty seconds later, the heavy airtight doors burst open. The chief surgeon sprinted into the room, followed by a team of panicked nurses pushing a crash cart.

“My God... he has neurological activity!” the surgeon gasped, staring at the active brainwaves on the monitor.

Hilliard perfectly timed a pained, confused groan. He slowly, agonizingly fluttered his eyelids open, squinting against the harsh fluorescent lights as if he hadn't seen them in weeks.

The surgeon rushed to the bedside and shone a penlight into Hilliard's pupils.

“Mr. Holloway? Can you hear me?” the surgeon asked.

He pulled down the hospital gown to examine Hilliard's chest. The moment the fabric moved aside, the surgeon's face went completely pale.

The surgical incision over the sternum was a horrific, swollen mass of torn flesh and fresh, coagulated blood.

“What the hell is this?” The surgeon spun around, glaring at the terrified nurses. “Who touched this patient?! This incision is completely ruptured!”

“N-no one, doctor!” a nurse stammered. “The cameras show he hasn't moved!”

“Bullshit!” the surgeon snapped. “This level of tearing requires massive physical trauma! And what is this head wound?!” He pointed at the thick gauze hastily wrapped around Hilliard’s temple.

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He reached for the wall phone. “Get hospital security up here. Pull the internal telemetry logs. Someone assaulted him in his bed.”

Hilliard knew he had to stop the investigation immediately.

He suddenly arched his back off the mattress and let out a violent, wet cough. A thin stream of blood trickled from the corner of his mouth, staining the oxygen mask.

The medical team froze, their attention snapping back to the dying billionaire.

“Wait...” Hilliard gasped, his voice trembling with perfect conviction. He reached out a weak, shaking hand and grabbed the surgeon’s sleeve. “I... I had a nightmare. I couldn’t breathe. I panicked... I fell out of the bed. I hit my head.”

The surgeon opened his mouth to argue. Hilliard’s large, pale hand clamped around the man’s wrist with a grip that was weak in body but terrifyingly rigid in intent. His eyes suddenly sharpened into a lethal, freezing glare that promised absolute ruin.

“Doctor,” Hilliard rasped quietly. “I said I fell. The nightmares of the Holloway family are not something an outsider should ever pry into. Do you understand me?”

The surgeon's breath hitched. The chilling threat in the billionaire's voice made his blood run cold. He swallowed hard and abandoned the security call out of pure, unadulterated fear.

"Push broad-spectrum antibiotics and a heavy dose of coagulants!" the surgeon barked at the nurses, his hands trembling slightly. "Prep OR Three for an emergency secondary debridement!"

As the nurses scrambled to prepare the IVs, the heavy doors to the ICU swung open.

Preston Holloway walked into the room in a perfectly tailored navy suit, his face glowing with the arrogant confidence of a man who believed he owned the world. Behind him, a nurse pushed Jeraldine Holloway in her wheelchair.

"Well, well, well. A miracle," Preston smiled, clapping his hands slowly.

Jeraldine burst into loud, hysterical sobs. "Hilliard! My boy! You're alive!"

Hilliard looked at his treacherous cousin and his hysterical mother. Deep within his eyes, a venomous, lethal shadow coiled, ready to strike.

He let his head loll to the side, playing the perfect, helpless victim.

“What... what happened?” Hilliard whispered, setting the stage for the greatest performance of his life.

Preston Holloway waved his hand dismissively at the medical team.

“Give us the room,” Preston ordered. “The Chairman needs to speak with his family.”

The chief surgeon hesitated, glancing at Hilliard’s bleeding chest, but Preston’s glare was absolute. The medical staff quickly filed out, the heavy airtight doors hissing shut behind them.

Preston pulled a metal chair to the side of the bed and sat down. He crossed his legs and looked at Hilliard with a mixture of pity and supreme arrogance.

“You have been asleep for a week, Hilliard,” Preston said, his voice dripping with false sympathy. “The world outside this room has been a complete disaster.”

Hilliard kept his eyes half-closed. The oxygen mask fogged with his shallow breaths. He didn’t speak. He simply watched Preston dig his own grave.

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“Your little scandal with Cailin, followed by your unfortunate medical emergency, sent the Holloway Group stock into a freefall,” Preston continued, leaning forward. “We were facing a hostile takeover by the end of the quarter.”

Preston sighed heavily, playing the role of the burdened savior. "As Acting Chairman, I had to make some very difficult, very aggressive decisions to save our grandfather's legacy."

He glanced at the door. "I have officially announced your engagement to the English family."

Jeraldine, sitting in her wheelchair, gripped her pearl necklace. She looked at Hilliard with wide, terrified eyes, fully expecting her son to rip the IV lines from his arm and explode in a violent rage.

But Hilliard didn't move.

His heart rate monitor remained perfectly, eerily steady.

"Engagement?" Hilliard asked. His voice was weak, filtered through the plastic mask, carrying the perfect pitch of confusion. "To whom?"

Preston narrowed his eyes and searched Hilliard's pale face for any sign of a trap.

"To Charla, of course," Preston said slowly, testing the waters. "She is the only woman with the capital backing to stabilize the board. Wall Street already recognizes her as the future matriarch of this family."

Hilliard stared at the ceiling. A flicker of absolute, murderous mockery flashed in the depths of his eyes, but he buried it quickly beneath a mask of exhausted defeat.

"I see," Hilliard whispered.

"I know this isn't what you wanted," Preston said, his tone shifting from persuasive to a hard, threatening edge. "But you are in no physical position to fight this. The board has already approved the merger. You will accept this arrangement for the good of the company."

The room fell dead silent. The only sound was the mechanical hiss of the ventilator in the corner.

Ten seconds passed.

Hilliard slowly turned his head. He looked Preston dead in the eye.

"Okay," Hilliard said.

Preston blinked. He sat back in his chair, completely thrown off balance.

"Okay?" Preston repeated, unable to hide his shock. "You agree?"

"I am a cripple, Preston," Hilliard rasped, letting his eyes drift shut in a display of total submission. "I can barely breathe without a machine. I have no power left. I understand the situation. For the stability of the Group, I will not oppose the board's decision."

Preston's face broke into a massive, triumphant grin. He slapped his hands on his knees and stood up.

"Excellent! I knew you were a rational man beneath all that drama," Preston beamed. He felt like a god. He had finally broken the great Hilliard Holloway.

"Send her in," Hilliard said suddenly. He opened his eyes, his voice dropping to a low, intimate whisper. "I want to speak with my fiancée. Alone."

Preston chuckled. "Of course. Take all the time you need."

He gestured for the nurse to wheel Jeraldine out. The heavy doors opened, and they left the ICU.

A moment later, Charla English stepped into the room.

She wore a pristine white Chanel couture suit, and the massive pink diamond Preston had bought her sparkled aggressively on her finger. But despite her expensive armor, she looked terrified.

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She stood near the door, her body rigid. She did not know how much Hilliard remembered. She did not know whether he had learned she had ordered the hit on Elia.

The airtight doors hissed shut, locking them in.

The ICU became a soundproof interrogation room.

Charla swallowed hard. Her legs felt as though they were made of lead. She could not take a single step forward.

"Hilliard..." Charla forced a trembling, pathetic smile onto her face. "You're awake. Thank God."

Hilliard did not smile back.

He lay perfectly still on the bed and turned his head, locking his dark, hollow eyes onto her face.

The look in his eyes was not human. It was the cold, unblinking stare of a venomous snake analyzing the precise spot to strike. The sheer, suffocating weight radiating from the bed made the air in the room feel ten times heavier.

A cold sweat broke out across Charla's forehead. Her expensive makeup felt like a heavy mask. She could not breathe.

"Come here," Hilliard commanded.

He didn't raise his voice. He spoke softly. But the absolute authority in those two words left no room for disobedience.

Charla trembled. She took a step forward, her heels clicking against the linoleum. She walked toward the hospital bed like a condemned prisoner ascending the steps of a guillotine.

Charla stopped two feet from the edge of the hospital bed. Her entire body was rigid with fear. She didn't dare look Hilliard in the eye.

Hilliard slowly lifted his right hand. The IV tubes taped to his forearm pulled taut. He reached out toward her.

Charla flinched violently. She squeezed her eyes shut, her shoulders hiking up, fully expecting his massive hand to clamp around her throat.

Instead, she felt a light, incredibly gentle touch.

Hilliard's hand rested softly over hers. His thumb slowly stroked the cold, hard surface of the massive pink diamond on her ring finger.

“The ring is beautiful,” Hilliard whispered. His voice was warm, completely stripped of the lethal pressure from just a moment ago.

Charla’s eyes snapped open in absolute shock. She stared at him, her mouth slightly parted.

“You... you aren’t angry with me?” Charla stammered, her heart hammering against her ribs.

“Angry?” Hilliard let out a weak, self-deprecating sigh and offered her a faint, tragic smile. “Why would I be angry? Because you had to make a deal with Preston to save my life and my company?”

Charla froze. Her brain struggled to process the words. Hilliard was actually giving her the perfect, heroic excuse for her treason.

“When I was in the coma,” Hilliard continued, his voice dropping into a masterful performance of vulnerability, “it felt like I was sinking into a freezing, black ocean. I couldn’t breathe.”

He tightened his grip on her hand, his fingers squeezing her skin with just enough force to feel passionate rather than painful.

“But I heard your voice, Charla,” Hilliard said, staring deeply into her eyes. “You were calling my name. You pulled me out of the dark.”

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Charla's enormous ego instantly devoured the lie. The terror evaporated, replaced by a blinding, euphoric rush of triumph. She flipped her hand over and gripped his fingers back desperately.

"I was!" Charla cried, tears of joy welling in her eyes. "I sat by your bed every single day! I never gave up on you!"

"Where is Cailin?" Hilliard asked. He injected precisely the right amount of disgust and heartbreak into the name.

The mention of her rival was the ultimate trigger. Charla's face lit up with vicious excitement.

"She abandoned you!" Charla spat eagerly. "She refused to even look at you! She is running around Europe with that criminal, Kegan Aguirre! She is a monster, Hilliard!"

Hilliard closed his eyes. He took a slow, deep breath, perfectly masking the volcanic urge to tear Charla apart.

"I should have seen her true face years ago," Hilliard murmured.

He opened his eyes and looked at Charla with absolute devotion. "It was always you, Charla. You are the only one who stayed."

Charla let out a loud sob. She threw herself forward, collapsing against the edge of the mattress.

"I love you, Hilliard! I will do anything for you!" she wept, completely intoxicated by her own perceived triumph.

Hilliard gently patted her back, suppressing the violent nausea churning in his stomach.

"I know," Hilliard said softly. "And because I know, I will not let Preston's little press conference be our real engagement."

Charla lifted her head, her mascara slightly smeared. "What do you mean?"

"I am going to give you a real engagement," Hilliard promised, throwing out the ultimate, fatal bait. "A Century Engagement. At the Long Island estate."

He smiled — a cold, dead expression that Charla mistook for love. "I want every billionaire on Wall Street, every camera in New York, to watch me claim you as my only wife."

Charla began to tremble with pure ecstasy. This was the absolute pinnacle of power and glory she had craved her entire life. She had won. She had beaten Cailin Morton forever.

"Go," Hilliard commanded gently. "Move into the estate. Pick out the most expensive dress in the world. Prepare to be the most envied woman on earth."

"I will! I will make it perfect!" Charla gasped. She leaned forward and pressed an eager kiss directly onto Hilliard's cheek.

She spun around and marched out of the ICU, her stilettos clicking with the arrogant rhythm of a conqueror.

Hiss. Click.

The airtight doors sealed shut behind her.

The second the lock engaged, the gentle mask on Hilliard's face shattered into a million pieces.

His expression contorted into pure, demonic rage. He grabbed a paper towel from the dispenser, drenched it in alcohol from a medical bottle, and scrubbed his cheek with punishing force, as if trying to strip her touch from his very skin. He did not stop until the flesh was raw and burning.

He threw the paper towel into the biohazard bin. He reached under the mattress and pulled out the encrypted communications device Gavin had hidden there.

"Gavin," Hilliard growled, his eyes burning.

“Yes, Boss.”

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“Push the access paperwork through. Give her unlimited access to the estate funds,” Hilliard ordered, staring at the Manhattan skyline through the window. “Let her fly as high as she wants.”

He paused.

“Because at that engagement party, I am going to personally lock her in the guillotine.”

The harsh fluorescent lights of the FBI Manhattan Field Office interrogation room bore down like a physical weight.

Charla English sat bolted to a metal chair. Her face was the color of dirty chalk. The whites of her eyes were completely bloodshot, darting frantically around the small, windowless concrete box.

Two senior federal agents stood over her.

One of them slammed a thick stack of financial documents onto the steel table. The loud smack echoed off the walls, making Charla flinch violently.

“These are the wire transfers, Ms. English,” the agent said, his voice completely devoid of sympathy. “We tracked the offshore accounts. The money went directly to the mercenary outfit that kidnapped Elia Morton-Holloway.”

Charla’s chest heaved. She couldn’t draw a full breath. The air in the room felt thick and suffocating.

“You are looking at a lifetime in a federal penitentiary,” the second agent added, leaning closer.

Charla’s hands were cuffed to the metal ring on the table. She yanked at the heavy steel chain. The metal bit into her wrists, leaving angry red marks. She bit down on her lower lip so hard the skin broke, and the warm, metallic taste of blood filled her mouth.

“My father...” Charla stammered, her voice shaking uncontrollably. “The English family will destroy your careers. You cannot hold me here!”

The first agent let out a dry, mocking laugh.

“Your family stock is currently being heavily shorted on Wall Street,” he stated flatly. “Your father is fighting off bankruptcy. No one is coming to save you.”

Absolute panic seized Charla’s throat. The reality of a concrete cell and a metal toilet crashed down on her. Her manicured nails scraped desperately against the steel table.

She opened her mouth, ready to beg for a plea bargain.

Before a single word could leave her bleeding lips, the heavy iron door was shoved open.

Gavin Thorne walked in wearing a pristine black suit, his face a mask of cold, professional indifference. Behind him marched three of the most expensive, aggressive criminal defense attorneys in the United States.

“What is this?” the lead federal agent barked, stepping forward. “This is a restricted area!”

The chief defense attorney did not even look at him. He walked directly to the steel table and slapped a heavy, sealed document down.

“Emergency bail order,” the attorney announced, his voice dripping with arrogant authority. “Signed by a federal judge ten minutes ago. My client is exercising her absolute right to silence.”

The federal agent snatched the document. His eyes swept the paper, and his jaw visibly tightened.

“Fifty million dollars?” the agent muttered, staring at the number in pure shock. “Cash bond?”

Charla stared at Gavin. Her entire body was trembling.

“Did my father...” Charla whispered, her voice cracking. “Did he send you?”

Gavin leaned down. He placed his hands on the steel table, bringing his face close to hers.

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“Mr. Holloway paid your bail, Ms. English,” Gavin said. His voice was so low only she could hear it.

Charla’s pupils dilated instantly.

The suffocating terror vanished, replaced by a violent, rushing wave of pure euphoria. The tears of despair on her cheeks transformed immediately into tears of manic joy.

He loves me.

The thought echoed in her hollow, narcissistic mind. Hilliard Holloway had fought the federal government and spent fifty million dollars in cash to pull her out of hell. She had won.

“Uncuff her,” the defense attorney demanded.

The agent gritted his teeth and unlocked the handcuffs. The heavy metal brackets hit the steel table with a sharp clatter.

Charla stood up. She rubbed her reddened wrists. The pathetic, terrified woman from thirty seconds ago was gone. She lifted her chin, her posture snapping back into the arrogant, untouchable socialite she believed herself to be.

She shot the federal agents a look of pure, concentrated disgust before walking out the door.

Gavin escorted her out of the FBI building.

The moment the glass doors slid open, the night erupted in blinding white light.

Hundreds of paparazzi and news crews swarmed the barricades. News helicopters chopped through the air overhead.

Charla did not hide her face. She descended the concrete steps slowly, intentionally raising her left hand to push back her hair so the massive pink diamond caught the flashbulbs.

Reporters screamed questions about the murder charges and the Holloway family's stance. Private security guards shoved them back, carving a path to a waiting bulletproof Maybach.

Charla slid into the luxurious leather backseat. The heavy door slammed shut, cutting off the noise of the crowd. She looked out the tinted window at the media circus, a sick, triumphant smile stretching across her face.

At that exact moment, across Manhattan, inside the VIP ICU of the Holloway Private Hospital, Hilliard sat on the edge of his bed.

He was staring at the large flat-screen television mounted on the wall. The live broadcast showed Charla English smiling in the back of the Maybach.

His eyes were as cold and dead as the Siberian tundra.

The encrypted earpiece in his right ear crackled.

"Bail process is complete, Boss," Gavin reported over the secure line. "The PR department is flooding the media. The narrative is shifting. She is being painted as a wrongfully accused victim."

"Good," Hilliard rasped. His throat was dry.

"Boss," Gavin hesitated, the static humming in the earpiece. "Why deploy this much capital to save her?"

Hilliard looked down at his own hands. The knuckles were wrapped in white bandages stained with faint spots of dried blood.

“Because putting a bullet in her head is too easy,” Hilliard said. The words tasted like ash in his mouth. “I am going to put her on the highest throne in the world. I am going to let her wear the crown.”

He curled his fingers into fists, ignoring the sharp, tearing pain radiating from his fractured sternum.

“And at that engagement party, with the whole world watching, I am going to kick the stairs out from under her.”

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A heavy silence fell over the comms line. Gavin felt a cold sweat break out on the back of his neck at the sheer, demonic cruelty of the plan.

“Understood,” Gavin finally said.

Hilliard tapped the earpiece to end the call.

Suddenly, a secondary encrypted phone hidden under his pillow vibrated violently.

He grabbed it. It was a direct text from his deepest Wall Street intelligence asset.

Morton family liquidating assets. Black market security hired for Long Island estate. Cailin Morton spotted driving toward their location alone.

Hilliard stopped breathing.

A physical jolt of panic slammed into his chest, completely overriding his calculated vengeance.

He grabbed his encrypted phone and hit Gavin's direct line. "Get the chief surgeon to my room. Now. I need a maximum dose of adrenaline and the strongest localized painkillers you have. And bring a uniform."

"Boss, your chest is still draining! A stimulant of that magnitude could trigger a cardiac arrest!" Gavin's panicked voice shot back.

"If you're not here in two minutes, I'll fire the entire medical staff and walk out myself," Hilliard snarled. He dropped the phone, grabbed the IV line taped to the back of his hand, and ripped the needle straight out of his vein without bothering to peel the tape.

A stream of dark red blood ran down his hand and dripped onto the pristine white hospital sheets.

He ignored it.

A minute later, the surgeon rushed in, his face pale with protest. "Mr. Holloway, this is medical suicide!"

“Do it,” Hilliard commanded, his voice a low growl.

Under duress, the surgeon administered a brutal injection directly into the muscle near his chest cavity. Hilliard’s back arched, and a choked gasp escaped his lips as the drugs flooded his system. The blinding pain receded into a dull, chemical numbness, but a violent tremor started in his hands. He stood up, his fractured sternum screaming in protest beneath the medication. A wave of nausea rolled through him, but the adrenaline forced his muscles to obey.

He walked to the closet, leaning heavily on the nightstand for support, and pulled out a black dress shirt.

He didn’t care about his wounds. Cailin was walking into a trap, and he was going to tear the world apart to get to her.

Inside the Brooklyn safe house, the air was heavy and stale.

Cailin sat on the edge of the leather sofa. She placed the heavy antique brass key and the matte-black digital cipher USB drive side by side on the glass coffee table.

Ashely walked out of the kitchen carrying a steaming mug of black coffee. She handed it to Cailin, her eyes scanning Cailin’s pale face. The dark circles beneath her eyes were bruised and heavy, a lingering physical toll from the Devil’s Breath neurotoxin.

The encrypted communications terminal in the center of the room beeped sharply.

A holographic projector hummed to life. Kegan Aguirre's image materialized in the middle of the living room. His face was hard, the muscles in his jaw tight with tension.

"My informants in Europe just intercepted a legal filing," Kegan stated without greeting.

Cailin set the coffee mug down. Her stomach tightened. "What filing?"

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"Eleanor Morton," Kegan said, his voice grim. "She is utilizing an obscure loophole in the New York Trust Law. She is filing an emergency petition to declare your late mother legally incompetent retroactively."

Cailin's hands curled into fists, her fingernails pressing into her palms.

"If the judge signs that order tomorrow morning," Kegan continued, "Eleanor gains the legal authority to bypass the dual-verification system. She can order the Sotheby's vault incinerated. Everything your mother left you will be destroyed."

Cailin stood up too fast.

A violent wave of dizziness hit her. The room spun. She grabbed the edge of the sofa, her knuckles turning white as she forced her trembling legs to hold her weight.

"My intelligence shows Eleanor claims the trust diary is hidden inside the Morton family estate on Long Island, and she is using its supposed existence as grounds for the court order," Kegan said, his holographic eyes locking onto hers. "It is likely a trap. She knows you will come for it. But whether it exists or not, the judge only looks at evidence. You have to go in and call her bluff, or secure the diary if it actually exists. It is the only thing that will stop the order from being signed."

"Where is it?" Cailin asked, her voice a hollow rasp.

"Hidden inside the Morton family estate on Long Island," Kegan replied.

Ashely immediately reached behind her back and pulled a heavy Glock 19 from her waistband. She racked the slide with a loud, metallic clack.

"I will call the Blackwater team," Ashely snarled, her face flushed with anger. "We will burn that Long Island mansion to the ground and dig the diary out of the ashes."

"No." Cailin's voice was absolute ice.

She let go of the sofa and stood straight. "The Morton estate is in the middle of the most heavily policed zip code on the East Coast. A tactical assault will trigger a National Guard response within ten minutes. Eleanor will use the chaos to burn the diary."

Cailin walked toward the bedroom closet. "I have to go in myself."

Kegan's hologram flickered slightly. "Cali, it is a trap. She knows you need that diary. She is waiting for you to walk through the front door."

"Even if it is hell, I have to walk into it," Cailin said.

She pulled a tailored black trench coat from the hanger and slipped it on. The heavy fabric concealed the matte-black ceramic folding knife she strapped to her forearm.

Her eyes in the mirror were dead and focused. She was ready to bleed.

Meanwhile, in a temporary Holloway Group command center in Manhattan, Gavin Thorne stood in front of a massive wall of monitors tracking real-time financial data across global markets.

The heavy doors behind him opened.

Hilliard walked in wearing a dark shirt, but his face was the color of wet ash. With every step, a faint dark red stain pressed against the fabric over his chest, bleeding through the fresh bandages.

"Boss, you shouldn't be out of bed," Gavin said, his eyes widening in alarm. He rushed forward to support him as Hilliard stumbled.

Hilliard shoved his hands away.

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He walked directly to the main console, his hand braced against the wall, his eyes locking onto the red lines tracking the Morton family's asset movements.

"Report," Hilliard commanded. His voice was a terrifying, mechanical growl as he forced himself to suppress the blinding pain radiating from his cracked sternum.

"The Morton family is liquidating shell companies," Gavin said quickly, pulling up a satellite feed. "And they just cut all external security feeds to their Long Island estate. They hired a black-market mercenary crew to lock the perimeter down."

He pointed at the screen. "The estate is a fortress right now."

Hilliard's heart slammed against his ribs. The panic in his chest was worse than the surgical wounds.

He knew Cailin. He knew how desperately she guarded the memories of the people she loved. She would never let Eleanor destroy her mother's legacy. She was going to walk right into that fortress.

"Mobilize the Shadow Squad," Hilliard ordered.

He turned and headed for the private elevator. His steps were slightly uneven, but the sheer, violent aura radiating from his body made him look like a god of war.

“Boss, your chest...” Gavin pleaded, following him. “You will tear the sutures completely open.”

Hilliard stopped. He turned his head. His eyes were completely bloodshot, burning with a psychotic level of protective rage.

“If they touch one single hair on her head,” Hilliard roared, his voice cracking with absolute fury, “I will bury the entire Morton family under Long Island!”

Gavin swallowed hard. He didn’t say another word. He slammed his hand onto the red emergency mobilization button on the console.

Thirty minutes later.

A nondescript black sedan rolled to a stop in front of the massive wrought-iron gates of the Morton estate.

Cailin cut the engine. A wave of nausea rolled over her as her abdominal muscles screamed in protest from the simple act of pressing the brake pedal.

The gates groaned slowly open. Two massive mercenaries wearing tactical vests and carrying assault rifles stepped out of the shadows and glared at her through the windshield, gesturing aggressively for her to get out and walk.

Cailin pushed the car door open. The cold night wind hit her face.

She stepped onto the driveway, her flat shoes crunching against the dead autumn leaves. She looked up at the towering Victorian-style mansion. It looked like a massive, dark tomb.

She knew that the second those iron gates closed behind her, she would be entirely cut off from the outside world.

She slipped her hands into the pockets of her trench coat, her fingertips brushing the cold ceramic handle of the knife, and walked into the vampire's nest.

Cailin pushed open the heavy oak doors of the Morton estate.

The grand foyer was blindingly bright. The crystal chandeliers cast a harsh light over the marble floors. The air was thick and suffocating, reeking of expensive Cuban cigars and stale whiskey.