

Second chance 521

Chapter 521:

Aron and Davy sat on a massive, tufted Chesterfield leather sofa. The cushions were so deep their feet barely dangled over the edge. A maid in a starched uniform nervously set a silver tray of delicate English pastries and Earl Grey tea on the glass table in front of them.

Jeraldine sat across from them, her eyes locked onto the boys with a disturbing, obsessive intensity. She was just opening her mouth to begin lecturing them on the duties of the Holloway bloodline.

Suddenly, the heavy oak double doors on the far side of the living room were pushed open.

Hilliard Holloway walked in.

He was wearing a loose, black cashmere sweater. His face was a sickly, ashen grey. A dark, barely-faded bruise bloomed under his left eye, and his lower lip bore a distinct, healing split. With every step, his left leg dragged almost imperceptibly — a clear testament to the brutal beating he had endured. He moved with a stiff, agonizing slowness, his hand subtly pressing against his ribs. He had just received the news from the security detail that the boys had arrived.

The moment Hilliard's dead, hollow eyes landed on the two boys sitting safely on the sofa, a violent jolt of electricity shot through his broken body.

His pupils dilated. A look of pure, desperate, starving fanaticism exploded across his face.

“Aron... Davy...” Hilliard gasped.

His voice sounded like he was swallowing crushed glass. He took a stumbling, urgent step forward, his massive hands reaching out, desperate to pull his sons into his arms.

“Stop right there.”

Aron didn’t even blink. He didn’t look up. He calmly lifted a bone-china teacup to his lips, his voice cutting through the air like a frozen scalpel.

Davy picked up a pink macaron from the silver tray. He looked at it for a second, then tossed it back onto the plate with a look of absolute revulsion.

“Mr. Holloway,” Davy said, his amber eyes glaring at Hilliard with pure, unadulterated hatred. “Please maintain your social distance. The smell of hospital antiseptics and blood on you is making me nauseous.”

The words hit Hilliard’s chest with the kinetic force of a sledgehammer.

Mr. Holloway.

The formal, distant title sawed through Hilliard's heart like a rusty blade. He froze instantly. His tall, imposing frame began to tremble violently.

He looked down at his own hands. He could smell the faint, sterile scent of the hospital on his skin. The terrifying realization that his very presence disgusted his own children paralyzed him. He stood there, his eyes filled with a pathetic, begging sorrow, completely unable to take another step forward.

Preston stood near the fireplace. He watched the former tyrant of Wall Street get verbally dismantled by a five-year-old child. A dark, sadistic smirk curled the edges of his lips.

The tension in the room was thick enough to choke on.

Then, the sound of slow, mocking applause echoed from the grand marble staircase.

Clap. Clap. Clap.

"Well, isn't this just a heartwarming family reunion?"

Julian Holloway strolled down the stairs. He was wearing a custom-tailored, light blue linen suit, a crystal glass of expensive bourbon resting casually in his hand. His face wore its usual arrogant, playboy smirk.

Aron and Davy's eyes flicked toward the staircase.

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In a fraction of a second, the two brothers exchanged a silent, tactical signal. They knew exactly who Julian was. Kegan's intelligence files had detailed the deep, festering resentment Julian held toward his older brother, Preston. Julian was the perfect wedge to crack the family's power structure.

Aron set his teacup down.

The cold, aristocratic mask instantly melted off his face, replaced by a bright, sweet, and entirely innocent smile that perfectly matched his age.

"You must be Uncle Julian!" Aron exclaimed, his voice suddenly filled with bright, eager admiration. He stood up from the sofa. "We read about your art investments in the European financial magazines. You have amazing taste!"

Davy immediately jumped off the sofa and ran over to stand right in front of Julian. He tilted his head back, looking up at the playboy with wide, admiring eyes.

"They say you are the only real genius in the Holloway family," Davy chirped. "They say you understand culture and art, unlike some of the violent barbarians who only know how to yell."

As Davy said the word barbarians, his amber eyes flicked deliberately toward Hilliard and Preston.

Julian blinked, completely caught off guard by the sudden adoration.

Then, a massive, ego-stroking grin spread across his face. He threw his head back and laughed loudly. He reached out and affectionately ruffled Davy's dark hair.

"Well, well," Julian chuckled, taking a sip of his bourbon. "It seems the new generation has excellent judgment. I like you kids already."

Hilliard watched his own flesh and blood — the sons who looked at him with pure disgust — happily leaning into the touch of his degenerate cousin.

A violent, psychotic wave of jealousy exploded in Hilliard's brain. The blood roared in his ears.

"Don't touch him!" Hilliard let out a deep, guttural roar.

He violently shoved himself forward, lunging like a wounded, territorial lion. The sudden, explosive movement instantly tore the freshly stitched muscles in his back. A sickening crunch echoed from his broken sternum, sending a blinding, white-hot spike of agony straight into his brain. His vision went completely black for a fraction of a second, and a fresh wave of blood rushed up his throat — but the sheer, psychotic willpower of his vengeance forced his ruined body to keep moving. His eyes locked onto Julian's hand with absolute murder.

Julian didn't flinch. He just smirked and raised his bourbon glass in a mocking toast.

“What are you going to do about it, Hilliard?” Julian sneered. “You’re going to dictate who the boys like?”

Hilliard’s massive fists clenched so hard that the scabs on his knuckles tore open. Fresh, dark blood seeped through the cracks in his skin, dripping slowly onto the Persian rug. His chest heaved, the broken sternum screaming in agony, but he forced himself to stop.

He couldn’t attack Julian. He was terrified that any display of violence would only make his sons hate him more.

Preston’s face, however, had turned the color of ash.

Preston stared at Julian and the boys. His mind raced with paranoia. He had spent months securing his power, and now, these two legitimate heirs were openly aligning themselves with his ambitious, resentful younger brother.

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Aron caught the flash of panic and murderous intent in Preston’s eyes. The first stage of the psychological division tactic was a flawless success.

“Uncle Julian,” Aron asked sweetly, tugging on Julian’s suit jacket. “Can you show us your private art gallery? We really don’t want to stay in this room. It smells like medicine and anger.”

“It would be my absolute pleasure,” Julian beamed, puffing out his chest.

He took Aron and Davy by the hands and deliberately walked them right past Hilliard, making sure his shoulder brushed against Hilliard's frozen, trembling frame.

Hilliard stood perfectly still. He stared at the floor, his breathing ragged, the blood dripping from his fists.

Preston watched the three of them disappear down the hallway. He turned to the head butler, his voice a venomous hiss.

"Put two men on Julian," Preston ordered. "Watch his every move. I will not let him use those boys to stage a coup."

Miles away, inside the Brooklyn safe house, Cailin sat in front of a bank of glowing monitors. She was watching the live, encrypted video feed transmitting from the micro-camera hidden in Aron's tie clip.

She watched Hilliard bleeding on the rug, his face twisted in pathetic, helpless agony.

Cailin's expression did not change. Her eyes were as cold as the bottom of the ocean. She reached out and typed a short, encrypted command into her keyboard, sending a vibration pulse to Aron's watch.

Keep pushing. Break him completely.

While Aron and Davy prepared to execute their mother's cold command inside the estate, they had no idea that another deadly psychological trap — aimed directly at Charla English — had already been quietly set in motion twenty-four hours ago.

The Atlantic waves crashed violently against the rocky shore below a highly secluded, ultra-luxury villa in the Hamptons. The sound of the ocean drowned out the silence of the massive, empty house.

Charla English paced frantically across the imported hardwood floor of the master bedroom.

She was wearing a sheer, black lace nightgown. Her manicured fingers tightly gripped a small, unmarked amber glass vial — a highly concentrated, synthetic hallucinogenic aphrodisiac. She had paid a dark web supplier a fortune for it.

Hilliard had promised her a Century Engagement. But Charla's paranoia was eating her alive. She knew Hilliard was a predator. She needed a physical anchor. She needed to bind him to her with an encounter so undeniable that he could never back out of the public spectacle.

At exactly 11:00 PM, the heavy brass doorbell of the villa chimed.

Charla stopped pacing. She took a deep, shaky breath. She walked over to the marble wet bar and unstopped the vial, letting three clear drops of the liquid fall into two crystal glasses of pre-poured Romanée-Conti wine.

She walked to the front foyer and pulled open the heavy oak door.

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A tall, broad-shouldered man stood in the shadows of the porch. He was wearing a bespoke, black overcoat. Gavin had spent a fortune bribing Hilliard's personal tailor in London to secretly replicate the exact Italian wool fabric, the precise shoulder cut, and the signature drape that Hilliard always wore. The collar was turned up against the wind. A dark baseball cap was pulled low over his eyes.

The villa's automated lighting was intentionally dimmed, casting the man's face in deep, impenetrable shadow.

"You came, Hilliard," Charla purred.

Her voice dripped with desperate seduction. She stepped forward, reaching her hands out toward the heavy wool of his coat.

The man did not speak a single word.

Instead, his massive hands shot out. He grabbed Charla by the waist and shoved her violently backward. Her spine slammed hard against the foyer wall. The sheer, aggressive brutality of the movement knocked the breath out of her lungs.

Charla gasped, but a thrill of pure, narcissistic victory shot through her veins.

This was the ruthless, dominating Wall Street tyrant she craved. She completely misinterpreted the rough handling as Hilliard's suppressed, animalistic desire for her.

She reached blindly for the console table, grabbing one of the crystal wine glasses.

“Drink this,” Charla whispered, pressing the rim of the glass against the man’s lips. “Tonight, I am entirely yours.”

The man swallowed the wine in one gulp.

Within minutes, the synthetic chemicals hit their bloodstreams with the force of a freight train.

Charla’s vision blurred. The edges of the room began to melt and warp. As she looked up at the man, the hallucinogen hijacked her optic nerves. The shadows shifted, and the man’s face perfectly morphed into Hilliard Holloway’s cold, handsome features.

The rest of the night dissolved into a chaotic blur.

Charla surrendered completely to the chemical euphoria, absolutely convinced she had finally conquered the untouchable king of New York.

The next morning, bright, harsh sunlight streamed through the floor-to-ceiling windows of the master bedroom, illuminating the wrecked, tangled sheets of the king-sized bed.

Charla groaned, her eyelids fluttering open. Her entire body ached with a deep, satisfying soreness. A smug, triumphant smile spread across her face.

She reached her hand out across the mattress, expecting to feel the warm, muscular chest of her newly conquered fiancé.

The sheets were ice cold. The bed was empty.

Charla sat up quickly. A brief spike of panic hit her chest. She looked around the massive, sunlit room. The man was gone.

Then her eyes locked onto the mahogany nightstand.

Resting perfectly in the center of the polished wood was a single, heavy cufflink. It was a flawless black diamond, set in custom platinum, with a microscopic, stylized “H” engraved on the base.

It was Hilliard’s signature cufflink. There was only one pair like it in the world.

Charla let out a long, breathless sigh of relief. She reached out and snatched the cufflink, clutching the cold diamond tightly in her palm. Her final doubts vanished into thin air.

“He couldn’t resist me,” Charla whispered to the empty room, her ego inflating to a psychotic level. “He just had to leave early for the board meeting. The pressure of the family.”

She threw off the sheets and walked toward the massive floor-to-ceiling mirror.

Chapter 525:

She stood there, admiring the dark bruises and bite marks scattered across her collarbone and neck. Her eyes gleamed with a toxic, venomous light.

“Cailin, you pathetic rat hiding in the gutter,” Charla laughed, a sharp, manic sound that echoed off the glass. “What do you have left to fight me with?”

At that exact moment, on a busy street corner in Manhattan, a sleek black luxury van sat idling by the curb.

Gavin Thorne sat in the back seat, his face a mask of absolute, professional indifference. He handed a thick, heavy manila envelope stuffed with hundred-dollar bills to a tall, muscular male model sitting across from him.

The model was wearing a cheap hoodie. He winced slightly as the fabric rubbed against the deep scratch marks covering his back.

“Thanks, Mr. Thorne,” the model smirked, greedily stuffing the cash into his duffel bag. “If the boss ever needs this kind of gig again, call me. That crazy bitch was wild.”

Gavin's eyes turned to dead, freezing steel.

"Keep your mouth shut," Gavin said, his voice dropping to a lethal whisper. "You are getting on a plane to Europe in two hours. If I ever hear a single whisper of this in New York, you will disappear into the Atlantic."

The model's smirk vanished. He swallowed hard, nodded quickly, and scrambled out of the van, disappearing into the crowded sidewalk.

Gavin pulled out a heavily encrypted satellite phone and dialed a secure sequence.

"Boss," Gavin reported, his tone perfectly flat. "The bait was swallowed whole. The asset has been paid and exiled. The cufflink was planted exactly as you instructed."

On the other end of the line, Hilliard's voice came through the speaker — a low, mechanical rasp, devoid of any human warmth.

"Excellent," Hilliard whispered. "Let her keep dreaming. Pump her ego full of air until she is standing at the very edge of the highest cliff."

Inside the sunlit master bedroom of the Hamptons villa, Charla wrapped a sheer silk robe around her body.

She sat on the edge of the ruined bed, rolling the black diamond cufflink between her fingers. A wicked, sadistic urge bubbled up in her chest. Winning wasn't enough. She needed to watch her enemy bleed.

She picked up her phone and opened the camera.

She angled the lens perfectly, capturing the dark, aggressive hickeys blooming across her collarbone. She took another photo of the violently tangled bedsheets, making sure the platinum "H" on the cufflink was in sharp focus.

She scrolled through the dozen shots and selected the three most visually devastating ones.

She opened a secure messaging app. Leveraging the last vestiges of the English family's influence, she had paid an exorbitant sum to a compromised source inside the FBI's cybercrimes unit, who had intercepted a fleeting, temporary number Cailin had used to contact Ashely.

Charla attached the photos. Her thumbs flew across the keyboard, typing out a message dripping with venom:

He was absolutely feral last night. It's over, Cailin. Your pathetic era is completely finished.

She hit send.

Chapter 526:

Charla threw her head back and let out a shrill, manic laugh. She could vividly picture Cailin staring at the screen, her heart shattering into a million pieces, sobbing hysterically in whatever miserable hole she was hiding in.

Miles away, deep underground in the Brooklyn safe house, Cailin sat in the ergonomic chair in front of the massive bank of surveillance monitors. She was rapidly typing lines of code, analyzing the firewall structures Aron was transmitting from inside the Holloway estate.

Her personal, encrypted phone buzzed sharply on the desk next to her keyboard.

Cailin stopped typing. She picked up the phone and tapped the screen.

The three high-resolution photos of Charla's bruised neck and the ruined bed instantly filled the screen, followed by the mocking text.

Cailin's pupils contracted violently.

Even though her heart was completely dead to Hilliard, the sheer, visceral visual of his supposed intimacy with the woman who had murdered her daughter triggered a violent, involuntary physiological reaction.

A wave of pure, acidic nausea hit the back of her throat.

Cailin shoved the chair back so hard it crashed into the wall. She sprinted to the small bathroom, dropped to her knees in front of the toilet, and began to dry heave violently. Her stomach muscles cramped in agonizing spasms.

Ashely heard the crash. She sprinted out of the kitchen, dropping a towel on the floor.

“Cali! What’s wrong?!” Ashely yelled, dropping to her knees beside Cailin. “Is it the ulcer? Are you bleeding again?”

Cailin waved her hand weakly. She leaned over the sink, turned on the cold water, and splashed it onto her pale, sweating face. She gripped the edges of the porcelain sink, forcing her erratic breathing to slow down.

She looked at her reflection in the mirror. Her eyes were bloodshot, but the cold, calculating operative was already locking the trauma back into its mental cage.

“I’m fine,” Cailin rasped, wiping her mouth with the back of her hand. “I just saw a pile of rotting garbage.”

She walked back to the desk. Ashely followed her and looked at the phone screen.

Ashely’s face turned bright red with fury. She reached behind her back and pulled her Glock from her waistband, racking the slide with a loud clack.

“That psychotic bitch!” Ashely roared. “I am driving to Long Island right now. I’m going to blow her head clean off her shoulders!”

“Put the gun away, Ashely.” Cailin’s voice was absolute zero. She reached out and pushed the barrel of Ashely’s gun down. “Killing her is too easy. It dirties our hands.”

Cailin sat back down in the chair.

She didn’t delete the photos. Instead, her fingers flew across the keyboard. She activated a military-grade encryption protocol. She stripped the metadata, the IP address, and the timestamps from Charla’s message.

She packaged the entire file and uploaded it to three separate, decentralized cloud servers located in Switzerland.

Chapter 527:

“These are perfect legal exhibits,” Cailin said, her eyes locked on the upload progress bar. “When she tries to play the pure, innocent victim in front of the media, I am going to broadcast these photos to every news outlet in the country. I will let the world see the future Mrs. Holloway acting like a cheap escort.”

The upload finished. Cailin picked up her phone to reply.

She knew exactly how to fight a narcissist. Anger was a reward. Absolute, degrading contempt was the only weapon that caused real pain.

She typed:

Congratulations. You finally managed to pick up the trash I threw away five years ago. Make sure you get a full STD panel. He's been passing around a lot of cheap diseases lately.

Cailin hit send.

Back in the Hamptons villa, Charla was holding a fresh glass of champagne, staring at her phone screen, practically vibrating with anticipation for Cailin's meltdown.

The phone buzzed.

Charla smiled wickedly and opened the message.

Her eyes scanned the words trash and STD panel.

The smug smile froze on her face. The blood drained from her cheeks, and then rushed back in a violent wave of humiliating heat.

“Ahhhh!”

Charla let out a hysterical, ear-piercing shriek. She hurled the crystal champagne flute directly at the wall. It shattered into dust, spraying expensive wine across the custom wallpaper.

“You bitch! You arrogant, dead bitch!” Charla screamed, her voice tearing her vocal cords.

She frantically tapped the screen, typing out a furious, expletive-filled paragraph. She hit send.

Message failed. User has blocked you.

The red error text was like a physical slap to the face. The suffocating frustration of throwing a punch and hitting empty air made Charla completely lose her mind.

She grabbed the edge of the heavy oak vanity table and violently swept her arm across it. Dozens of expensive glass perfume bottles and makeup palettes crashed to the hardwood floor, shattering into a chaotic mess.

Charla stood in the middle of the wreckage, her chest heaving, her eyes wide and bloodshot. The toxic hatred in her heart boiled over into pure, concentrated murder.

“You want to play tough?” Charla hissed through her teeth. “Fine. I will make you watch as I walk into that estate and crush your two little bastard sons into dust.”

She spun around and marched into her massive walk-in closet. She ripped a conservative, impeccably tailored Chanel suit off the hanger. She was going to the Holloway estate right now, and she was going to exercise her power as the future mistress of the house.

The heavy, oppressive grey clouds finally broke open.

A freezing, torrential autumn rain began to hammer the outskirts of New York. The windshield wipers on the nondescript black sedan scraped violently back and forth as Ashely carefully navigated the vehicle away from Brooklyn. Cailin sat in the passenger seat, wrapped in a thick blanket, her face pale and her body trembling violently from the lingering effects of the neuro-stimulants and the ulcer spasms.

Dealing with Charla’s photos had required absolute, mechanical logic. But the moment the task was done, the adrenaline crashed. The sheer psychological weight of the last forty-eight hours collapsed onto Cailin’s shoulders, leaving her paralyzed in her seat.

Ashely steered the car through the towering wrought-iron gates of a highly secluded, private family cemetery.

Chapter 528:

The ancient oak trees blocked out the little light that remained in the sky. Ashely parked the car on the gravel path and turned off the engine. She looked at Cailin with deep, heartbreaking worry.

"I'll wait right here, Cali," Ashely said softly. "Take all the time you need."

Cailin gave a weak, barely perceptible nod. She didn't grab an umbrella. She pushed the heavy passenger door open, her atrophied legs shaking violently as they hit the ground, and stepped out into the storm.

She wore a thin black trench coat. Within seconds, the freezing rain soaked through the fabric, chilling her skin to the bone. She didn't care. She walked blindly across the manicured grass, her flat shoes sinking into the thick, freezing mud.

She stopped in front of a pristine, white marble headstone.

Engraved on the stone were the names of her parents. And right beside it, a smaller, delicate plaque marked the empty cenotaph of Elia Morton.

Cailin's legs gave out.

She collapsed onto her knees in the mud. Her trembling fingers reached out, tracing the cold, wet porcelain of the black-and-white photograph embedded in the stone. It was a picture of Elia, forever frozen with that bright, innocent five-year-old smile.

The iron cage Cailin kept around her heart completely shattered.

"I'm sorry..." Cailin whimpered. The sound was a raw, guttural noise of an animal bleeding to death. "Mommy couldn't protect you."

She pressed her forehead against the freezing marble. Her tears mixed with the heavy rain, washing down her pale cheeks and dripping into the mud.

The extreme physical exhaustion, the lingering neurotoxic damage from the Devil's Breath, and the violent emotional spike from Charla's photos pushed Cailin's fragile nervous system past its breaking point.

Suddenly, the deafening roar of the rain seemed to fade away. The world went eerily, impossibly quiet.

"Mommy, why are you crying?"

The voice was high-pitched, sweet, and rang like a tiny silver bell behind her.

Cailin's entire body went rigid. Her heart stopped beating in her chest. The blood froze in her veins. She slowly, agonizingly turned her head.

Standing in the pouring rain, less than six feet away, was Elia.

She was wearing the bright pink windbreaker. There was no blood. There were no tears. Her dark hair was perfectly dry, and she was smiling that beautiful, heart-stopping smile.

“Elia...” Cailin breathed. Her pupils dilated massively. The logical world ceased to exist.

Cailin scrambled up from the mud. She stumbled forward, throwing her arms wide open, and lunged at the hallucination.

She wrapped her arms around the empty, freezing air. But her broken, desperate brain completely fabricated the sensory input. She felt the soft warmth of her daughter’s small body. She smelled the faint, sweet scent of baby shampoo and vanilla.

“Mommy, the bottom of the ocean was so cold,” the hallucination of Elia whispered, reaching up a tiny, phantom hand to touch Cailin’s wet cheek. “But I’m not cold anymore.”

“Don’t go...” Cailin sobbed hysterically, dropping back to her knees, clutching the empty air against her chest with terrifying force. “Please, baby, don’t leave Mommy alone in the dark.”

Chapter 529:

“Don’t be sad, Mommy,” Elia smiled, her edges beginning to blur and dissolve into the heavy rain. “You have to protect Aron and Davy for me.”

“No! No, wait!”

Cailin screamed, waving her hands frantically, trying to grab the fading light. Her fingers closed around nothing but freezing raindrops.

The hallucination vanished completely.

The deafening roar of the storm violently crashed back into Cailin's ears. The brutal, unforgiving reality slammed into her brain.

She was alone. She was kneeling in the mud, hugging nothing.

The whiplash of getting her daughter back for ten seconds, only to lose her again, was a psychological torture worse than having her flesh flayed from her bones.

Cailin clutched her stomach. A violent, agonizing spasm ripped through her ulcer. She let out a long, blood-curdling scream of pure agony that echoed through the empty graveyard. She curled into a tight fetal position in the mud, her body shaking uncontrollably, completely broken.

At that exact moment, the heavy metal gates of the cemetery groaned open.

A sleek, black Maybach rolled to a stop on the gravel path behind Cailin's sedan.

Inside the sedan, Ashely saw the familiar, bulletproof Maybach in the rearview mirror. Her hand instantly went to the Glock holstered at her side. But when she saw Hilliard Holloway step out, alone

and without his usual security detail, she hesitated. A dark, conflicted part of her wanted to see what the man who had caused all this pain would do now. She held her position, her finger resting on the trigger, but did not immediately alert Cailin.

The heavy door swung open. Hilliard Holloway stepped out into the storm.

He had used Gavin's hacking network to trace the GPS signal of Cailin's car. He wasn't wearing an overcoat. The freezing rain instantly plastered his dark shirt to his muscular chest.

He looked through the rain and saw Cailin curled up in the mud, screaming in agony in front of their daughter's grave.

Hilliard's heart physically cracked. He couldn't breathe. He dragged his heavy, exhausted legs forward, stepping off the gravel and walking into the deep mud toward the woman he had destroyed.

The torrential rain hammered against Hilliard's broad shoulders.

Every step he took through the thick, sucking mud sent a blinding spike of pain radiating from his shattered sternum. The dark red blood began to seep through his wet shirt again, mixing with the rain and dripping down his sides.

He stopped a few feet behind Cailin's curled, trembling body.

“Cailin...” Hilliard whispered.

His voice was a ragged, broken rasp, barely audible over the roar of the storm. It carried the weight of a man who was already dead inside.

Hearing that voice, the violent shaking in Cailin’s body instantly stopped.

The suffocating, bottomless grief vanished, replaced in an instant by a wave of absolute, freezing revulsion. She slowly pushed herself up from the mud and turned around.

Her trench coat was plastered to her body, covered in brown dirt. Her face was deathly pale, streaked with mud and tears. But her eyes — her eyes were like two shards of poisoned glass, locking onto Hilliard with lethal intent.

Chapter 530:

“Who gave you permission to stand here?” Cailin’s voice cut through the rain like a whip. “Get out. You don’t have the right to breathe the air near her grave!”

Hilliard looked past Cailin. His eyes landed on the small porcelain photo of Elia on the headstone.

His throat closed up. His massive chest heaved.

In front of Cailin's icy glare, the untouchable titan of Wall Street — the man who commanded billions of dollars and destroyed empires with a single word — suddenly collapsed.

His knees hit the freezing, filthy mud with a heavy thud. The dirty water splashed up, soaking his expensive trousers. He didn't brace himself. He let his arms hang limply at his sides. He tilted his head back, letting the violent rain wash over his pale, agonized face.

"I'm sorry..." Hilliard sobbed. The sound was a pathetic, tearing wail that ripped from the bottom of his lungs. "I didn't know... I didn't know she was my daughter... I deserve to die. I deserve to burn in hell."

He leaned forward, his hands digging deep into the freezing mud. He dragged himself an inch closer, reaching out a trembling, bloodstained hand, desperately trying to touch the hem of Cailin's muddy coat.

"Don't touch me with the hands that killed her!" Cailin roared, violently stepping backward to avoid his reach.

Her eyes blazed with psychotic fury.

"Do you think kneeling in the dirt fixes anything?!" Cailin screamed, pointing a shaking finger at the headstone. "Do you think bleeding on my shoes washes away the fact that you traded your own flesh and blood for power?!"

Hilliard squeezed his eyes shut. Tears poured down his face. "Take my life," he begged, his forehead almost touching the mud. "Take everything I have. Just... please, let me try to atone."

“Atone?” Cailin let out a sharp, hysterical laugh that sounded like cracking ice. “Unless you can reach into the dirt and pull her back to life, I will never, ever forgive you. You make me physically sick.”

She pointed toward the cemetery gates. “Take your pathetic guilt and get out of my sight.”

Hilliard stayed on his knees. He couldn’t move. He knew he had lost her forever, but his broken soul refused to let him stand up and walk away.

Suddenly, the darkness of the cemetery was shattered by four blinding beams of tactical light.

Four European mercenaries, wearing heavy black tactical rain gear and carrying suppressed submachine guns, emerged from the shadows of the oak trees. The roar of the wind and the percussive drumming of the rain on the leaves had perfectly masked their approach. They moved in perfect formation, instantly surrounding Hilliard.

A second later, Kegan Aguirre stepped into the light.

He was holding a massive, custom black umbrella. He had received the emergency beacon alert from the tracker Ashely had discreetly installed on the sedan, knowing perfectly well that Cailin’s fragile emotional state required an absolute, impenetrable safety net. He walked through the mud with the elegant, terrifying grace of a warlord inspecting a battlefield.